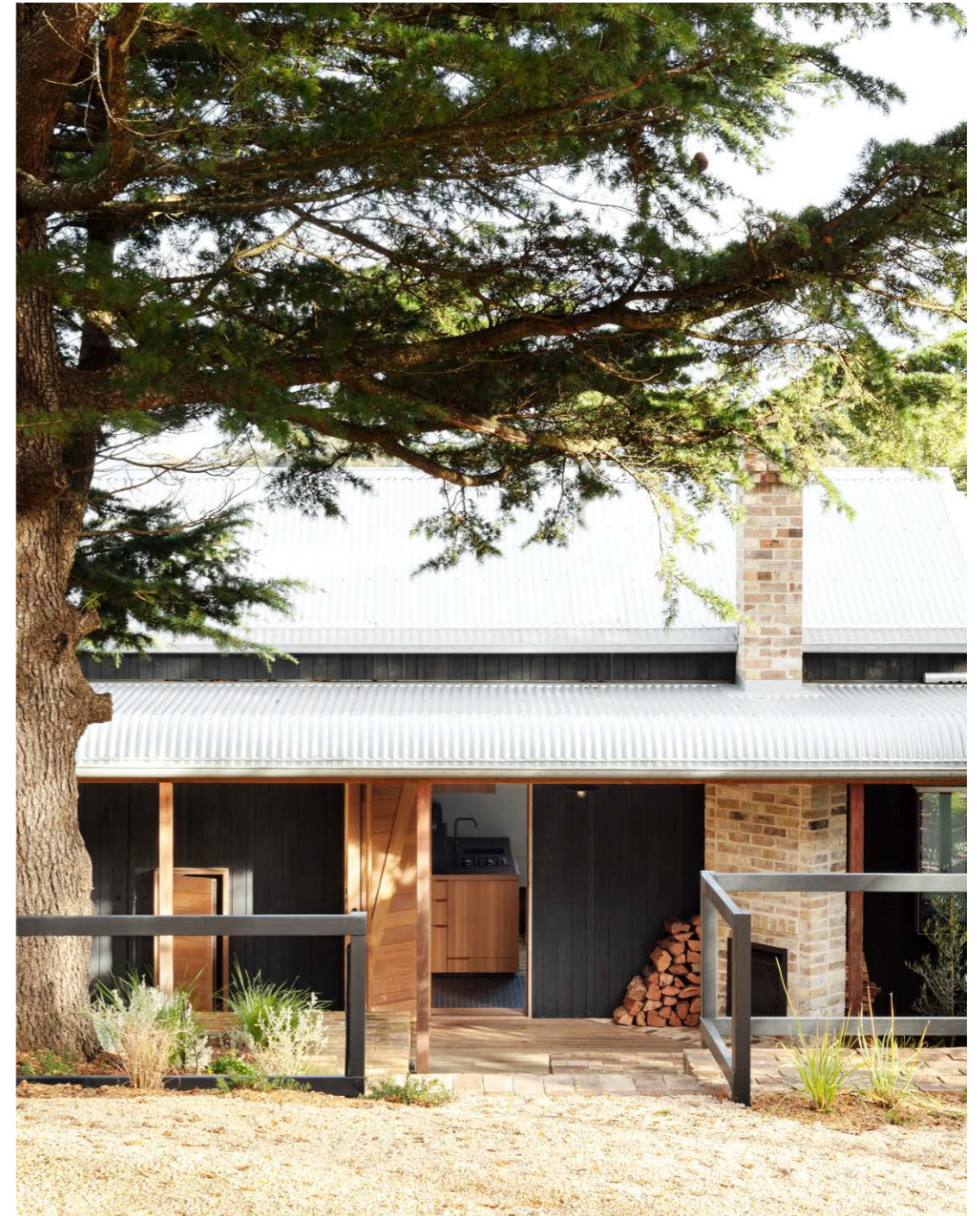


H&G HOUSES

EXTERIOR At the rear of 'Little Black Cabin', which faces the valley, every window was purposely designed to reveal specific views. **FACADE** *Opposite* A new bullnose verandah and door refreshed the exterior of this former worker's cottage.



