



Bright Alpine Builders' Masterstroke

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY JAMIE DURRANT

Steve Graves greets his carpenters with a few short words and a nod as he quietly steps over the threshold entering a near-completed Victorian weatherboard cottage renovation and extension in Abbotsford, Victoria. This modest property is a departure from usual work for the veteran High Country, HIA-award-winning custom home builder. The quaint yet impeccably restored front elevation of the small allotment is less than imposing but its interior construction detail and use of fine materials leaves a much bigger impression. The walnut-stained Victorian ash flooring has a satin finish with a slight charcoal tint. While still warm in colour, feels edgy and super-modern. Twin front bedrooms with 3.6 metre ceilings and a further two on an upper level are spacious and light-filled. Ornate cornices and large Victorian skirting and door architraves detail the home, but unlike most

Melbourne cottage renovations, this home is now built very square, complete with new framing and timber joins that are millimetre perfect: not a length of lumber, nail or finishing stroke of paint is out of place. This is the kind of detail that makes Steve Graves of Bright Alpine Builders a one-off, a rare commodity, a needle in a haystack. While Steve is proud of his team's achievements, his approach is subtle, never boastful. Rather, he lets the property do the talking, allowing it to impress the viewer. And it does, captivatingly so.

We continue along the hallway to where an extended sun-filled living room opens up to reveal a tastefully designed, modern and streamlined kitchen featuring matt finish porcelain benchtops – a wonderful material that has the uncanny appearance of white marble, yet with new-world benefits. It has strength, heat resistance and is resistant to chipping.

It is also non-porous, making it possible to cook and entertain with red wine without fear because those occasional spills will do no damage.

The polished peppermint gum counter-top kitchen seating / bar area feels connected yet remains separate from the island bench. The ensuite bathrooms and a powder room also feature this rare hand-selected timber, crafted as twin slab vanity shelves. This tiny alpine touch sets the home apart from any within its suburb and hints at the origin of Steve's business: Victoria's High Country.

In the past 18 months, Steve Graves and his team of four carpenters, one apprentice and associated experts – including cabinet maker Adam Williams of Wilko Cabinets – have been busy. Together they've completed a number of grand architect-designed homes, the new Christmont Wines cellar door in the King Valley as well as a challenging build atop





FROM TOP LEFT, CLOCKWISE
 Koomerang Ski Club, Mount Hotham;
 Turner Street, Abbotsford home kitchen,
 featuring marble-look porcelain solid
 surface, entry hall of the Killawarra, Victoria
 eco-friendly custom home,
 Master Builder Steve Graves

Mount Hotham, the new Koomerang Ski Club, constructed mostly from steel. This month Steve's team is city-bound, working on the house and two luxury units, and they're eager to return home.

Bright Alpine Builders has a reputation in Victoria's High Country for tackling and perfecting complex jobs. When this includes beginning a day's work at an elevation of over 1700 metres, simply getting to the job site is half the battle!

'The challenge at Hotham is always the unpredictability of the weather and often working in intense cold conditions on the mountain,' says Steve. 'Altitude also plays a part. The first couple of weeks you need to acclimatise, as you do tire more quickly.'

Koomerang is engineered in steel to cope with extreme snow and wind velocity loadings. Steve outlines how in alpine building it's necessary to keep building profiles as sleek

as possible, allowing wind to blow across and/or over structures to maximise structural integrity and thus safety.

While many of the projects built by Bright Alpine Builders are designed by architects, it is perhaps Steve's ability to see the completed building in his own mind before commencing a job that sets him apart from other builders.

'One of my best strengths is being able to work with architects to perfect a building before and during its construction. I like to help mould the design and carefully craft it into the best final product it can be. I'm very happy working with that third person and continuing the conversation.'

Another such project, the Mount Hotham Police Station, designed by Melbourne's FMSEA Architecture, features a striking concave wedge exterior and is built to withstand some of Australia's most extreme weather conditions. The angled façade reduces the glazed areas to a

minimum, reducing heat loss. The building also features a floating concrete slab, most of which is suspended 4 to 5 metres above the ground. Its construction required careful planning and formwork before bedding down the concrete.

