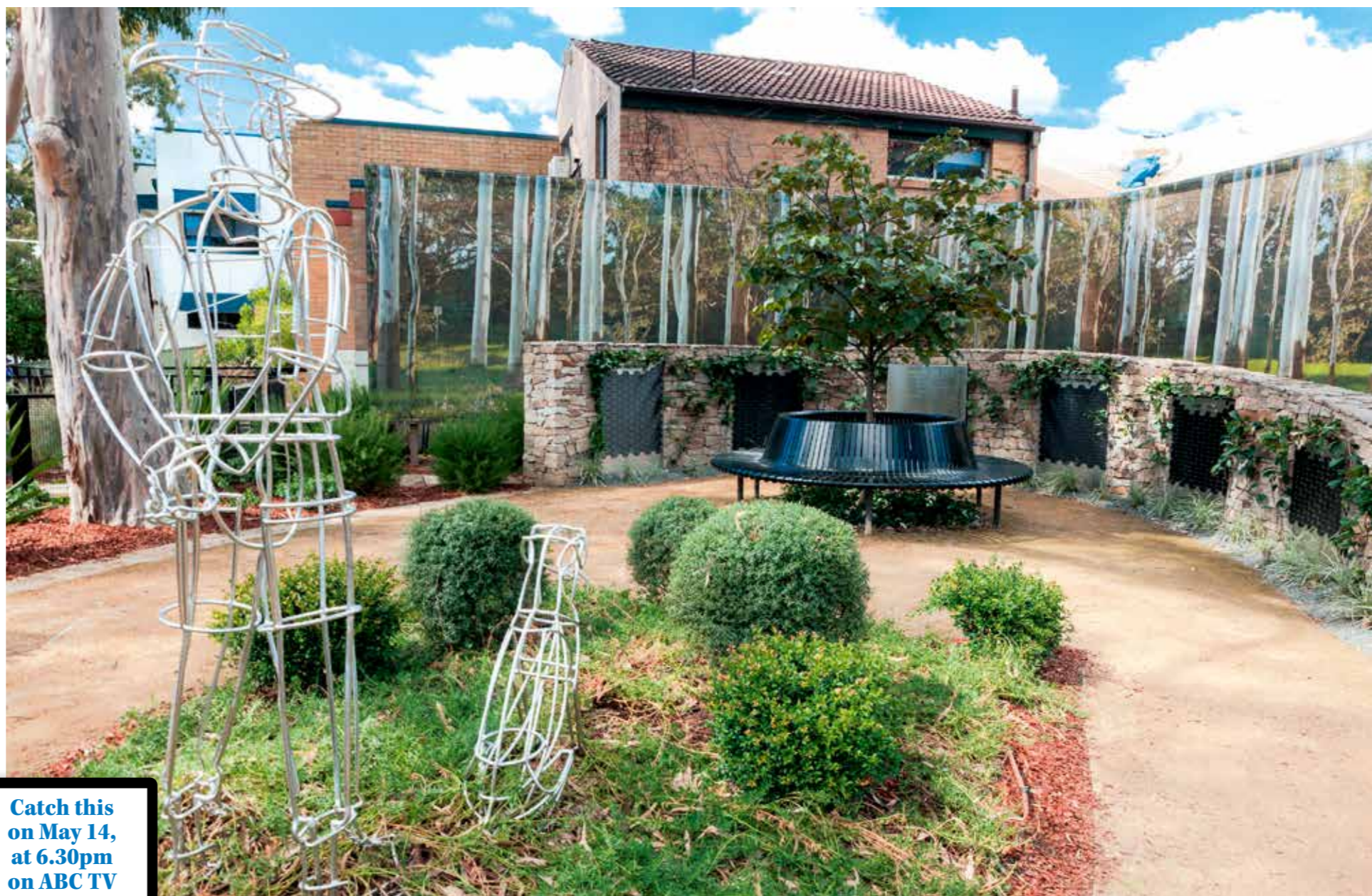


creature COMFORT

AB BISHOP checks out the clever landscaping at this animal shelter, where Costa Georgiadis finds the pets and visitors feel (almost) at home



Catch this
on May 14,
at 6.30pm
on ABC TV

Although RSPCA Australia was officially established in 1981, there were branches in every state and territory well before this. In fact, the New South Wales organisation started caring for animals in 1873.

At its Yagoona shelter and animal hospital in south-west Sydney, the practicalities of housing 400-plus animals at any given time mean that concrete and steel rule the roost, because they are robust and easy to clean. This means the buildings are as bland as their industrial surrounds, so the not-for-profit organisation created a series of gardens to soften the impact and provide natural spaces for the animals, staff and visitors to enjoy.

As gardeners, we know that landscaping can be an expensive undertaking. Understandably, the

RSPCA wanted to keep costs to an absolute minimum, so it engaged the services of landscape designer Steve Warner from Outhouse Design. Steve is passionate about providing discounted and pro bono services for charities and not-for-profit institutions. He says, "It's my way of giving back. Good landscape design engages the community with the charity. For example, when contractors donate their services or businesses gift building materials, they become aware of a charity that they might not have known about previously. They come together and create something special."

