

NZ HOUSE & GARDEN

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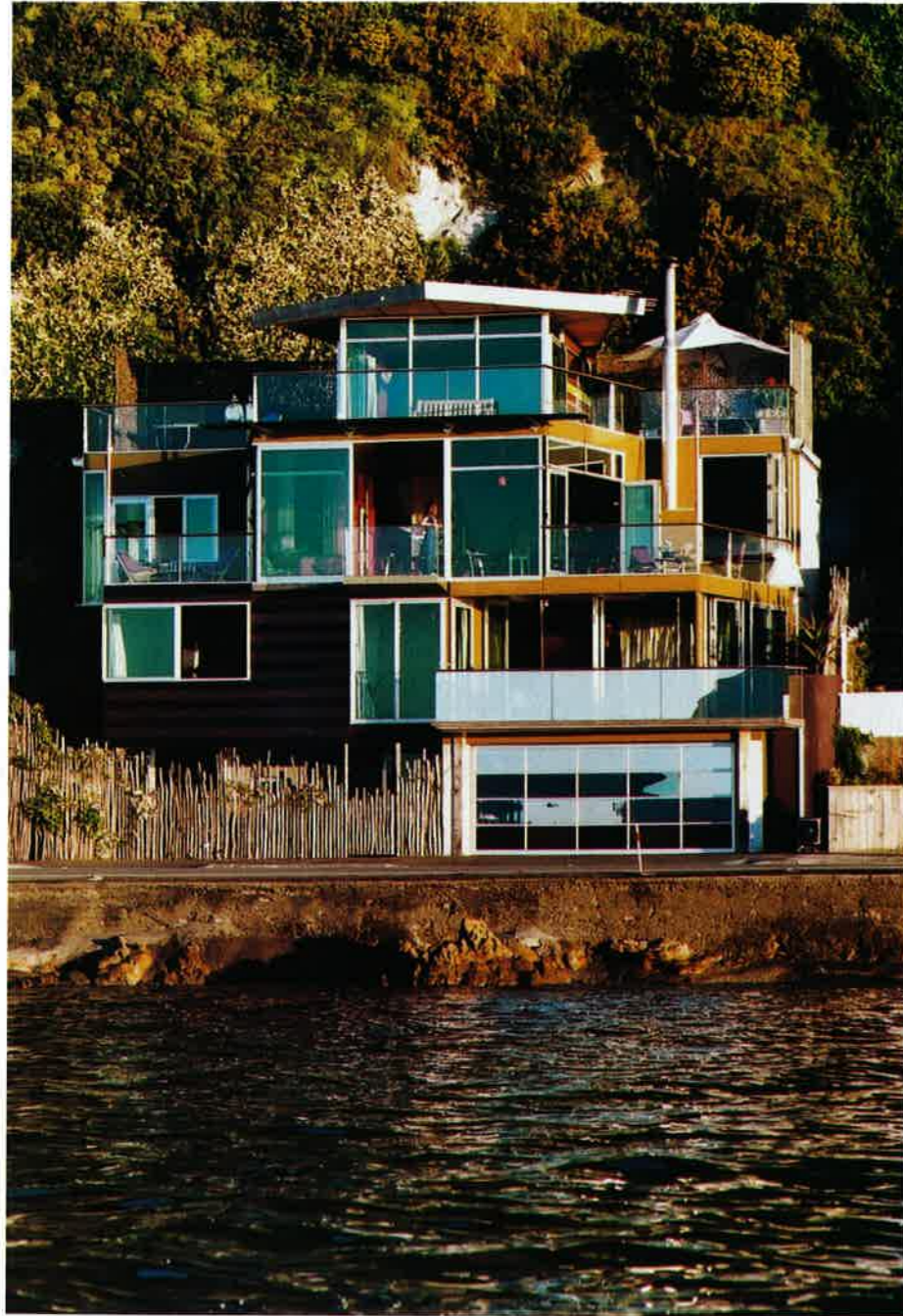
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On home ground

Six children and a cliff determined the design of Wellington architect John Mills' own home. Ann Packer surveys the results PHOTOGRAPHS: PAUL MCCREDIE





PREVIOUS PAGES: Stacked up the hillside at the southern end of Days Bay the four levels of the Mills' house catch the late afternoon sun. Curtis, left, Fletcher and Hudson play at the family dining table which has an old map of New Zealand laminated on top.

