

Finding new favour after the mudslide

MUD brick. That oldest, cheapest, easiest and most sustainable building material literally put Eltham and its surrounds on the map in the 1930s as artists and back-to-nature types flocked to Melbourne's bushy north-east, drawn by its creative and eco-friendly potential.

But three years ago, the humble muddy fell foul of Victoria's new housing energy rating system. In a decision steeped in irony, it was

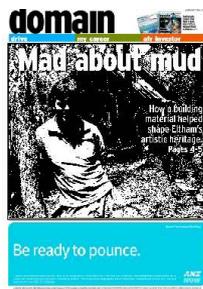
deemed by the FirstRate five-star energy program as having such poor-to-negligible energy efficiency that few if any mud-brick houses have been built in Nillumbik or any other part of the state since.

It is an outcome that doesn't sit well with architect Ross Henry. In his 30-year career, Mr Henry has designed well over 100 muddies in the rural shire. He deeply regrets the demise of a "hand-built housing" tradition that had once allowed amateurs and a high percentage of the

creatives attracted to the area to raise "one-off, whimsical, character-rich houses".

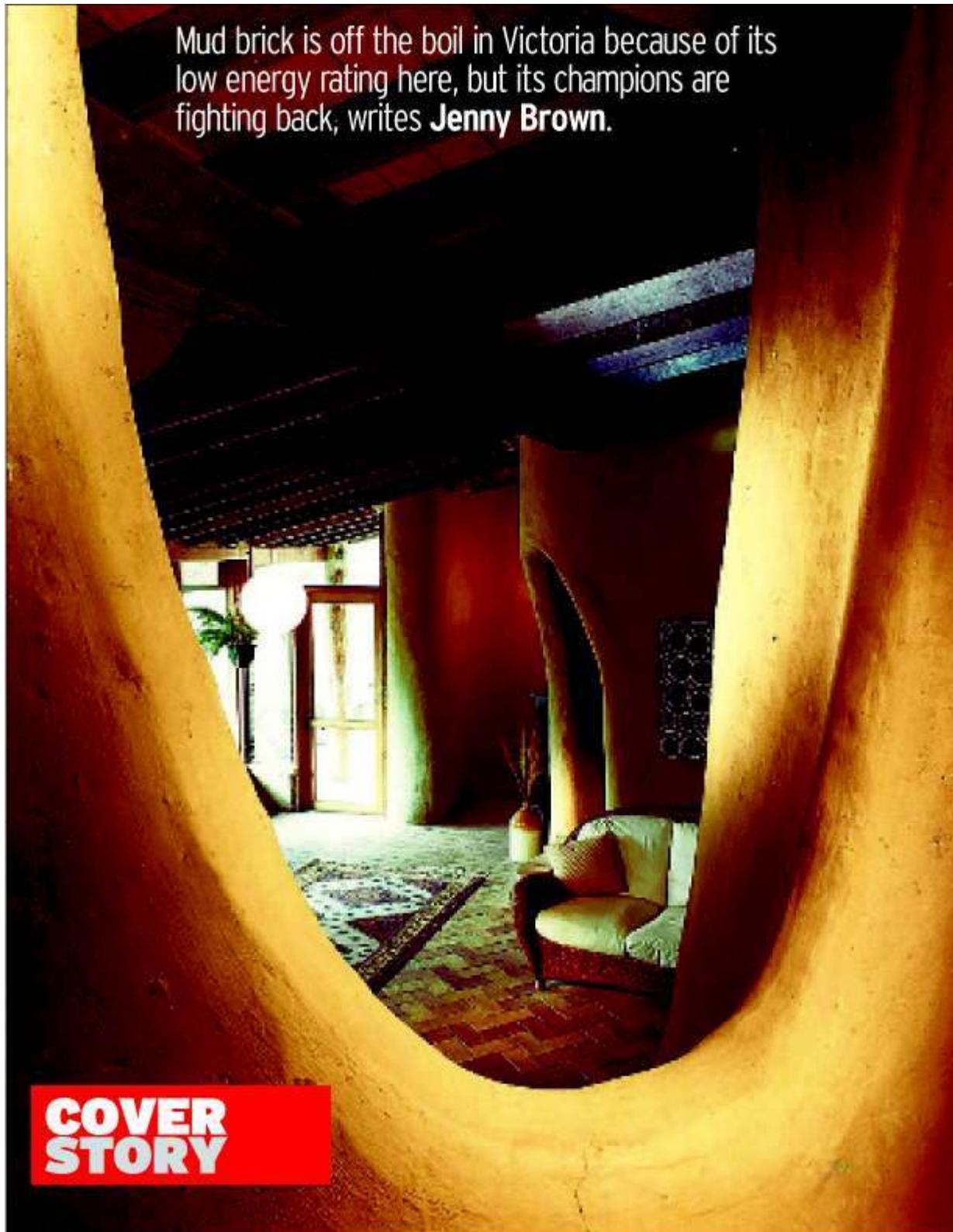
Mud brick is a material that "doesn't require precision workmanship", says Mr Henry. "Even grandma can lay mud bricks."

