



Free as a BIRD

The beautiful home of Bird Textiles founder Rachel Bending is as planet-friendly as the exquisite pieces produced by her label

STORY JUDY BAROUCH STYLING STEPHANIE POWELL PHOTOGRAPHY JOHN DOWNS

Low-impact living has never been so glamorous. Rachel's sustainably stylish home is a harmonious addition to the landscape, with a low profile that hugs the hillside, timber trims and cladding in understated greys, with Dulux Woodland Grey on the lower section and Porter's Paints' no-VOC Lime Wash in Promenade on the upper parts. "I felt deeply connected to the land and knew I could honour this by building with a light footprint," Rachel says. >



No matter how much the wind huffs and puffs through the hills above Byron Bay, the home of Rachel Bending, founder and creative director of leading sustainable fashion and homewares label Bird Textiles, and her partner Campbell is one house that certainly won't blow down – despite the fact that it's made of straw.

As someone who's passionate about environmental responsibility, Rachel knew straw bale would be the perfect choice for the home she planned to create in the lush Byron Bay hinterland. A traditional building material with serious eco cred – it's a renewable natural resource with exceptional thermal insulating properties – straw bale is undergoing a renaissance in dwellings. "It's durable and, when you combine it with passive solar principles and an awareness of the site's environmental considerations, you can design a house with significantly fewer energy requirements," says Rachel.

Sitting in harmony with its bush surrounds, Rachel's home is one of only six private properties within an 32-hectare community-titled, wildlife sanctuary that borders a state forest. Before design and building began, she lived part-time in a caravan on-site for three years. "I needed to know what the sun and the wind were doing over the four seasons so the design would be in sync with the environment," she explains.

In order to stay hands-on, Rachel took a straw-bale building workshop and an owner-builder training course, then hired Blue Architects (now based in the UK) because "they had a similar design aesthetic to me and were interested in the challenge." Straw-bale specialist Robert O'Keeffe of Natural Building Works was commissioned for the build.

ENTRANCE {top left} The main entrance to the home is via a little bridge from the lush, sloping front garden. Rachel chose kwila timber for the decking, doors, windows and the internal floors, seeking out Forestry Stewardship Council (FSC) certified timber to ensure it was responsibly harvested. To find stockists of FSC-approved timbers in Australia, visit the Good Wood Guide at goodwoodguide.org.au.

KITCHEN {top right} Rachel's '50s style is a good match for an eco aesthetic, with retro accessories recycled in her kitchen. A vintage fridge has been given an eco revamp with a new motor, the sink is an old laundry sink salvaged from Aarvbee Bellingen Valley Recyclers, and open shelves house Rachel's collection of vintage pieces. "The shelves were sized specifically so the items of 1950s kitchenalia would fit," she says.