THESE PAGES: Josephine on the Juliet balcony which is "safer than the Picton ferry" in terms of compliance with regulations for decking. Juliet and John on the south-east balcony that looks towards Evans Bay.

Designing a house for a family of eight is one thing. Locating it against a rugged cliff face where there's no flat land at all is quite another.

Yet the Days Bay house built by Wellington architect John Mills for his wife Juliet and their six children – now aged from five to sixteen – has heaps more space than they enjoyed in their previous home in nearby York Bay.

The new house is within walking distance of shops and schools. And what they miss of their previous bush surroundings – and the creek running through the property – is more than compensated for here. There are decks off three sides of each living level, across the road there's the rocky beach – uncovered at low tide – and just around the corner, in either direction, a large waterfront park. ▷



THIS PAGE: The island sink unit features woodworker John Calvert's beautifully crafted finish. Outside and in the house makes the most of every opportunity with large expanses of glass and decks.

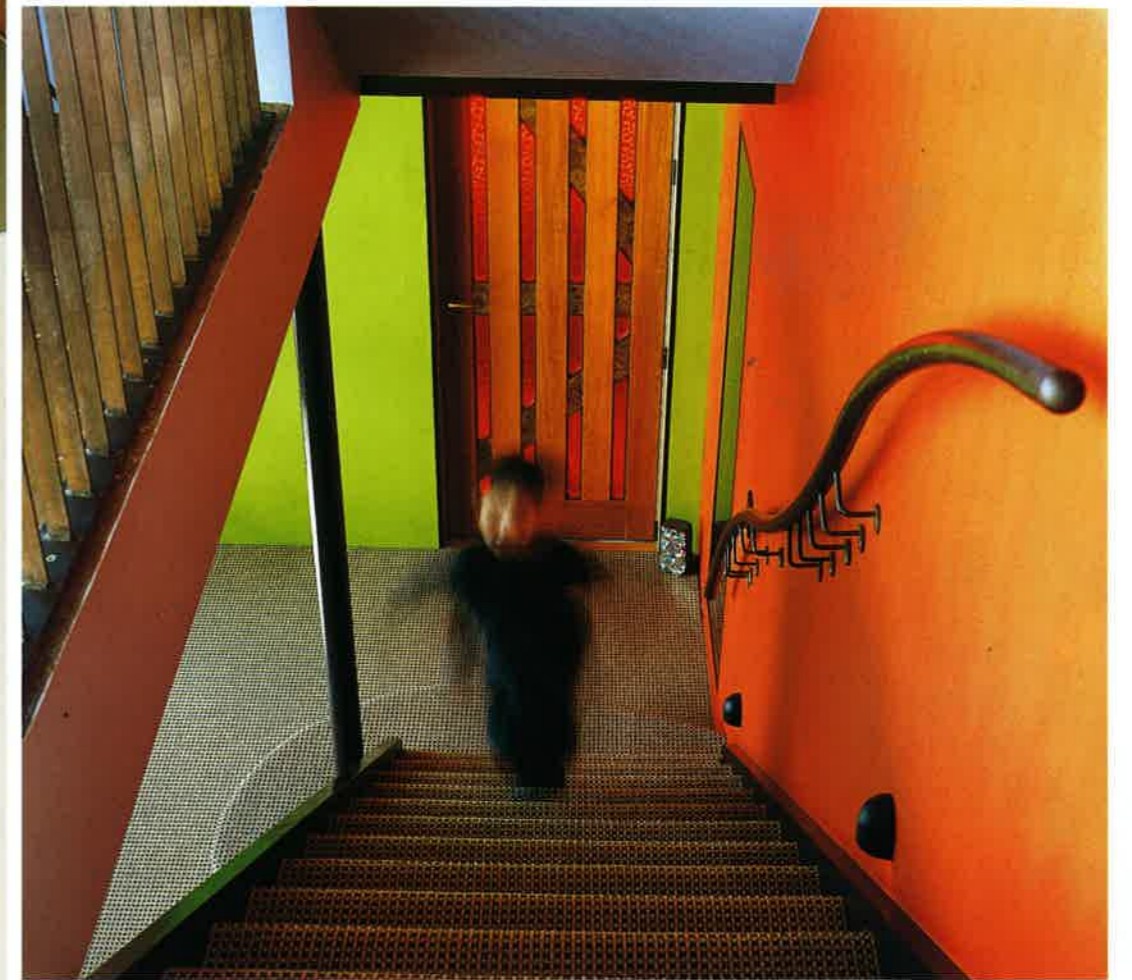
OPPOSITE: Grace sits in front of the Jetmaster fire. The scooped stools are Italian. The 1960s chairs have been re-upholstered in pink and purple leather.



