

RISING FROM THE ASHES

After the devastation of the Black Saturday bushfires, entire communities are being rebuilt as never before, house by house and life by life.

Words by Claire Scobie | Photography by James Lauritz

When Courtney Hall fled her dream home in shorts and thongs, all she had time to grab were her cats, Saas and Momo. She sent a text message to her partner, Robbie Congdon, who was working in a copper mine in Western Australia, and drove to the centre of Kinglake. She took shelter in the Country Fire Authority (CFA) shed.

For the next twenty four hours, her partner didn't know if she was alive or dead. "It was horrific," says twenty nine year old Hall.

It was 7 February, 2009 - Black Saturday. The mercury had hit the high forties. Even without fire, the air crackled with heat. Like many, in the lead up, Hall had checked the CFA website, but communication channels had broken down.

Hall and Congdon had been living in Kinglake for only six months. After twelve years of saving, they had left suburban Melbourne and bought a "lovely established home", 2 kilometres from the Kinglake National Park Hotel. After the firestorm, only rubble remained.

The Black Saturday bushfires killed 173 people, including twenty three children. They were the worst peacetime disaster in Australian history. More than 2000 properties and 430,000 hectares of vegetation were destroyed across north east Victoria, from Kilmore East and Murrindindi to West Gippsland. A combination of drought, gale force winds and a record heatwave contributed to extreme climatic conditions. It was unprecedented in terms of scale, loss of life, homes and property," says >>





↳ Kevin Butler set up BlazeAid from his woolshed. His team of volunteers built more than 300 kilometres of new fencing for fire damaged properties.

↳ Courtney Hall's old house in Kinglake was reduced to rubble in the fires. Her new home will now meet stringent fire safety standards.



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Courtney Hall | Kinglake resident

Ben Hubbard, CEO of the Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority (VBRRA).

When Courtney was reunited with Robbie four days after the fires, he asked her what they would do. “Find a builder, I guess,” she said. “We weren’t going to let a catastrophic day and an act of Mother Nature stop us. It will take more than a bushfire to keep us off the mountain.”

Most of Australia’s significant bushfires have led to changes in planning and policy making. With seventy eight diverse communities affected and historic townships such as Marysville virtually wiped out, to rebuild after Black Saturday was to embark on an uncharted course. For many of those still traumatised, the decision can take months if not years.

“The infrastructure in terms of public buildings is the easy part,” says Malcolm Hackett, chair of the Strathewen Renewal Association. “What will take a hell of a lot longer is for people to rebuild homes. Many were underinsured, and there are additional building costs.”

Strathewen was overlooked by many in the weeks after the fires, but the tiny community suffered twenty seven fatalities and lost eighty of its 120 homes. “Even though there’s no one around, it doesn’t mean the community doesn’t exist,” says Hackett.

“What’s difficult is making the community return.” Relief efforts have focused on activities ranging from blokes’ nights to knitting chooks - all “ways of looking after each other”.

For all the towns affected, the emergency phase of recovery focused on establishing ten community service hubs as one stop shops for access to government services, temporary accommodation, psychological support and counselling. Australians gave millions to the Victorian Bushfire Appeal Fund. Non-government organisations and charities donated clothes, furniture and food, and thousands of volunteers offered their services.

“It was a terrible shock. One day we were a normal community and the next day we couldn’t feed ourselves,” says Kinglake artist and mother of two, Kate Jones.

In the chaotic early days, people like Kevin Butler, a sheep farmer from Kilmore East, didn’t wait for the authorities to take charge. After volunteers helped rebuild their fences, he and wife Rhonda set up BlazeAid from their leaking woolshed. For the next ten months, BlazeAid organised 3200 volunteers to build about 300 kilometres of fences on 400 properties.

“It was a strict military operation. Volunteers had to be there by 7.45am,” says Butler. “At the end of the day they sat down for a three course meal in the woolshed. The outside pouring of empathy was just a treasure, priceless. It made you feel wonderful to be Australian.” For their outstanding efforts, the Butlers were presented with Victoria’s 2010 Local Hero award.

The Libreri family, who have lived in Kinglake for twenty years, managed to douse the flames surrounding their twenty hectare property and save the house, where six children and neighbours were sheltering.

"Daylight went to pitch black for forty five minutes," says Tessa Libreri. "One of our neighbours, Mick Flynn, was badly burned and was in our swimming pool for hours before the CFA picked him up around midnight. His skin was peeling off his forehead and hands. The initial prognosis was good, but he died twelve days later. We felt gutted. We'd let him and his family down."

