Never turn your back on an excavator.” That’s the advice of Sydney building designer Dick Clarke after the “green screen” he’d planned for the vulnerable western face of a sustainable house 15 kilometres north of Cairns was razed. All in a morning’s work.

All along the western edge of a 1000 square metre sloping block, the rainforest trees that would have shielded the house from the road and sheltered it from the afternoon sun were flattened. “It was deeply upsetting,” says Dick. “And it will take about 20 years to get them back.” A bamboo screen must suffice as a shade screen in the meantime.

Fortunately for owners Marty and Helen Rowe, who have been living in the home for the past two years, there are some blessed compensations. They still have their view of the dramatic escarpments of the Kuranda Plateau, while at the rear of the house they enjoy the annual spectacle of a seasonal waterfall crashing two metres beyond the deck of their master bedroom. “Part of the magic of living in the tropics,” says Marty.

After spending 11 years working in aboriginal communities on Groote Eylandt in the Gulf of Carpentaria, Marty and Helen were adamant they must continue to live in open engagement with the environment, which around Cairns means World Heritage-listed wet tropics rainforest.

They asked Dick Clarke, who has been working within the evolving parameters of sustainable design since 1977, to design their house in the form of two elevated pavilions – one for living, one for the three bedrooms – and to make it a place that “was brave, that blended with the environment, that caught all possible cross-breezes, and that was climate engaging rather than climate denying”.

The Rowes wanted “something different,” especially to what Marty sees as the heat-locking insanity of the ground-hugging concrete homes of modern Cairns that “retreat from the environment and that require massive air-conditioning”.

They preferred a house that allowed them “to...
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canopy.” Keeping it low “also meant it was cheaper to build”. Dick reckons that by the end of the first phase of making such a responsive home, the build cost was around $330,000. “A great achievement.”

The house boasts a myriad of clever corners: a ground-level laundry with an ingenious clothes drying frame; a cyclone shelter “really a brick box”; heat-bouncing bubble foil ceiling insulation (“six millimetres thick in two layers; a space blanket rather than a jumper”); and lightweight construction that proves that slim materials can still deliver five-star performance.

Of course, there will always be more the Rowes would like to do. Happily, Marty and Helen got to the end of their initial budget in a climate that is suffering no diminution in its water supply, and the house is already very water efficient. Says Dick, “The water use is very low”. Nevertheless, in Phase Two, wise water management will be the focus. The Rowes would like to install water tanks and a greywater system that takes their household outflow out of the sewers and ultimately out of watersheds and oceans. As Dick explains, “Even though the tropics are getting wetter, it’s important that water wastage be minimised”.

Meanwhile, Dick Clarke is looking far into the future. Having worked with sustainable principals for three decades, he is gratified with the progress.
to date but says there is still a lot more that can be done. “Many new technologies are still considered too “out there”. Out there is where we need to be!” The more he works into sustainability “the more I see that it gets a whole lot deeper, wider and further out. But if we’ve come this far in the last three years,” he muses, “where will we be three years from now?”

The master bedroom enjoys spectacular views over the forest.