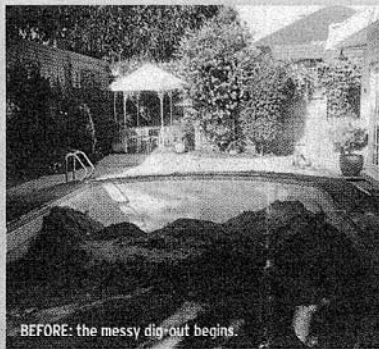


take the plunge?



BEFORE: emptied for the big fill-in.



BEFORE: the messy dig-out begins.



AFTER: an outdoor entertainment makeover.



AFTER: an appealing garden walkway.

The downside

MANY pool owners do a backflip after a few years when they realise that while children love being in a pool on a warm day, they are rarely around when it comes to cleaning time. They also go into anti-pool mode when the children grow up and leave a pool that gets little use but consumes vast amounts of time and expensive materials.

For 16 years Peter Burns of Reverse Pools in Hampton has been making a living out of people who are desperate to get rid of their backyard pool.

There have been many cases where people have sold up and moved just because they didn't want the trouble and perceived danger of their pool, Mr Burns says. "But for about \$5000, we can get rid of their pool and replace it with something really useful and aesthetically pleasing."

Reverse Pools' solution might be to convert it into a wine cellar, remodel it as a trampoline pit, transform it into lawn or a flower bed or even use it as an underground water supply.

"Concrete pools are the most expensive to reverse," Mr Burns says.

"On occasions when people have tried to drain their own pools and fill them with soil, there have been spectacular failures. We always keep a straight face but you have to laugh when you see some-

one's concrete pool popping out of the ground. We've seen that happen in sandy soils and also in the rocky terrain of the Dandenongs. Take the water out of a pool and you have a concrete boat, ready to float on subsurface water."

Mr Burns is happy the trend away from pools seems to be waning. The more pools installed, the more work for him. "I smashed up my own pool about six years ago. When you think about it, they're only in use for a few hours each year, but the time spent maintaining them is much more than that. If you don't clean them regularly they go green, and you can bet that as soon as that happens you'll have a lot day and want to use it."

Demand

Despite manufacturers' hype, it seems the demand for domestic pools is fairly constant, and is only just keeping level with population growth. The most recent figures (for 2001) issued by the Bureau of Statistics, show Australia has more than 400,000 backyard pools, with 60,000 in Victoria. This represents about 11 per cent of households, a rate that has remained roughly constant since at least 1994. The pool business is much bigger in NSW and Queensland, which each have double the number of Victoria's private pools.

"And some cultures know nothing about swimming. In those cases a pool could be a bit of a downer."

Mr Dwyer concedes that the value of a pool to a property is more or less what it costs to install.

"So you'd be mad to put a pool in just to help you sell your home. You'd also be mad to put one in if you didn't want one," he says.

"There's a lot of work involved. I happen to like that work but plenty don't. But as a real estate agent, given two houses that are identical except one has a modern pool, I know which one I'd like on my books. I think the turn-off factor of pools is a bit of a furphy."

Troubleshooting

Building and owning a backyard pool can be fraught with danger — financial, legal and physical.

