

From the back porch...



Dear diary...

— BY LYNDA WILSON —

Well, we have finally gone and done it – bought a block of land near the beach! Now the hard work starts... but let's go back a little bit.

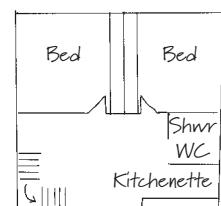
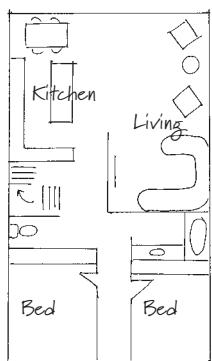
Early 2009

Three years of living about an hour from the coast was just too much for two ocean-loving creatures, so the first move was made. It was a wrench to leave our four hectares behind, but the lure of the sea was just too much. Unable to make the transition to a standard suburban block, we compromised with 4000m² only 15 minutes from the nearest beach. Here we have spent another three years, with enough space to have a very productive vegetable garden.

But still the sea called, and daily trips by car of 15 minutes each way every day were an absolute waste of time, money and precious resources. So the search was on for something we could afford, within 1km of the beach, and in a relatively quiet area. We had resigned ourselves to the fact this would mean a small block, but were nevertheless slightly traumatised when in mid-August we became the proud owners of 500m²!

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Some early ideas for floor plan layout



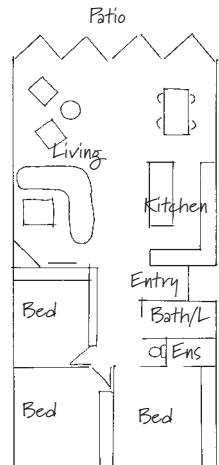
17m x 8m
Deck 3m x 8m

Pros:

- Lots of living space
- Self-contained studio area downstairs.
- Deck to east – more private & breezes

Cons:

- Double storey
- Bed 1 to road
- 2 baths
- 4 beds
- Downstairs overshadowed by deck
- Too big – too much cleaning!



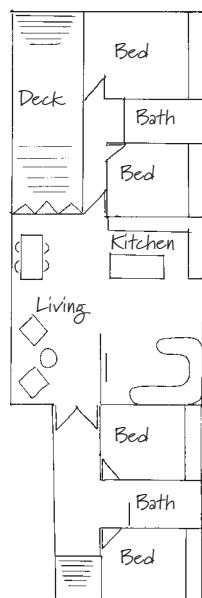
17m x 8m without deck
Doors could open to wide steps down to patio instead of deck

Pros:

- Single storey
- Less wasted passage space due to side entry
- 3 bed
- 1 bath (could have small ensuite)
- Bed 1 could be used as a self-contained studio if ensuite is included.

Cons:

- 20m long if 3m deck added to rear.
- Only 3 beds – could affect resale value.



25m x 8m

Pros:

- All beds have sun access
- Self-contained studio area to front.
- More northerly garden area
- Single storey

Cons:

- 25m long – 50% of block
- Deck not as private (overlooking neighbours)
- More complex shape to build
- Wasted space in long passages

March 2009

By March we had decided on the area, a small coastal town, and were pretty much stuck with what was available. All the streets run N-S and E-W, with rear laneways for vehicle access, and the blocks are around 10m wide and 50m long. So the first priority was to look for an E-W oriented block on the east side of a street, giving us good access to sea breezes in the living areas, which would be located to the rear of the block to be away from the street front. Only two blocks met these criteria, and they were next to one another, so it wasn't a huge effort to choose the northerly of the two.

July 2009

Apart from the normal checks done when purchasing land, we also had a detailed site survey done, to confirm the land levels. We then spoke to the council to check that building approval (in principle) would be given; we never doubted it seeing as the block is surrounded by other homes, but better safe than sorry. The land is only 2m above Australian Height Datum at its lowest point, so this will affect how we build, and it is unlikely they will allow slab-on-ground for habitable areas.

August 2009

While we have always had a dream of building our own house, this romantically included such features as solid stone walls, lots of exposed timber, a big open fireplace and lots of land. Well, having already abandoned the dream of land within 1km of the beach

(unless we win Lotto of course!), the other aspects have also had to be given a reality check. This is a seaside location, so we want a house that matches this with a light and open feel.

A few other 'wants' are for a single-storey small, easily cleaned and maintained home. There are only two of us, so three bedrooms will be more than enough. From a resale point of view (we are under no illusion that this will be our last move), four bedrooms would probably be more attractive. A single bathroom, with a separate toilet would be ideal. Open plan living, with lots of light access is a must.

Over the years with *The Owner Builder*, I have built good relationships with many of the architects and designers who appear in the magazine. I was therefore extremely lucky to receive some valuable hints and tips from Jack Metcalf (SA) and John Basden (NSW). I also spent time going through back issues and books, finding floorplans that matched (some only partly) the criteria we had.

Not having the time or inclination to do the plans to council standards ourselves, we decided to use the services of a local professional. While the design could quite reasonably have been done in any location, we like the idea of someone local who has contacts with council, agencies and tradespeople. Natalie Allen from Terra Prima Sustainable Designs in Newcastle was our preferred choice.

Late in August, we supplied Natalie with a wishlist and design criteria, as well as some rough ideas of layout we had been playing around with. The major benefit of using a professional,

even if you have a fairly good idea about the design you want, is that they can be objective and make suggestions that you may not have considered.

In summary, the main items on these lists are:

- Lightweight heavily-insulated exterior construction
- Internal thermal mass in walls and/or floors
- Timber frame, possibly timber cladding
- Preferably single storey, as small a footprint as possible
- Large clear space for the vegetable garden to the east (rear)
- Simple construction – standard construction sizes, simple shape
- Sustainable, eco-friendly and healthy choices
- Australian made preferable
- Gas-boosted solar hot water, gas cooker, gas heater
- Rainwater tanks, probably underground
- Enough north-facing roof space for PV panels and solar hot water
- Cross ventilation and ceiling fans – no airconditioning

September 2009

The aim is to have the plans finalised and ready for council by mid November. As we will be away for three months from the end of November, that will hopefully mean that by the time we get back everything will be ready to start building.

Let the games begin! ■

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