And while the associated technology of a modern alternative, pise (or rammed earth), has gotten around the rating system to some



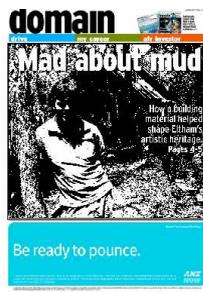
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Cool, rustic, very original, this Ross Henry-designed mud-brick house has withstood the seasons.

PICTURE: TOM McCALLUM



Michael Skewes says he's very happy with the energy efficiency of his Kangaroo Ground muddy.



degree by including insulation in the core of relatively porous walls, pise is a job for professionals, says Mr Henry. "It's a contractor's role so the handmade aspect has gone out of it." He says pise is a fine material but "it just doesn't have the beauty of mud brick".

Idiosyncratic and sometimes amazing, mud brick and recycled stone houses — often built by owner-builders of limited budgets but unlimited imagination — have been the architectural vernacular of the semi-rural areas around Eltham since the 1930s, when the template was established at the artists' colony of Montsalvat by Justus Jorgensen and his friends.

From the 1950s, builder/designer Alistair Knox championed the material along with the use of recycled timbers and stone as part of what he called an "alternate Australian vernacular".

Described as "the father of the earth-building movement", Knox is said to have designed more than 600 mud-brick houses around the district and his name still headlines

"Even grandma can lay mud bricks."

ROSS HENRY, architect

sales brochures whenever one of his comes onto the market.

Today, depending on land sizes or aspects relative to the main townships, mud-brick houses with a provenance can sell for a premium, says Morrison Kleeman Eltham agent Gayle Blackwood.

"The name, the aura or the famous work of an artist can help

because the properties have a story that adds to their attraction," she says.

These include Knox, Robert Marshall, Llewellyn Pritchard, Ross Henry or any of the artists who came to the area.

The attraction of mud-brick houses is certainly there. "We have more people coming out to

Eltham to look for them than we have on our books because mud-brick houses are not your standard brick veneers," Ms Blackwood says.

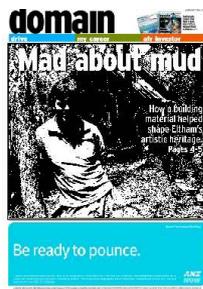
She says some of her buyers have swapped swank Docklands apartments for muddies with land on which they can build a studio. There are also first-home buyers who gain entry-level access in a suburban Eltham muddy for \$430,000 or for marginally less in entry-level Hurstbridge.

On the bigger properties, which are viable for hobby farm agriculture in Kangaroo Ground and St

Andrews, the prices touch million-dollar-plus levels.

In the unique Environmental Living Zone precinct on the Yarra known as the Bend of Isles, Ms Blackwood has for sale a four-bedroom mud-brick house with hectares of land for just under \$700,000. The proviso of settling in the zone, which was largely the brainchild of painter and potter Neil Douglas, is that residents cannot have dogs, cats, fences, firearms or any extraneous land clearing or development that might impact detrimentally on the native flora and fauna.

It is therefore one of the enclaves that has attracted a disproportionate number of creatives who prefer the quiet of the bush to the more



immediate stimulus of the high streets of suburbia.

They are the people who live in the core of the area dubbed by real estate agents as "Eltham and District". Since the 1970s, especially, so many painters, potters, writers, musicians, architects, jewellers and craftspeople have settled there that the district has turned into an arts hub.

When it comes to building houses and studios, they very famously do their own thing and their housing compounds are almost always unique and, invariably, micro village-like collections of buildings surrounded by vaguely tamed bush.