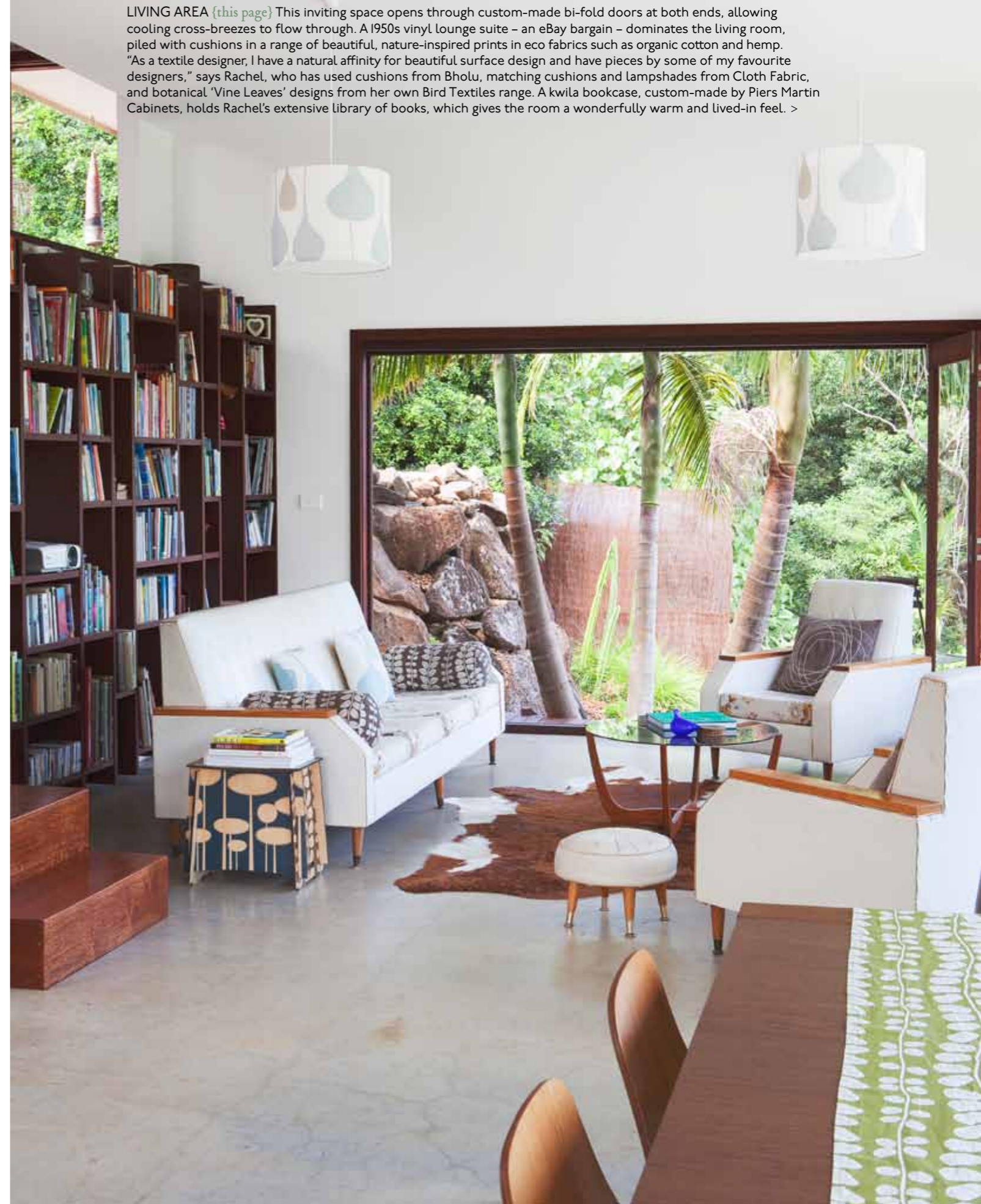


Of course, one would expect nothing less than a totally green approach from Rachel, who is widely regarded as a pioneer in the field of eco textiles. The beautifully bold, organic fabrics in all of Bird's ranges are designed in her Byron studio, hand-printed using water-based dyes and sewn using solar-powered machines – and Rachel's home displays the same enchanting characteristics: a raw, organic palette punctuated by graphic bursts of pattern and colour, with a nod to nostalgia and a firm focus on natural beauty. Designs from Bird are dotted throughout the house, as are well-chosen hits of retro furniture and the occasional style statement, such as a cowhide rug. "Pieces that have caught my eye have become highlights of the house," says Rachel. "I incorporated a vintage fridge but had a new motor put into it to make it more energy efficient. And I collect items like old egg whisks and cake racks as wall decoration."

The home is split into two pavilions, connected by an outdoor bathroom and stepped timber deck, with the northern pavilion containing the couple's 'summer bedroom', and the southern a cosy, enclosed 'winter bedroom', an indoor bathroom complete with a composting toilet, and a combined kitchen, dining and lounge area. "I love the natural flow between the indoor and outdoor spaces and the way it all blends with the environment," says Rachel.

Uniting it all is a consistent commitment to planet-friendly features, such as solar heating and power, a compost toilet, a reedbed greywater system and rainwater tanks that hold 50,000 litres and provide all the home's water. "When one understands that one can live lightly without decreasing your quality of life, there's no going back," says Rachel.

LIVING AREA {this page} This inviting space opens through custom-made bi-fold doors at both ends, allowing cooling cross-breezes to flow through. A 1950s vinyl lounge suite – an eBay bargain – dominates the living room, piled with cushions in a range of beautiful, nature-inspired prints in eco fabrics such as organic cotton and hemp. "As a textile designer, I have a natural affinity for beautiful surface design and have pieces by some of my favourite designers," says Rachel, who has used cushions from Bholu, matching cushions and lampshades from Cloth Fabric, and botanical 'Vine Leaves' designs from her own Bird Textiles range. A kwila bookcase, custom-made by Piers Martin Cabinets, holds Rachel's extensive library of books, which gives the room a wonderfully warm and lived-in feel. >





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OUTDOOR BATHROOM {opposite} The home's private location provides the opportunity to indulge in the luxury of an outdoor bathroom, with the occasional curious bird the only visitor. "The salvaged clawfoot bathtub was a gift from a friend and the flooring is travertine, surplus from another job," Rachel says. To get this look, try scouring reclamation yards for a clawfoot bath.