The day after the fires, Thomas Libreri phoned ABC radio and said, "I'm a survivor. We have no power or water. What we need are generators, power leads, supplies." Overnight their house became a makeshift relief centre, sourcing, then taking, caravans and generators to struggling residents. "For a while there was a cast of thousands," says Tessa. "We did hug a lot of people at that time. We were glad to be alive."

As residents were trying to get back on their feet and fires burned for weeks afterwards, a team of researchers, including Justin Leonard, a CSIRO research scientist and

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Kevin Butler | Kilmore East resident

expert in fire safety design, was surveying the devastation. "It was a bit hairy," says Leonard. "Invariably there is a human story inherent in every case. You have to combine the human and built environment into one storyline."

Although the Black Saturday bushfires were a unique, and tragic, combination of factors, some facts remain. "The adage that ember attack is one of the main culprits of house ignition still holds true, even under these extreme conditions. The past theory on bushfires has not been debunked," says Leonard. "Human influence during and after a fire has the single biggest influence on house survival over and above individual design. [However], we need to consider >>

Change for good

The Victorian Bushfire Royal Commission's final report will not be released until July, but its two interim reports recommend a host of changes. They include a national standard for bushfire bunkers, the need for community fire refuges or 'informal places of shelter', and a clearer evacuation policy. The commission has also challenged the core 'stay or go' policy of bushfire safety.

In March last year, a new Australian Standard 3959 on building in bushfire prone areas was adopted in certain states including Victoria and Queensland. The Australian Building Codes Board plans to adopt the revised Standard in the new Building Code of Australia from 1 May this year.

A Bushfire Attack Level (BAL) assessment is now required for all building permit applications in any urban or rural area. Buildings are classified from one to six, ranging from BAL-low, BAL-12.5, BAL-19, BAL-29, BAL-40 to BAL-FZ (for 'flame zone'). About 80 per cent of BALs will be low. Applicants assessed as BAL-29s - as Hall and Congdon were for rebuilding their Kinglake home - must now meet stringent construction requirements for roofing, windows, exterior walls, subfloor and decks. Even then, any house can only be made flame resistant, not flame proof.

"Information from Victoria's Building Commission indicates that the predicted cost premiums range from 4 to 8 per cent depending where the property is located [and what the BAL is]," says David Hallett, general manager of Archicentre, a Melbourne based architect firm. "So, as an example, if the house is going to cost \$200,000 to \$300,000, the premium ranges from \$8,000 to \$24,000. A significant sum."

"The biggest challenge is that a lot of people don't know much about

building," says Gordon Moses, from the mobile Building Advisory Service. "There's lots of trepidation in getting started, and it can take six to eight months of talking to builders. You have to get the community functioning again to bring people back."

The new legislation was being rolled out as Hall and Congdon were rebuilding. "We were learning at the same time as the industry and professionals," says Hall.



The couple hope to move into their new split level brick house in early March. Hall, a software sales agent, estimates that in their case they paid an additional \$40,000.

"The sub-floor section is now completely enclosed. Before, there was a chance embers could come in. We've had safety glass installed and the roof is sarked [gaps filled with flame proofing material]. The increased cost will price many people in our demographic out of rebuilding."

As the fire approached, the Libreri family doused the flames around their property while neighbours sheltered inside.



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something more complex than just building a home to a likely level of exposure. A combination of building, landscape design and human education needs to occur.”

Regenerating entire communities, public spaces and buildings takes a coordinated effort. 40 per cent of Murrindindi Shire was burnt, including half its houses. The local council lost a large part of its rate base. In the initial weeks after the fires, the council “seemed to put up walls in every direction”, says Tessa Libreri. “They didn’t know what was going on and were charging for permit fees to rebuild, despite government flyers stating fees would be waived.”

Murrindindi Shire Council acting CEO Robert Croxford admits there have been peaks and troughs. “There is no rulebook for such a disaster,” he says. “There has been an evolution of the recovery process. We are back on track now.”

The council now works closely with VBRRA which

coordinates thirty three community recovery committees, each with its own recovery plan. “Rebuilding entire townships has involved extensive consultation

with the community and significant planning to ensure broad consensus in what is an incredibly sensitive time,” says Ben Hubbard. “Communities have told us they don’t want to simply rebuild what was there previously, but to take the opportunity to rethink the way towns and facilities are built and improve them for future generations. It’s important not to rush communities into making decisions they will have to live with forever.”

To date, more than \$1 billion has been spent on reconstruction and 230 urban renewal projects have been initiated.

Kinglake comprises four townships over the Kinglake Ranges. Community facilities damaged or destroyed include two schools, five shops and

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Courtney Hall | Kinglake resident

eight businesses. At a Remake Kinglake workshop with the local community last July, VBRRA and other government stakeholders addressed long term rebuilding strategies and how to attract investment.