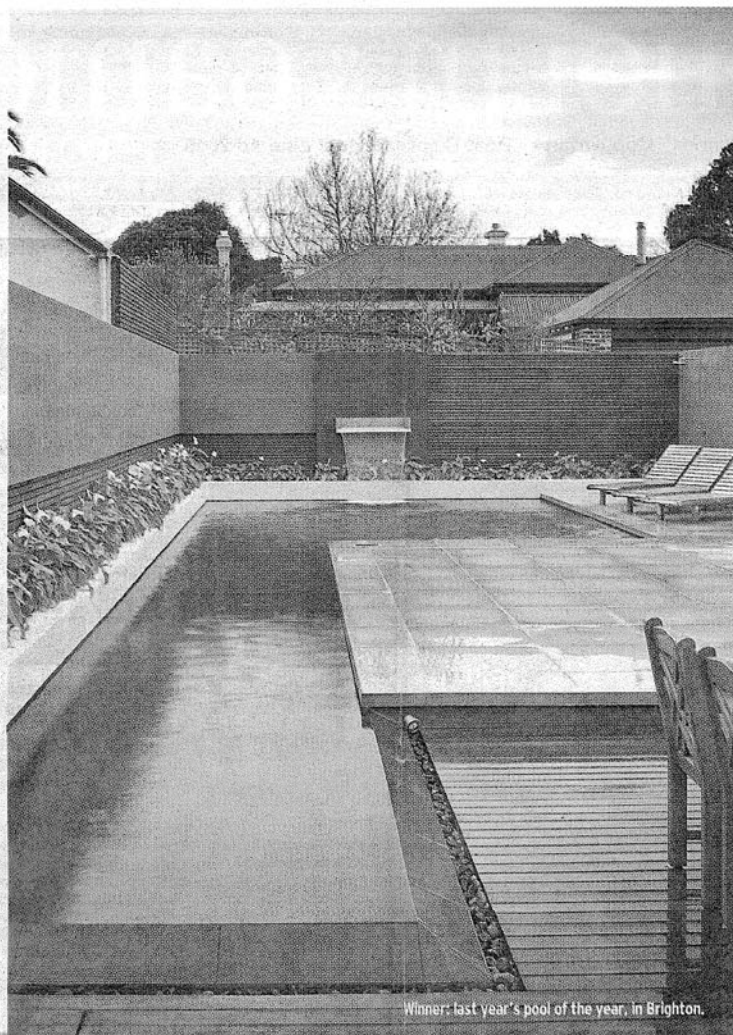
Greg Fell, president of the Swimming Pool and Spa Association, says people can avert much of this trouble by refusing to deal with unregistered and uninsured pool builders.

"Unlicensed pool builders often use a hole in the consumer protection legislation to make the owner fully responsible for all of the occupational safety, building faults or structural failures of the pool by getting them to become owner-builders," he says.

Mr Fell warns that owners then become personally liable for all aspects of the project and put their assets at risk in relation to legal, health and occupational safety issues.

"Issues such as damage to a neighbouring property due to excavation, or water damage, or a worker being injured on site could see the home owner entangled in expensive legal battles for compensation," he says.

"When the owner-builder sells their home before the seven-year warranty period, they will need to take out an insurance policy to cover any pool defects — a point which is not often explained by unregistered pool builders."



Winner: last year's pool of the year, in Brighton.

Maintenance low — diligence high

NEW pool technology that cuts out much of the work in pool maintenance is another driver in the pool revolution — although the Swimming Pool and Spa Association of Queensland notes that visits from the pool-maintenance specialist could still be needed.

The association recommends a regular check-up, which usually means monthly visits from service contractors, peaking at weekly visits in the December-March period.

Contractors say the average cost is \$60 per visit, plus chemicals and other materials, but most say the average person can easily handle maintenance chores.

A big maintenance concern is storage and use of filtration and cleaning substances — some are toxic.

Fences

Drowning in backyard pools is the most common cause of accidental death among Australian toddlers, even though fences are compulsory. The aim is to deny access to unsupervised children, particularly those under five.

Fences must be at least 1.2 metres high and must separate the pool from residential areas. Gates must be self-latching and latches must be as child-proof as possible. They must be 1.5 metres above ground level.

And pool covers should not be considered a safety device.

Endless swimming

Since designing its first endless swimming spa 25 years ago, the Endless Spa Company of Ringwood has sold more than 3000 units throughout Australia and neighbouring countries.

"They (spas) are ideal for the person who takes fitness seriously but doesn't have the space for an expensive, full-sized pool," says sales director Warren Anderson.

Like other domestic pools, or even a goldfish pond more than 30 centimetres deep, it must be fenced.

Useful contacts

spasavic.com.au
brightonpools.com.au
timdwyer.com.au
endlessspa.com.au
Reverse Pool Company: 9598 0638.