Gayle Blackwood says that for the artists of Nillumbik, "environmental sensitivity goes hand in hand with creativity".

In 1970, when Tess Edwards was the young wife of nationally famous printmaker George Baldessin, the couple faced a choice of buying an Albert Park terrace house for \$12,000 or a fibro shack on 4.5 hectares up a dirt track behind St Andrews for \$7750.

They opted for the bush and in the eight years until her husband died in a car accident, they built a cottage, studio and the bones of a big house out of recycled bluestone. As a European, George insisted on stone buildings and, at the time, nobody wanted the bluestones from demolished city buildings.

"We got them for the price of the transport," Ms Edwards says.

Though Ms Edwards "ran away" to France for nearly 20 years, she never sold her house and eventually felt the call to return to it to honour Baldessin's memory and finish the vision he had for the place as an access studio and artists' retreat.

With new partner, artist Lloyd Godman, and other professional printmakers, she runs workshops

"On the second or third day of a five-day heatwave, sure, it will heat up. But it also cools down." MICHAEL SKEWES

and retreats in what is now known as The Baldessin Press.

"It's high maintenance," she says, "but I have no intention of leaving again."

Inspired by Clifton Pugh's art compound, Dunmoochin, ceramic artist Judy Trembath and her sculptor husband Tony similarly took up cheap land in nearby Cottles Bridge in 1971. The recycled building materials lying in piles on their hillside block show they are still in the process of realising their vision of house, home studios, a fanciful corrugated tower apartment used by their 27-year-old son and sheds.

They started their compound with a hexagonal tower on which they learned how to make and lay mud bricks. Mud brick was their option, says Ms Trembath, "because we couldn't get a bank loan and because we could make them ourselves".

Though she now has the perfect pottery and teaching workshop with bush and distant valley outlooks, the place keeps growing as new ideas occur to the sculptor and as new needs for their practices arise.

A shed is soon due to become a showroom for Ms Trembath's ceramics but even if they were allowed to build in mud brick, they probably wouldn't make the raw product themselves "because making mud brick is very, very hard work".

That the Trembaths have never built to suit a market but rather in a place that they love is characteristic of the alternative building vernacular of Eltham and District.

Some of the most individualistic houses present a challenge to conventional buyers. But if mud-brick compounds do come on the market, Ms Blackwood says they are often targeted by other artists from within the area and, increasingly, by overseas buyers looking for a definitive Australian bush lifestyle experience.

Potter Michael Skewes and his wife, Annie, had always dreamed of living in a mud-brick house in the bush. In 1996, they bought wild hectares in the Environmental Living Zone and the mud-brick house built by Neil Douglas and Abbie Heathcote. The house's provenance was "a bonus", says Mr Skewes.

Despite the fact that some of the rooms had been built by a mud brickie "who didn't believe in using a spirit level", says Mr Skewes, "it had the 'wow' factor. I loved it as soon as I walked in." The Skewes have changed very little about the house they well recognise as part of Nillumbik's heritage and say all it really needs, perhaps, "is a dishwasher".

