



## Going local, slow and carbon low

*By Gib Wettenhall and Lachlan Park*

**The ImLal hut provides a practical demonstration of how eucalypts and other native timbers can advance habitat creation, while offering sustainable resources for human use.**

Standing in a clearing within the 15ha ImLal biorich plantation, the drop slab hut will be a focus for meetings, shelter and storage. A demonstration project, ImLal pursues the binary goals of optimising biodiversity, while producing useful resources from timber to seeds, through to foliage and locally rare endangered plants. By



pursuing a binary approach of keeping and caring for country, we are choosing to act as custodians – just as the First Australians did for 65,000 years prior to settlement.

In building the hut, Ballarat Region Treegrowers and wood craftsman Lachlan Park have followed three organising principles, which we call “going local, slow and carbon low.”

### Going local

We start with trees, the most renewable of material resources. We have sought to connect to our patch, seeking indigenous trees that possess a local provenance. They weren't clearfelled en masse or sourced from exotic distant places. While many Australians may still prefer culturally to look elsewhere for, say, oak from Europe or teak from Asia, we pivoted to focus locally, to seek timber from largely unsung common native trees. Three of the five species we're using were identified as eminently suitable in research done by BRT in the 1990s. Most in the past have been trashed for low value uses.

- **Sugar gum**, from the Western District's shelter belts mostly ends up as firewood, yet is a Class 1 naturally durable timber, perfect for the hut's sturdy frame. A BRT company set up by BRT members, SMARTtimbers, successfully sold sugar gum as decking to architects for five years.
- **Messmate stringy bark** is the Wombat Forest's dominant eucalypt. Regarded by author and gold digger William Howitt as “the most useful” of trees in the gold rush era, it splits easily and makes a natural fit for the drop slab walling.
- **Black wattle** once covered the plains, but was spurned as “rubbish” from the get-go, only fit for tanning. In reality, it burnishes beautifully to a fashionable wavy-red, ideal for floorboards. It's very branchy and looks untidy, which was no doubt held against it. It just needs a good prune.





In all other aspects of building the hut, we have attempted to go local. Even the granite stone foundations were sourced from a local quarry.

But why choose drop slab walling? Because it's part of our heritage, a uniquely Australian method of hut building. Although we're borrowing from our past, we're not seeking to exactly replicate the miners' and cattlemen's huts of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Craftsman Lachlan Park is bringing his full range of skills and modern technology to bear in reframing the drop slab hut technique so it's updated for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## Going slow

In building the hut, Lachie individually selected and felled each tree. The wood was then cut green and crafted on the spot. Pegging the frame together in mortise and tenon style brings back an attractive building technique from the pre-industrial era when construction in 'green' wood was the norm. The old, slow artisanal ways that preceded mass production and destruction created cultural artefacts of lasting strength and beauty – like the 21C drop slab hut.

The wide eaves offer shelter and shade, as country homestead verandas once did. The granite foundation stones anchor the hut to the earth, while keeping termites at bay, and allowing for timber flooring and adequate airflow.

From start to finish, construction has not required long distance, energy-inefficient, external value chains and a battalion of expensive middle men. Just a small team and the skills to use a limited range of easily available and mostly inexpensive tools.

## Going carbon low

This follows as a consequence of pursuing a slow, place-based approach. When combined together, going slow and going local has ensured a minimum of energy was expended in the hut's construction. Choosing unprocessed natural products, sourced from where we live, means our drop slab hut will sit lightly on the earth – unlike the large amounts of embedded energy that require offsetting when you choose to build with a concrete slab or a steel frame.

Both temporary and transportable, our tiny hut demonstrates how we might marry conservation and production, the only pathway we have to a truly sustainable future. We like to think that when taken together, the hut and its surrounding biodiverse habitat offer a glimpse of how we might connect people to their place and to species other than human. The hut itself we see as a small practical example of how we might redirect our cultural values and use our hearts, heads and hands to live in a way more suited to the rhythms of the earth.

For a presentation and a fact sheet about the 21C drop slab hut project, visit –  
<https://www.biorichplantations.com/21chut.html>

To see steps in the hut-making process, visit –  
<https://www.biorichplantations.com/blog/category/21c-drop-slab-hut>

