



Rob Mills

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Howqua Valley, Victoria, Australia

A modern retreat in Victoria's alpine region, Howqua River Lodge offers space to slow down and reconnect. Designed for comfort and clarity, the home is a personal reflection of the values and vision of architect Rob Mills.

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Photography Anson Smart
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Long before he created his home in the Victorian Alps, Rob Mills – founder and principal of Melbourne-based Rob Mills Architecture & Interiors – knew that a quiet life in the countryside was written in the stars. “I had already built a beach house on the coast and enjoyed that experience enormously, but as I grew older, I was in search of something quieter,” says Mills. His pursuit led him deep into the Howqua Valley, a region prized for its magnificent panoramas. “I’d been holidaying there with my family and friends my entire life, but land in this valley is very rare. Then, by chance, about 15 or 16 years ago, maybe more, a parcel of land became available.” Seeing it as an opportunity to step into his next chapter, Mills purchased the land and spent the following years manifesting a residence that is sustained by natural elements.

In designing for himself, Mills approached the project as a labour of love. “When I design for my soul, it’s very much an expression of my views. The homes I’ve owned and built have one thing in common; they allow me to see well beyond the boundary line to the world.” In addition to

the plentiful rainfall, ever-present ventilation and northern light, the land offered another dimension – it was untouched by mankind. “There were no power lines or buildings. It was completely isolated,” he recalls. It was a scenario many architects might have deemed a challenge, but Mills saw it as an opportunity. To him, it was the perfect rural idyll to host a self-sustaining, high-performance residence that would allow him and his family to live peacefully amid nature.

The mountains served as the point of departure for the architectural lexicon, which was intentionally restrained to cede the spotlight to the alpine surroundings. For example, the earthy tones and textures were echoed in the interior environment, while the outdoor area – including a pool, spa and sauna – were designed with access to a nearby river. To project the mountainscape as an extension of the indoors, the design team enveloped the home in glazing, opening it to the picturesque valley by day and the distant galaxies by night.

Mills set out to establish an all-encompassing off-grid ecosystem. “Because





Floor-to-ceiling glazing brings the mountainscape into Howqua River Lodge's living, dining and kitchen areas, and the abundant natural light helps to minimise energy use.

there are no services, we had to generate our own water and electricity, deal with waste, and protect ourselves from the threat of bushfire,” explains Mills, who worked with industry experts to galvanise a renewable energy system. The home generates its own energy through a rooftop solar array, preserving surplus electricity for auxiliary services such as electric car charging. Rainwater is similarly harvested, while wastewater is channelled through a closed-loop worm farm. A bore supports the verdant lawn and the fire sprinkler system is designed to mitigate the risks of bushfire.

Mills designed the five-bedroom residence to turn with the seasons. It is optimally geared to embrace any weather, with its three pavilions orientated to maximise energy efficiency and minimise its carbon footprint through natural light and passive cooling. Sweeping eaves limit the

effects of excessive sun and rain, while an eco-sensitive palette of recycled materials – including reclaimed timber and repurposed brick – treads lightly on the land. Other interventions include natural ventilation strategies, underpinned by night-purging systems; radiant floor heating via hydronic pipes embedded in the ground slab; and efficient glazing, insulation and appliances. “At a time when self-sufficiency is increasingly vital,” says Mills, “the project demonstrates how sustainable architecture can deliver both environmental responsibility and a superior quality of living while providing a place for escape, adventure and restoration, surrounded by one of Australia’s most inspiring alpine landscapes.”

Mills applied the principle of slow living to other parts of his life too, including sourcing furniture, which he did over the course of many years. “Working with trusted











materials and collaborators allowed us to keep costs down without sacrificing our high standards of quality,” explains Mills. The approach also allowed him to nourish the land at the deepest possible level. He focused on restoring the topsoil, eliminating invasive blackberries, reforesting with native blackwood trees, establishing a worm farm and cultivating wildlife habitats. Additionally, he ring-fenced the home to protect it from

bushfires and incorporated automated fire-detection sensors, dedicated water storage and a bunker. “The landscape design further minimises fire risk through controlled fuel loads and native planting.”