ON TOP OF THE WORLD

A rock-climbing architect painstakingly rebuilt a 120-year-old worker's cottage in the NSW Blue Mountains, proving good things do come in small packages.

STORY *Hanna Marton* | PHOTOGRAPHY *Clinton Weaver*

For an architect, renovating your own home can be a struggle. Knowing all the possible options can lead to a textbook case of analysis paralysis. To extend or not? Add a storey? Take one away? Knock down and rebuild? Then there are the myriad design details to contend with. When architect Stewart Smith and his partner, MJ, stumbled across this 120-year-old cottage in the NSW Blue Mountains, they ultimately took the road less travelled. Which is apt since they're avid rock climbers. Instead of extending or even working within the existing footprint, which included old additions, they stripped the worker's cottage back to its original size. The result is a ▶



KITCHEN *This page and opposite* A compact and clever kitchen in the living space houses a 30cm gas cooktop, a 45cm compact built-in combination microwave oven and an integrated CoolDrawer fridge, all by Fisher & Paykel. Bot by Vistosi wall lights, Lumen 8 Architectural Lighting. A Thornton & Blake Morso 1440 freestanding wood burner heats the whole cabin beautifully. Tiles, Amber (for similar, try Minokoyo by Nagoya Mosaic-Tile Co, Academy Tiles+Surfaces).

“We fell in love with the location and the project evolved from there.” STEWART SMITH, HOMEOWNER & ARCHITECT



one-bedroom cabin that meets all of their needs. “We’re not true minimalists, but we like using only the space we require,” explains Stewart. “The more things you buy, the more space you need. And if you have less space, you can’t consume as much.” Building a smaller house also allowed Stewart to invest in and craft quality finishes, and clean 2500 salvaged bricks by hand, preparing them to be relaid.

Brisbane-based Stewart and MJ discovered the Blue Mountains about 10 years ago, on a climbing trip. “We fell in love with the location and it evolved from there,” Stewart recalls. After spending a few Christmases and Easters in rentals there, it became clear the couple needed a mountain bolthole of their own. Overlooking a national park with hiking trails at the back door, the dilapidated weatherboard and brick house caught their eye in 2016. “One of the property’s attractions is you can see a rock face in the northwest, past bushland and a valley. Occasionally you can pick out climbers on those routes.”

Building works started in mid-2019, with Stewart doing most of the heavy lifting himself. It wasn’t easy, with holes in the brick foundation so big you could crawl through them. The couple would zip down every few weeks to do 10- to 14-day sprints, staying in an Airbnb on the same street. “We’d fly to Sydney, drive to the mountains, usually stopping at a hardware store at 9pm to pick up extra materials,” says Stewart. “I developed lots of grey hair that year!” For MJ, who was also juggling a full-time job, it was her first experience on a building site. “It was a massive learning curve for her... she helped clean bricks and tidy the site at the end of the day. She was a great sounding board for ideas.”

At the rear of the existing house, facing the valley, was a porch and bullnose verandah that opened onto a traditional hallway with a bedroom on either side - which formed the original cottage. Behind this was a kitchen and living room, with a smaller verandah on one side and a bathroom tacked onto the other. Stewart demolished the kitchen, living and bathroom, taking the floor plan from 56 square metres down to 28 square metres.

One of the bedrooms was converted into a compact kitchen and living space, the other a bedroom, bathroom and laundry, while the existing living room became an outdoor deck. ▶

LIVING *This page and opposite* Stewart retained the original timber walls and floorboards, made welcoming with the Andorra rug in Pepper by Armadillo. The Muuto ‘Outline’ sofa provides all the comfort Stewart and MJ need in the living room. Map armchair, The Modern Furniture Store. Throw, Waverley Mills. The double-glazed windows are fixed panes that protect against wind and bushfires. The operable timber shutters allow light and fresh air to enter the cabin, with security screens satisfying bushfire attack level (BAL) requirements.

