

outdoors

My dad made this

Child's play gets serious when architects design cubbies, writes **Babette Hayes.**

There was immeasurable joy in finding things, tying bits of timber together or hammering away to make a platform with ropes to secure it. There was the thrill of hiding away in your secret place, observing what was happening around you without being seen (or so you thought), up high, out of reach, or concealed among the bushes.

Building a cubby or tree house was a special part of childhood. But one thing is certain: for the average cubbyhouse builder there is little, if any, considered attempt at "designing". Even so, some cubbyhouse builders grow up to be architects and, if they are lucky, they can have their fun all over again.

Two such architects are Rob Brown and Richard Cole. Both fathers, their most important clients are aged under 10. Brown has four children – Zella, 8, Ben, 6, James, 5, and Nina, 2 – with his partner, the furniture designer Caroline Casey. Their cubby is at the back of their home at Mackerel Beach. "We live right on the beach and had the idea we'd like to build something together. It's actually a coalition of ideas. Mum and dad being design nutters, all the children have their creative bent," Brown says.

"All the family started collecting materials with the intention of building at some stage – we did not know how it would all come together – picking up flotsam off the beach and wherever else it would turn up, like the red spinnaker pole, the perfectly curved Oregon boom off a 1956 Olympic vessel." Leftover timber poles from one of his projects found their way down to the beach, as did a sample sheet of mini-orb corrugated copper sheeting.

"We had family meetings and discussions – everyone had their say. We had a birthday coming up and had six weeks to build, which we did with the assistance of our carpenter, Adrian Macbeth.

"The cubby had to be in the front, beach-side yard, so we could keep an eye on the children. It had to have a Robinson Crusoe feel, all thrown together to create a bit of sculpture because we, the parents, had to look at it from the house."

The cubby won the Timber Development Association award for the Best Structure in the Landscape for Dawson and Brown Architecture. "We'd put it up for the awards, a tongue-in-cheek



Treemendous ... the Brown family cubby at Mackerel Beach, top left and right; and the Cole cubby in Avalon.

Photos: Georgia Moxham, Natalie Boog

exercise because we'd never won an award [from] this body. We thought we'd give it a try," says Brown. But he makes it quite clear he won't be designing cubbies for clients. "It's one of those never-to-be-repeated projects – but for our kids we'd do anything," he says, with a smile. "Theirs is a beachside property right on the beach, it's their bit of real estate. It's theirs to do what they like with."

For Richard Cole, the process started when he and his wife, Cissy, started renovating their stone house (featured in Domain Home on August 11).

They needed somewhere to store their garden



equipment. "I decided to build a shed in the front garden and then decided we might as well build a cubby on top rather than have two lots of footings. It is screened by heavy vegetation from the street."

Conceived in the spirit of a traditional shed, "the design concept was to integrate it with the house and create a tower-like structure with a shed underneath", Cole says. Set on a 2.4-square floor plan, it has four columns of treated pine that go up to the double-height roof with mass concrete footings. The rest of the framing is all hardwood, with corrugated Zincalume and fibre-cement sheeting for cladding. One wall and the door are made with plywood. It was left natural in keeping with the materials and colours in the house.

"The form is like a fort or lookout with the steep 250-millimetre-wide ramp fixed to a 600-millimetre-high stump. It was very satisfying building it myself," says Cole, who is also a fine furniture craftsman. "It was a manageable little project as well as being a fun design exercise, because you don't need to take it too seriously and can end up with something for the kids and a great feature in the landscape."

Cole has designed another cubbyhouse for a client that will be reassembled on site. "Cubbies are often an afterthought. The ones you can buy are so ordinary, very safe. There is no excitement or sense of adventure."

That is, after all, what makes them special.

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