That something special at the RSPCA shelter in Yagoona is a variety of garden areas designed to facilitate meaningful interactions between the animals and visitors hoping to adopt a pet.

"Areas are designed to facilitate meaningful interactions between the animals and visitors"

The area for 'pocket pets' (rabbits and guinea pigs), for example, is a fun, colourful space with a fenced, grassy area where they have space to roam freely. This allows children to experience them in a natural, home-like setting. "If animals are calm and happy, you are more inclined to engage and bond with them, and hopefully adopt," says Steve.

design with purpose

The design for the memorial garden, a quiet space for reflection, features curved stone walls that

gently increase in height, giving a sense of support, protection and embrace for the bereaved. "We want visitors to feel invited into the space, and for them to feel comfortable to stay," Steve explains. Plaques engraved with your pet's name can be purchased.

With the landscapes integrated through the entire site, it's now much more enjoyable walking any of the dogs that are up for adoption, and people tend to spend more time with potential pets than before. Designing these spaces successfully with so many considerations, however, was challenging. ►

NATURE CALLS
Far left Costa dishes out cuddles to three homeless pups. Above The large mural of a eucalyptus woodland in Sydney's Centennial Park is a smart way to hide a brick building behind the memorial garden while tying in with existing trees on-site.

PHOTOS TAEJA ELLERBECK

As seen in *Gardening Australia* magazine, June 2016



“There’s a lot of wear and tear ... you don’t know which plants the animals will wee on or chew!”

“It’s a difficult environment, because what works well in a normal garden doesn’t work well here,” says Steve. “The key was to get the balance right with enclosures, gates and fencing, but not make the space feel like a prison. There’s a lot of wear and tear on the plants and you don’t know which plants the animals will choose to wee on or chew! They’ve got to be extremely hardy, animal- and person-friendly and, most of all, extremely low or no maintenance, as the budget doesn’t allow for it.” Steve chooses plants that he thinks would work well in each zone and then the vets decide which are safe for the animals.

A *Cercis canadensis* ‘Forest Pansy’ tree was chosen as the focal point for the memorial garden, as it offers dramatic flower colour and gorgeous seasonal foliage. *Myoporum parvifolium* ‘Yareena’ provides contrast against clipped *Westringia* spp. balls, and it winds around a sculpture by Roger Apte that pays tribute to animals in combat and conflict. *Callistemon* ‘Little John’ will eventually provide a visual buffer between the memorial garden and area for pocket pets.

Experimentation with the plants continues. “The dianellas and lomandras at the newly completed animal hospital just couldn’t cope with the constant

drenching of dog wee,” laughs Steve, “so they are being replaced with species of *Osmanthus* and *Raphiolepis*, which are apparently more resistant to it – and they’re scented!”

The gardens have been a success on many levels, according to Brendon Neilly, the executive manager of animal care services at RSPCA NSW. “Shelters are confronting places to visit, but these gardens are providing a calmer, quieter place for people coming to the hospital or to adopt an animal, as well as our staff and animal clients.”

The Sydney shelter has already exceeded the 3000 adoptions it achieved last year and Brendon believes that the gardens are part of the reason – along with the animals themselves. “We have amazing animals up for adoption – some have had a rough time and we want to give them another chance. There are huge benefits for people and animals when you adopt a pet.” **GA**

want to help?

Animals available for adoption include dogs, cats, pocket pets, birds, reptiles and livestock. Profits from the animal hospital, engraved plaques and fundraising pavers go to the shelter. **201 Rookwood Rd, Yagoona, NSW. (02) 9770 7555.**

WHERE THE HEART IS
Clockwise from top left Fundraising pavers engraved with messages form the entry path to the site; individual shelters are painted in bright colours with grassed outdoor areas; the RSCPA’s Brendon Neilly (left) and landscape designer Steve Warner. Opposite Costa befriends a bunny in the pocket pets area.

design ideas to adopt

When Costa arrived at the RSPCA Yagoona site to shoot the story for television, he was struck by how the clever landscaping had completely transformed it.

“Animal shelters are usually unfriendly environments, but this is a perfect example of bringing to life an area that often has a stigma attached to it. The gardens have softened the surroundings and changed the perception of what you’d expect.

“The fences around the animal zones are black so they’re less noticeable and they’re low so you can see what’s going on and feel a part of it.”

Costa believes the design principles could be integrated into any home with pets, because “you might want to protect certain areas, and every backyard has some elements of a pound within it!”

The plants at the site are also worth noting. “Steve’s plant selection is great for anyone with a high-traffic garden – people with animals or kids playing ball sports.”

Needing to block an unsightly view is another requirement many people face, but Steve really thought outside the square when considering how to hide a nearby brick building, eventually incorporating a large mural of a eucalyptus woodland.

“The message is that there is no space we can’t beautify,” says Costa. “The woodland is at Centennial Park, where many people walk their dogs, so there’s a lovely connection.”

Costa also enjoyed spending time with the animals. “The rabbits welcomed me into their palatial, open-plan homes and we took a walk to their veggie patch, where they enjoy sorrel and rocket. They’re very happy living here, but I think they would prefer to be adopted!”

PHOTOS TAEJIA ELLERBECK, DAVID SMYTH PHOTOGRAPHER