For Mills, the Howqua Valley holds special significance. “Before we even started building, my father and I would sit on the land, under the stars, and talk about how we imagined our future home. My father was the

The remote location lacks access to services, so facilities depend on harvested rainwater. Wastewater is channelled into a closed-loop worm farm.





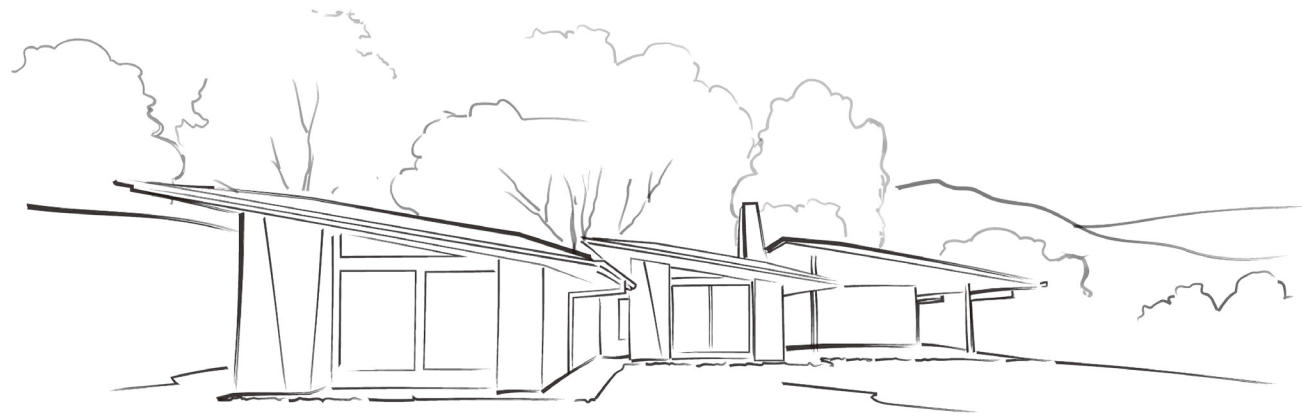
Sweeping eaves limit the effects of excessive sun, boosting the home's energy efficiency, while bore water keeps the lawn lush and can also be used to mitigate the risk of bushfire.



one who discovered the valley as a teenager working for the Forests Commission. He loved it so much that he returned every year,” adding that it became a cherished family tradition. “We’ve had so many happy times in this valley that building here gave me hope and an expectation that more good times lay ahead.” Of course, since he built the home, Mills has witnessed some traditions take on a life of their own, “like gathering on the terrace,” he says. “It’s a fragrant little oasis where we enjoy huddling around

a roaring fire in winter and staying cool in summer. It’s a degree or two cooler than the world beyond, and the air is always fresh.” If that is his favourite place, his second is the living room, where Mills and his family enjoy bonding over board games.

It has been less than a year since the completion of Howqua River Lodge, and Mills is still getting accustomed to the idea of living the quiet country life he always imagined. “Howqua River Lodge has been a soul project for many years, made all the



On designing the self-sustaining five-bedroom holiday retreat in Victoria's Howqua Valley, Rob Mills opted for a restrained approach to the architecture, allowing the alpine surroundings to take centre stage.





more meaningful by its deep roots in my family's history. It holds immense personal significance, and it's been a true honour to share this extraordinary landscape," admitting that carving out time to retreat to the mountains is an act of intention. "We've got a busy life," he says of himself and his family. "We have offices and homes in both Melbourne and Sydney, and we visit Howqua as often as possible on the weekends and during the holidays." As to whether he achieved what he set out to do, the architect certainly feels fulfilled with the outcome. "I think the true measure of that

joy is how other people feel when they're there," reflects Mills. "We envisioned and built the lodge as a place to come together and celebrate life's most cherished moments. The home brings people joy and peace."

Indeed, the place, by virtue of its remote location and connectivity limitations, tends to slough off the stridency of the city, existing in its own silent slipstream. "Time slows down here," he says. "It reminds us to eat well, exercise and do all of the lovely things we enjoy." In this next chapter for Mills, there's plenty yet to be lived.



An outdoor area includes a pool and spa with river access. Mills says being at Howqua River Lodge gives the family a chance to "eat well, exercise and do all of the lovely things we enjoy".

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