SUMMER BEDROOM {top left} While the couple's winter bedroom is snug and warm, this bedroom opens to the elements, with sliding doors connecting it to the outdoor bathroom. The decor suits the room's summer feel, with cheery pink bedlinen and Osborne & Little wallpaper (visit osborneandlittle.com). "I've always loved Osborne & Little's work. And they bought some of my fabric designs when I graduated from the Glasgow School of Art," Rachel says.

INDOOR BATHROOM {top right} With its sleek neutral tiles from Metro Tiles, square above-counter basin from Reece, curvaceous shower recess and a Nikles rainwater showerhead, the indoor bathroom is a picture of slick contemporary style. The room's most impressive feature sits unobtrusively in a corner: the Clivus Multrum odourless composting toilet (not pictured), which converts waste to clean compost in a chamber beneath the house. "It uses no chemicals, water or heat, has no polluting discharge and can save up to 60,000 litres of water per year!" says Rachel. The only clue to a composting toilet's eco purpose is the lack of a cistern.

LIVING ROOM {right} Botanical prints, such as this limited-edition Bird Textiles Zaishu stool, reflect the breathtaking bush views through the living room windows. Standing guard behind the 1950s chair is one of a pair of enormous hollowed palm tree trunks. "I bought them from a gallery that is now closed. I love the shape of them, particularly the natural bumps and hollows," says Rachel. "We don't have much wall space for artwork in the living area so I thought that sculptural pieces would work well." >





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houses built of straw

As well as the insulating benefits of straw, the snug feel of the thick walls and the feelgood factor of using an eco-friendly renewable resource, straw-bale building also allows for creative design. "Sustainable living isn't just soy milk and mung beans. Your home can be sustainable and still have a contemporary edge," says Rachel, who has taken advantage of the pliability of straw to have stunning curved walls (top left) and deep window recesses created. "It has been rendered in lime and is very tactile. The cost was comparable to a similar house made from conventional materials but there is way less impact on the earth."

STONE WALL (top right) A dry-stone wall forms the spine of the home's southern pavilion, adding rustic texture to the space and reminding Rachel, who came to Australia from Wales nine years ago, of her Welsh homeland. "It took the stonemason, his assistant and me two weeks to build," she says. The limestone used was salvaged from the local area. "It was lying around in paddocks on the stonemason's property. We have old stone walls that are a hundred years old, made from the same limestone, on our property too," says Rachel.

ARTWORK (TOP RIGHT, SMALL PRINT) WINTER LANDSCAPE BY FRANCESCA IANNACCONE



Sustainable living
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OUTDOOR LIVING (this page & opposite, bottom) The generous main deck wraps around the north and west sides of the home, overlooking the valley and connecting with the more private courtyard of the outdoor bathroom. Northern NSW's temperate climate allows for outdoor living most of the year and Rachel and Campbell take full advantage, using different outdoor areas according to the season. "We love sitting on the big deck at night in summer listening to the chorus of cicadas," Rachel says. The lush outlook is partly of the couple's own making, with the view taking in some of the regenerated community-owned land. "Together we planted 10,000 trees." >

Inside story

Who lives here? Rachel Bending (inset), founder and creative director of Bird Textiles, and her partner, Campbell Rowe, a chef and organic farmer.

Tips for putting a room together?

Rachel: "Keep it simple – have a couple of focus pieces to build a theme around. You can pick up really beautiful vintage bargains if you take the time to hunt around. And keep a scrapbook of ideas – I kept one for five years before I started the house."

My style... "depends on where I'm living. I used to live in London, where I decorated with warmer colours, such as maroons, that seemed to suit the climate. Here in Australia, I tend to use a lot of lighter blues and greens rather than an earthy palette."

Isn't a composting toilet a bit yuck? "Not at all. A friend who was visiting from Sydney recently commented that it's 'cleaner than a normal toilet!'"

Why do you use one bedroom in summer, another in winter? "The southern bedroom is snug in winter, whereas the summer bedroom in the northern pavilion is cooler, as air circulates through the little leadlight windows and out through two large flyscreened French doors that we keep open all night."