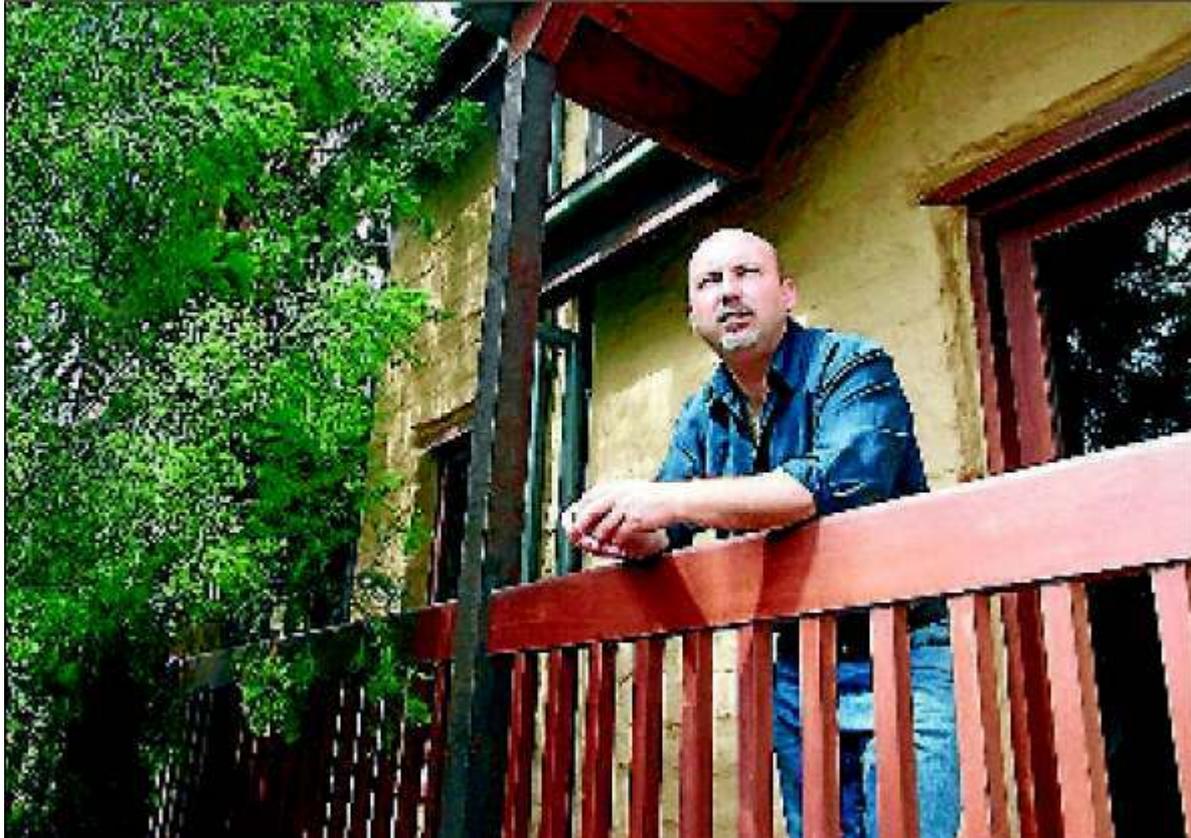
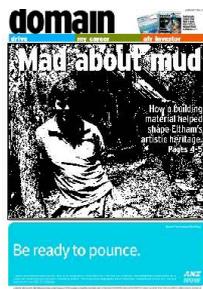
"For us, it's just fine as it is."

Having spent a decade living in mud brick, Mr Skewes finds nothing to fault in its energy performance. "On the second or third day of a five-day heatwave, sure, it will heat up. But it also cools down."

He is just one of many in the area who feel it is a terrible shame "that the mud-brick industry has gone off the boil because it is so much a part of the heritage here".



Artist Judy Trembath's family house at Cottles Bridge has been a work in progress for nearly 30 years.



Mud-brick advocate Michael Young is working to have the humble "muddy" restored to favour.

PICTURE: MICHELE FERGUSON

Restoring a master material, brick by brick

BUILDER Michael Young was once apprenticed to Alistair Knox and has constructed numerous mud-brick houses. So it's natural that the 49-year-old builder finds it frustrating that, in the past three years, he has only been allowed to build two small extensions out of a material that he feels "has proven itself to be eco-friendly for 10,000 years".

As president of the Nillumbik Mud Brick Association and a local councillor, Mr Young has been lobbying hard to have the software that rates a building's energy performance recalibrated to consider the embodied energy of mud-brick manufacture – and its actual thermal performance – more realistically so that

the mud-brick house building industry can start up again.

He claims the virtual ban on using mud brick comes down to glitches in the software, rather than the material itself, which "in a house made out of 250mm bricks works so beautifully that it can have less thermal fluctuation than a normal house".

"With good design we can get a five-star rating or better."

While the NSW mud-brick building scene has been thriving under different energy measurements, he says his association has been forced to "battle on" through a succession of Victorian planning ministers with the argument that "mud brick is

the most environmentally friendly of all building materials, and that not everyone in Australia wants to live at 21 degrees, seven days a week".

Mr Young says the software determining the five-star criteria is already up to version five and there is hope that, with a few more tweaks, it might finally measure the right reasons for building in mud brick.

The breakthrough is inevitable, he believes. When it happens, he says, "Nillumbik, the heartland of mud-brick building in Australia", can re-emerge from its temporary retreat as a showcase "of a fantastic heritage that uses a fantastic material".