Similarly, the new Chrismont Wines cellar door, completed in late 2015, incorporates suspended and cantilevered slabs. These were challenging for Steve and his team, as complex engineering was required to ensure proper curing of the slabs without cracking or a loss of strength or stability. Steve considers the success of that build as one of Bright Alpine Builder's proudest achievements.

Bright Alpine Builders have created a long list of High Country custom homes incorporating hand-selected local timbers and all featuring the cabinetry work of Adam Williams.



Killawarra, Victoria: eco-friendly custom home, featuring rammed earth, polished concrete flooring and polished timber ceiling battens



FROM LEFT, CLOCKWISE
Adam Williams' designed bathroom
cabinetry; custom home Smoko, High
Country Victoria featuring local granite
stone; custom home Wangaratta, Victoria
featuring eco-friendly layered surfaces;
Killawarra custom home kitchen



'I rely on Adam a lot because of his professionalism, expertise and eye for detail,' Steve says. 'He's one of those blokes who understands the direction required and can perfect both a harmony in choice of materials and technical requirements. I can rely on him to deliver a perfected job each and every time.'

Adam collects fine and rare timbers, warehousing unique pieces that will await the perfect location and use. The peppermint gum timber used in the Abbotsford renovation is one such example. 'It's quite an odd choice of material, yet has great beauty,' says Steve. 'It polished up with a golden flame pattern, similar to maple. Adam just pulled out these timber segments; he knew he'd found the right home for them.'

Bright Alpine Builder's 2015 custom home build in Killawarra (near Wangaratta, Victoria) is testament to Steve's continuous build philosophy. A sense of pride is gained by ensuring the same staff work on the same home from the beginning of a job to the time it is handed over to the client. In turn the work done by all staff members is of a much higher standard.

'A continued build work-flow invites clients to inspect the site daily and really get involved in the build. This also helps to build a good client relationship, which I prefer,' says Steve.

'And I'm not afraid of fussy clients either; I've built with some pretty fussy people over the years and often I seem to out-fuss them,' he says with a smile.

One feature of the Killawarra home is an organically flowing entry-hall ceiling of polished timber battens that rise and fall in height as they snake their way around a curving floor plan. It's a masterful ingredient that was exceedingly difficult to complete and is echoed in ceilings throughout the house. Sharp edges on the face of the battens are made by tapering the width of the sides so they fall away to meet the black plasterboard to which they are glued and nailed. The sharpened edge angles create deep shadows so that the sides are not seen and the polished battens appear to float in mid-air. It's a look that has great appeal and style.

Clever design in modern homes also means constantly keeping up with new innovations. While the Killawarra home features geo-thermal temperature control that makes possible very stable year-round live-in comfort, Steve is keen to talk about more recent discoveries.

'A terrific innovation in the building industry in recent times is the new laminated timbers or LVL (laminated veneer lumber). They can be custom made in substantial lengths, for

example a roofing beam of 15 metres, but they also come in standard lengths up to 7.5 metres. To me this is a major step forward in timber home builds. It's also possible to request beam laminates for visual colour appearance, but for me, I feel the strength and character of LVL is its real benefit. It's also becoming more difficult to source quality natural timber beams, so this is a great sustainable product with very stable and strong properties.'

'Energy efficiency in building is something that we need to continue to push if we can. Exploiting north-facing aspects, and products with great insulation properties in any home makes such a difference. Thermally broken (nylon centred) aluminium window frames is another innovation we're using now to maximise the benefits of double glazing. There's also a new super polished glass product called 'low-e' that reflects unwanted ultra-violet and infra-red light rays. In terms of new technology, we're always keen to push the boundaries.'

Unit 1, 31 Turner Street, Abbotsford (a renovated and extended four-bedroom two-level home) will be completed and offered for sale in September 2016.

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