

THE Melbourne Weekly Home Ground

THE CUTTING EDGE P 16

Pool Your Resources

Summertime and the living is easy – except if it's your turn to vacuum the pool. KARL QUINN takes the plunge.

It's 39° in the shade, the mercury's gone through the roof and your mind's gone for a dip. "Wouldn't it be great if we had a pool," you say. You start to imagine yourself sprawled on a banana chair, coconut oil smeared over your glistening highly-toned body, shades on your face, a strawberry daiquiri in one hand and a trashy novel in the other.

Time for a reality check. Let's face it, Melbourne isn't Los Angeles. Hell, it's not even Brisbane. If you're going to waste your life away beside a swimming pool, you need lots of sunscreen, lots of time and lots of warm, sunny days. The last, at least, is in short supply in Melbourne.

Not surprisingly, pool construction in Victoria lags behind other states. Since 1985, 140,000 pools have been built in NSW. The figure for Victoria is a mere 29,000.

Four years after they bought their Camberwell home in 1976, David Vaughan's parents decided to put in a pool. They thought it would be good for the kids. It was. They also decided to put in a spa. They thought it would be good for those swinging parties in the evenings. It was. Last year they thought about getting rid of them both.

"We kicked up a bit of a fuss about it," says David, now 26. "We couldn't stand the thought of the pool being filled in – there was too much sentimental attachment."

David and his sister convinced their parents to give the 14-metre L-shaped pool a stay of execution. While it languished on death row awaiting appeal, the kids rounded up a few friends to come over for a dip, just like old times.

"This has been a good year for it – we really made an effort," says David. "We've used it about five times this summer. Even dad's been in two or three times."

That may not sound a lot, but it's an improvement on the years when a whole summer would pass without the calm waters disturbed once. But it's still a long way short of the halcyon days when the kids would spend all summer swimming, jumping, diving and generally making mum and dad feel they'd spent their money wisely.

The Vaughans' scenario is pretty common. When the kids move out of home, parents often find themselves with a very large white elephant in the backyard, merrily chewing up time and money in upkeep. No-one wants a green algae-choked pool, but to keep the water sparkling costs a couple of thousand dollars each year. Old pools, like old houses, need looking after.

"A lot of the pools we see now are really dated," says Peter Burns, whose landscaping company Reverse Pools specialises in filling in unwanted suburban swimming holes.

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David Vaughan tests the waters.

PICTURE: FRANK MALLEY

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"They're 20 to 30 years old, and really showing the signs of their age."

Burns claims the average cost of renovating an existing pool – by replastering, retiling or repainting, plus installing new pumps and filters – can run to \$10,000. To fill in an old pool to a stage where it is ready for landscaping costs between \$3000 and \$4000.

Between 60 and 70 pools are reversed by Burns and his five-person team every year. And while many clients are the parents of grown-up kids, around a third of his custom comes from young families uncomfortable with the idea of a potential death trap in the back yard.

The other main reason people choose to fill in their pool, says Burns, is that it simply wasn't sensibly designed in the first place. "Two out of the three pools I looked at this morning totally decimated the backyard," he says. "There are times when the pool company should have said, 'Look, your garden really doesn't suit a pool'."

A badly designed pool, or one that wears its era on its kidney-shaped sleeve, may not be an asset when you come to sell. "Pools can be a deterrent, especially if they're above-ground or poorly maintained," says Bert Stewart of Buxton's real estate in Brighton. "But a nice one can add value." Stewart claims that the preference these days is for low-maintenance heated pools with added features like landscaped surrounds and paving.

There is also a trend towards smaller plunge pools which are less demanding in terms of maintenance. Longer, narrower lap pools which can look good without swallowing a whole backyard are popular too.

So the next time the barometer starts to rise and you think how nice it would be to have a pool, you might do well to heed the words of Peter Burns: "Most people really only use pools for looking at and entertaining around. If they're lucky they might dive in five or six times a year." Maybe one of those small inflatable numbers would be smarter. ☺