



ON THE DRAWING BOARD

Designing for intentional community in the tropics

In Malanda on Queensland's Atherton Tablelands, a house is taking shape that bucks convention, designed for harmonious communal living as well as top-notch performance in its tropical climate. Darren Finlay of Innovation House Australia explains the thinking behind it.

Where should I begin in order to explain the vision and purpose behind our Malanda house project? At its core it's about starting a conversation around how we can live differently in community. Our current 'standard' housing doesn't always suit the needs of the people who live there. This project is about bridging the gap between mere shelter and the profound sense of belonging that a true home should provide.

After a couple of decades working as a builder in Queensland's dry tropics, I was getting increasingly frustrated by the housing industry's 'business as usual', which I saw often delivered limited options and poor housing. So I set up Innovation House, and later the not-for-profit People Purpose Place, to provide sustainable solutions that improve people's lives through better housing. We do this by shifting the focus: starting with the *people*, exploring their *purpose*, and then seeing what the *place* could look like.

For this project, we had a steadfast ally and, at times, a formidable critic in landowner Christine Doan, who was interested in building something a little different to the norm on her 1.5-hectare block in Malanda. Growing up in the United States during the 1960s, when countercultural ideas were on the rise, Christine relocated to Australia more than 40 years ago and has a long history of supporting innovation in housing.

As a long-standing pillar of her local community, Christine's support for our endeavour was invaluable. Her scrutiny, while demanding, stemmed from a genuine desire to enact tangible change through community-based action. We all quickly agreed that our shared project was as much about people finding ways to communicate and work together as it was about housing.

Christine's objective was to create a high-performance, affordable house that allowed a group of individual residents to foster community – we thought of it as one modern version of 'familia'. I strongly believe that high-performance housing and affordability don't have to be mutually exclusive concepts, and I was happy to tackle the necessary rethinking of the conventional 'nuclear family home' layout to create a house suitable for a more diverse intentional household.

THE SITE

One extra challenge for designing this home was the responsibility of safeguarding a unique piece of land. While not large, Christine's block is very lovely, with its natural slope down to a creek that runs into the North Johnstone River. Over the years, Christine and members of the local Tablelands community have rehabilitated the former farming land into lush tropical bush that functions as an important wildlife corridor, especially important for the local tree kangaroo population.

The site is big enough to allow us to orient the house facing north, ensuring that only the ends of the building would bear the brunt of the hot tropical morning and afternoon sun. However, the sloping, partially flood-affected block meant that optimising the house's location while considering buildability from a cost point of view required meticulous on-site analysis and collaboration with Christine, her trusty companion Moggie (the puppy), and the team. Placing the house higher on the ridge still allowed for good orientation and aspect while addressing these site-specific challenges.

THE DESIGN THINKING

Sometimes you get lucky and the science, common sense, and desired feel of a place all end up pointing in the same design direction. Scientific principles in our tropical climate called for cross ventilation and minimal sun exposure to exterior walls – a design strategy that led naturally to the inclusion of covered breezeways and alfresco areas that also offer extra options for living space.

For the layout, we moved away from the idea of a 'main' bedroom that's larger and better located than the others. We thought it was important that all bedrooms be similar in size and amenity, and all with the benefit of the beautiful aspect down the block to the creek. As the design unfolded, it settled into a 'longhouse' shape, common in this kind of semi-rural location and incorporating elements of vernacular structures like shearing sheds.

We also drew inspiration from American 'dogtrot' design, in which separate cabins or living quarters are connected with breezeways (or dogtrots), all under a common roof. By eliminating hallways – a move that might challenge conventional thinking – we were able to maximise the usefulness of the built space. The generous overhangs designed for sun protection also function as circulation space, and aid the connection of the bedrooms and living spaces to the surrounding environment. I find it intriguing that we humans are so drawn to connect with nature, but so often create homes that fail to facilitate it!

Arranging the bedrooms on each side allowed for the living area at the heart of the home, very well protected and yet still enjoying that same view.

One thing we realised was that to create a gathering place to sit and talk away from electronic devices, the focus might best be on fire. So we positioned an outdoor hearth out the front of the living area, near the patio, to draw people together outside (appropriately, the Latin word for hearth is *focis*).