THE LAYOUT



THE PALETTE

Dulux White Exchange Half

Dulux Klavier

Dulux Variegated Frond

BATHROOM *This page* Tiles from Amber reflect the native bushland outside (for similar, try Minokoyo by Nagoya Mosaic-Tile Co, Academy Tiles+Surfaces). Milli Pure tapware in Rustic Bronze, Reece. Bot by Vistosi pendant lights, Lumen 8 Architectural Lighting. Wall-mounted basin, Reece.
BEDROOM *Opposite* The joinery is blackbutt. Surrounded on three sides by walls, the bed is a true cocoon and offers plenty of storage via its three drawers located underneath. Bedlinen, Sheet Society. ▶



Paint colours are reproduced as accurately as printing processes allow.



THIS IS THE LIFE

The cabin is a restful retreat for Stewart and MJ and a base for their climbing expeditions. “I love sitting on the sofa, looking through the picture window that frames the rockface across the valley just beautifully,” says Stewart. The internal and external fireplaces offer chances to pause and cosiness. “Recently, I spent a day and a half just stoking the fire!”

“We’re not true minimalists, but we like using only the space we require.” STEWART SMITH, HOMEOWNER & ARCHITECT



EXTERIOR The outdoor fire pit is surrounded by the cottage's repurposed original bricks. The cabin is wrapped in *shou sugi ban* charred cladding, which helps it recede into the natural environment, with insulation between the cladding and the original timber walls providing lasting warmth. **LAUNDRY** *Bottom* Accessed from the eastern side of the home, the external laundry is sheltered from brisk westerly winds.

The interior is pint-sized but not short on luxury. Drawing on Japanese design and the house's bones, Stewart selected simple, sustainable materials and earthy tones that connect to the bush. In the kitchen/living, square tiles in matt black line a hearth for the wood-burning fireplace and the kitchen splashback. The original hardwood floors were restored and kept raw. Rather than an imposing TV, the couple opted for an LG Ultra short-throw projector in the living space.

A cleverly designed kitchen accommodates a drawer fridge, two-burner stove and microwave-oven combination, with loads of storage hidden behind blackbutt joinery. Featuring a floating basin from Reece and underfloor heating, the fully tiled bathroom feels opulent despite its diminutiveness.

'Little Black Cabin' was 95 per cent complete before Covid confined Stewart and MJ to Queensland, where they waited until they could return to finish the job. "It was a labour of love, working out how to restore the building and protect it for another 100 years," says Stewart.

They succeeded. It was so fruitful in fact, that Stewart and MJ now share their beloved chalet with others. It's available to rent on Airbnb... when not being enjoyed by a couple of industrious rock climbers, that is.

Smith Architects, Byron Bay, NSW, and Norman Park, Queensland; smitharchitects.com.au.



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THE SOURCE

Blond timber and lashings of white deliver a serene Scandi vibe, just perfect for a home among the gum trees.



Produced by Shayne Burton.

1 Foscari 'Chouchin 1' suspension lamp, \$1335, Space. 2 Milli 'Mood' twin rail shower in PVD Brushed Bronze, \$2643.85, Reece. 3 Lucine Nook mat (150cm diameter), \$550, Armadillo. 4 Eggcup radiata pine stool, \$795, Mark Tuckey. 5 Hugo teapot, \$40, T2. 6 & Tradition 'Boomerang' armchair, from \$7330, Cult Design. 7 Zaza 3-seater sofa by Charles Wilson, from \$3190, King Living. 8 Australian House & Garden 'Esperance Wiped Edge' mugs in White/Sand, \$19.95/set of 2, Myer. 9 Molly (Mel) Drum fire pit, \$1730, Robert Plumb. 10 Australian House & Garden 'Summer' seagrass storage basket, \$49.95, Myer. For Where to Buy, see page 192. H&G