Is there anything you would have done differently? "Really, hand on heart, I wouldn't change a thing!"



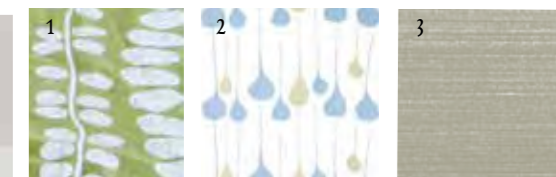
DECK One of the couple's favourite places to wind down is on the Ikea rattan furniture by the plunge pool from Baywater Pools (visit baywaterpools.com.au). "It's a guilt-free hot bath as the water for it is collected from our roof and heated by the sun," says Rachel.

SOLAR POWER (right) Rachel and Campbell invested in six solar panels and a solar hot water system. "The house produces most of its own power. Surplus power is fed back into the grid during peak hours," Rachel says.

WILDLIFE (below) Cats and dogs are not permitted in the wildlife sanctuary, but the couple don't lack in animal companions. "We have Gordon, our resident goanna, plus a bowerbird, echidnas, wallabies, kookaburras and koalas." Then there are the chickens. "We have six hens which lay eggs every day," Rachel says.



"When one UNDERSTANDS THAT ONE CAN LIVE LIGHTLY, THERE'S NO GOING BACK."



Colours & materials

- 1 Fabric 'Vine Leaves' organic cotton fabric in Peat, from \$89/metre, Bird Textiles, (02) 8399 0230, birdtextile.com.au.
- 2 Fabric 'Looking for Water' hemp fabric in Boyblue on Cream, \$107/metre, Cloth Fabric, (02) 9699 2266, clothfabric.com.
- 3 Exterior paint Lime Wash in Promenade, from \$88.80/4 litres, Porter's Paints, 1800 656 664, porterspains.com.
Due to the printing process, actual colours may vary.



fave find
This flat-packed stool is made from sustainable hoop pine plywood. 'Baw Baw Daisy' stool by Nicola Cerini. Price: \$360. Find it: Zaishu, (02) 6646 1895, zaishu.com.

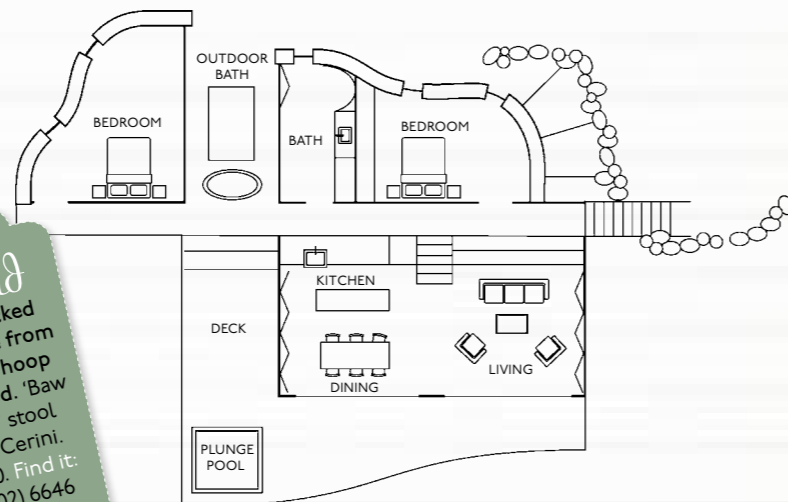


ILLUSTRATION WWW.KENZIEDSIGN.COM

great idea...

< reedbed greywater system
Greywater from showers, sinks and the washing machine is fed into a partially buried holding tank before being filtered through a bed of native lomandra reeds. "These clean the water before it is pumped to an irrigation field and dispersed through the garden, except for the vegie patch. There's a dedicated water tank for the vegies and plunge pool," says Rachel. "These reeds are not mature yet; when they are fully grown, they will be around 1.5 metres wide."



Eco directory

- 1 Building: Natural Building Works (02) 6684 9144; naturalbuildingworks.com.au.
- 2 Joinery: Piers Martin Cabinets (02) 6685 9014.
- 3 Composting toilet: Clivus Multrum, 1300 138 182; clivusmultrum.com.au.
- 4 Solar panels: Nickel Renewable Energy (02) 6622 7639; nickelenergy.com.au.