



Urban Escape

text: **Susanne Kennedy** photography: **Derek Swalwell**

The city falls away in this tranquil bushland garden only a 10-minute drive from Melbourne's CBD.

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During a careful meander down slippery steps and dirt paths in her Fairfield garden, Rachel Nolan of Kennedy Nolan Architects (KNA) stops intermittently to share the intricacy of a grevillea flower, the potent scent of a crushed leaf, or to point out a well-camouflaged possum nest in a casuarina tree. “To me, this project was more about garden than house,” said Nolan of her reinvigorated backyard. “Which is quite good, given what I do.” With native bushland all around, the Yarra River, and a ruin-like chimney up ahead, the Melbourne CBD seems remote rather than a 10-minute drive away. And it is near impossible to imagine the riverside block brimming with rubble, weeds, dumped cars, tiger snakes and foxes, as it was just eight years ago. The garden makeover was a collaborative effort between Nolan, her partner Stephen Farrell, and landscaper Sam Cox – who began his career apprenticing to the iconic Australian landscaper Gordon Ford. For three years Farrell spent weekends hand-clearing the

2650-square-metre block; later Nolan contributed structural elements to the garden, and Cox gradually infused it with the soft edges, native plants and rock features that characterise his landscaping style. “Sam brought in tonnes of floater boulders with Bobcats to give form to the garden,” said Nolan. “His skill at rock placements and knowledge of Australian native plants unifies the entire site.” The trio decided to plant native tube stock rather than established trees. “We would recommend using tube stock to anyone. It is so much cheaper and comes up in no time.” The structural elements or “sites” – a viewing deck, swimming pool, fireplace, boat store, campfire and river pier – and the connection between them were the other keys to transforming a steep south-facing block into a hospitable bush backyard. Each site, located on its own plane, was considered a “destination”, and all were strung along a winding path that finally reaches the river’s edge. →



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These geometric elements, particularly the chimney, had to be inserted and scaled with delicacy. “It’s not rocket science, but care did have to be taken with placement and sightlines,” said Nolan. The chimney needed to be seen from the house without dominating river views, in the same way trees needed to be “brought up” without losing sight of the river.

A chemical-free swimming pool “was an experiment. Wayne Zwar worked to adapt the Biotop natural pool to [a] circular form on a steep hill,” said Nolan. “The pool uses plants to clean the water. It is soft and refreshing, and you feel clean when you get out.” The deep pool is surrounded by rough-cut Castlemaine slate, and a third of its surface is covered with lily pads, which turn hot pink in the summer. A slate bridge separates plants from swimmers and doubles as a – partly immersed – bench-seat angled to the river. When not in use, the pool is a reflective pond, which mirrors overhead clouds and trees.

The KNA design themes of hearth, fire and engagement of senses and memory are also present in the Nolan-Farrell garden. Freestanding and ruin-like, the chimney site has the feel of a secluded camp, luxurious for its solid fireplace and prime position beside a slow river. A coarse Castlemaine slate platform flows from

its base. Nolan likes the idea of taking sanctuary here for a day or overnight.

Scent was another important consideration that inspired the planting of native frangipanis and lemon-scented eucalypts close to the house, the latter being “at their best after a good rain”. These and the clay wattles further down the slope particularly evoke Nolan’s country Victorian childhood.

The architect wanted a garden she could return from with an armful of native flowers – reminiscent of a Margaret Preston linocut – and its deep red, vermilion, mustard and yellow flowerings, together with the garden’s lovely unruly textures, fulfil this brief perfectly.

All plantings in this urban bush escape are native, and all below the natural pool are indigenous to the river fringe. Overall, the sensitive and equal attention given to structure and minutiae has created a very special environment, which inspires one to pause and appreciate rather than simply pass through. 🌿

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