From a materials perspective, we opted for insulated lightweight construction to achieve the low thermal density

that's important for tropical climates, while still being sensitive to the fact that the Tablelands can be cold and windy. The timber-framed structure will be finished with a combination of claddings to ensure an aesthetic balance and good durability, including James Hardie fibre cement products and Colorbond (to fit the semi-rural vernacular). We have chosen a concrete slab for the floor, to aid accessibility, for cost-effectiveness, and for some thermal mass to make the most of winter sun. With these materials and good orientation, we were able to achieve an 8.6-Star energy rating for the design.

FULL STEAM AHEAD

We feel we have landed on a design that achieves the brief: providing for intentional community living while being conscious of the environment in this lovely spot. Given that it's somewhat unconventional, it was important to ensure that the home adhered to regulations and integrated seamlessly with the surrounding village. We were very keen that the community was on board, and prioritised consultation with local residents, which was generally well received. We are conscious of making sure that this and future projects like it move the wider community from a response of "not in my backyard" to "yes please, in my backyard". I am delighted to report that the project now possesses the requisite building permits, and we are on the verge of breaking ground.

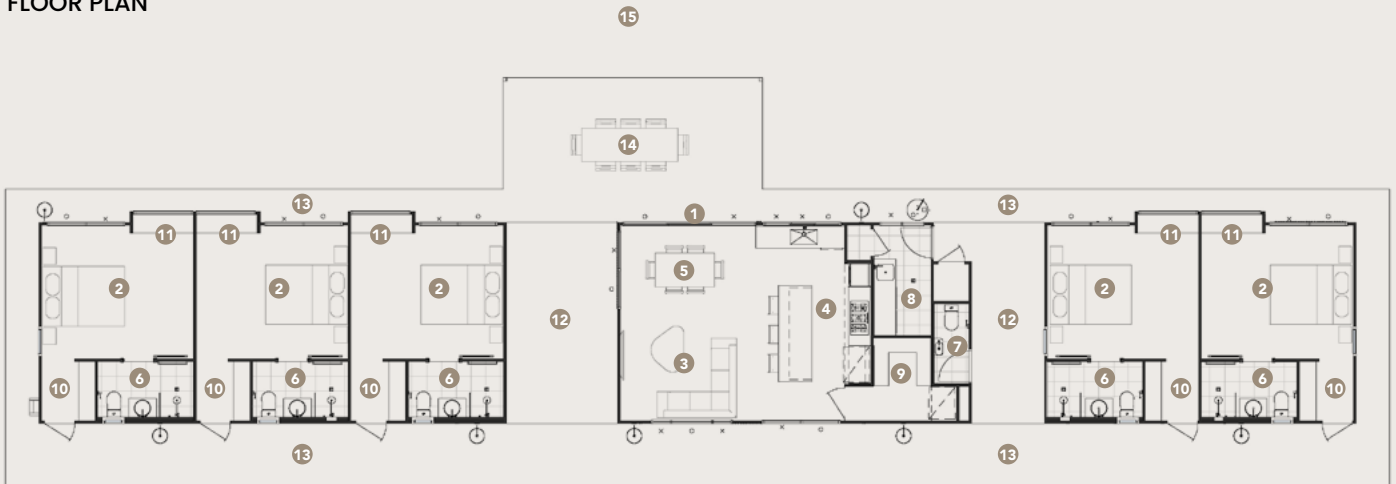
I'm confident that this project will demonstrate that with considered, climate-appropriate design and carefully chosen materials, a high-performance house can be achieved without a lot of extra cost. And it's about more than the mere construction of a house. It's about rethinking the very essence of home and community, and we hope that it will inspire others to challenge the status quo and explore new possibilities for living that help build community. **S**





Left Christine's Atherton Tablelands block, shown here with a portion recently slashed in preparation for the start of construction, slopes down to a creek at bottom left. The house will be sited on the higher ground at top right, oriented for northern sun and views to the lush tropical bush that's the result of years of revegetation efforts by Christine and local community members. Image: Juergen Freund

FLOOR PLAN



LEGEND

- | | | | |
|-----------|------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| 1 Entry | 5 Dining | 9 Pantry | 13 Verandah |
| 2 Bedroom | 6 Bathroom | 10 Mudroom | 14 Patio |
| 3 Living | 7 Toilet | 11 Reading nook | 15 Outdoor hearth |
| 4 Kitchen | 8 Laundry | 12 Breezeway | |