“We’ve had morale boosting events, but business confidence is at a real low. A lot of businesses have lost 40 per cent of clientele, and some up to 70 per cent,” says Brad Quilliam, owner of Roda Graphics and coordinator of the Kinglake Ranges Business Network. “One of the shining lights was the Salvos who worked with the business network to set up a voucher system. The vouchers are redeemable as money which people can spend at local businesses.”

The Kinglake Business Hub has opened to provide office facilities for local businesses. After a year without a local fuel supply – locals have had to drive a sixty kilometre round trip to get petrol – a service station is being rebuilt.

Such basic services are crucial. In Marysville, where only 10 per cent of businesses survived, residents were frustrated because they couldn’t buy basic supplies locally, says Kerry O’Neill, who is in charge of planning at VBRRA. “It wasn’t until the supermarket opened in December that it felt like a real town again.”

The supermarket is in the former Marysville car museum. One of the few buildings left standing, it is now being developed into a retail hub.

A \$7 million Marysville community learning, health and recreation hub is also in development. Both are part of the Marysville and Triangle Urban Design Framework. >>



Store owner Sharon Karpany at The Rainbow Shop's temporary home in Kinglake.



Head and heart

Sixty eight year old Sophie Mantus had lived in her Flowerdale home for fifteen years before Black Saturday.

“The fire came so fast, without warning,” she says. “I tried to put my fire plan into place with wet towels in front of the doors, but knew I had to leave. I closed the gate and tied a red ribbon to show nobody was home. Then I drove to Yea.

“Three days later I managed to return on the back roads. Everything was black and grey. It was like a bomb had dropped. Only my washing line, a bench table and the gate were still intact. I thought, ‘I’ve come from Europe and worked double shifts to ensure I had a peaceful retirement, and what for?’ It was hard to find strength.

“The insurance took about six months and I planned to rebuild. I had the engineers, soil testers and builders come out. But my intuition kept telling me different from my head.

“It was very painful, but it worked out okay. The generosity of Australians who have offered their time has been very heart warming. Nearly a year on and I have bought in [nearby] Whittlesea. I go up to my block and potter. I can always change my mind [and rebuild], but I am not forty anymore. I need to live for today.”

HEALING TOOLS

Alan and Tricia Hayward, both sixty one, run a hardware store in Whittlesea, twenty six kilometres from devastated Kinglake. They have since worked tirelessly for their community. Alan has helped set up two projects, Tools for Tradies and Community Tool Libraries, for tradesmen who lost up to \$30,000 worth of equipment in the fires. Whittlesea Lions Club has provided support and funding.

"We asked tradies to fill in a wish list of tools they would dearly love to have," he says. "The number of grown men who broke down in tears when they received the tools was humbling."

After that project wound up in October, he collaborated with other groups to establish the tool libraries. "We could see people were still struggling. Neighbours were concerned about neighbours who were locking themselves away. The tool libraries are a way to get them off their property, to get a chainsaw or wheelbarrow. Some people don't want to talk to a neighbour but are happy to talk to a stranger, so we have a mix of volunteers at the libraries. It's an excellent way to help survivors' mental wellbeing."



“For those committed to staying, there is renewed solidarity in the community.”

"In this iconic sub-alpine village, renowned for its natural beauty, tourism was identified as an important anchor in economic regeneration," says O'Neill.

"The planning needs to strike a balance between streamlining decisions and making sure the process is transparent. We've put a lot of emphasis on communication to all groups, and consultation is critical."

While bushfire safety is an important priority, refuges are currently decisions for individual property owners and government service providers for education and the like, says O'Neill.

In the decimated Murrindindi ribbon settlement of Flowerdale, fire safety has been a core issue. The community has received a \$60,000 tanker for its local

brigade. While the trees on the mountain are still black, and will never recover, Flowerdale Recovery Committee chair John Burgess is optimistic.

"We compare ourselves to Greensburg, in Kansas, which was wiped out by a tornado in 2007. It was around the same size as Flowerdale and suffered a similar number of deaths. After three years, only 45 per cent of houses were rebuilt. In Flowerdale, fifty homes out of 200 have been rebuilt. That's 25 per cent in one year."

For those committed to staying, there is renewed solidarity in the community. Some people are emotionally exhausted, but green shoots are emerging. Courtney Hall focuses on "making new traditions" when she gets upset about what she lost on Black Saturday.

"On a personal level for us, it was an awakening - what life is about and what it's not. The blessings are the people I've met in the community on account of our tragedy. If this had not happened, I wouldn't have met them." •