The Mills house makes the most of every centimetre of space, in part by using the harbour view to visually enlarge the living areas. Floor to ceiling windows above the road bring in wide water views and the only passing traffic anyone notices is the Eastbourne bus trundling by.

Juliet, a journalist who now puts her energy into raising a very creative family – Curtis five, Fletcher seven, Hudson nine, Josephine eleven, Grace fourteen and Telford sixteen – says it's a compliment to John's design that the house works so well.

There's a floor for kids, another for family living plus parents' bedroom and bathrooms and a top floor which is a haven for adults and occasional guests. ▷



THESE PAGES: Indian shutters open the adult bathroom to the view. Throughout the house the children's artwork is sandblasted on glass doors, here into the bathroom. Curtis comes up carpeted stairs from the entrance door.

In spite of the four-storey house being open plan the inevitable chaos caused by kids and their friends doesn't seem to overflow into every area.

"I'm not a cracking the whip type," Juliet says, "but I don't need to be because they have so much space."

Apart from the occasional foray into the kids' lounge – "tents and forts that might last a couple of days" – the children's activity is focused on the art room, a large multi-purpose space with a comfy couch, a large table that comfortably accommodates half a dozen crafty souls and enough room to play cricket on wet days.

There's also masses of cupboard space (including a huge dressing-up stash that lends itself to theatricals), shelves stacked with board games, swings hanging from robust yacht fittings, a netball hoop and a carpeted performance stage with sound equipment and mike in front of a large mirror. ▷



“I don’t like slick, sharp interiors – they don’t say much about who we are as New Zealanders ...”





THESE PAGES: Behind the palisades clematis and hardy natives like kohekohe have to withstand wind and salt. Grace on the balcony off the main living area.

PREVIOUS PAGES: Kids' chaos is contained on the second level where creativity runs riot. Josephine closes off her bedroom area. Relaxed viewing on upholstered benches. Decks are large enough to allow Fletcher to practise his skipping.

On this level the oldest two children have self-contained rooms. The younger ones used to share a bunk room here but have since shifted their beds to ground level.

It has taken a couple of years of nights and weekends to complete the house since builder Geoff McKee – whose attention to detail has been “exceptional” – finished his part. John thinks architects' own houses are invariably more expensive because of the detail they want to incorporate and the care they take with it.

“Everyone expects you to come up with something distinctive so everything's been considered. You put special things in when you can afford to, you do it properly,” he says.

Basically it's a concrete house – the only timber is in the upper level roof – with Nu-wall and compressed sheet cladding on the exterior. ▷



The cladding and the light plaster on the interior walls act like a "thermal bank. It takes a lot of energy to heat because of its size but it's stable temperature-wise."

Designing his own house gave him the chance to try ideas he'd been working on for some time.

"Playing with the notion of the components of a house is as close as I get to artworks – it's applied decoration. It's a chance to experiment and improve on other people's places."

Typically when he tries something new – like the woven Pacific matting used as a ceiling in the top floor – he likes to "work it and work it till I understand it completely, till the material is mine".

His houses are associated with bold use of colour and this is no exception – colour creates different moods in different areas.

"The colours come alive at night."

He also likes the imagery of reused materials – the living room floor, which

looks as if the tide's just gone out, was created by spreading stones, shells and coloured oxides on coloured concrete over a three-centimetre topping slab and plastering it off.

"It's fantastic for holding the heat."

The living room ceiling is made of glued panels of marine grade plywood variously spray-painted, stained, sprinkled with stones and sand, soaked in white spirit and set alight to produce effects echoed in the massive trademark John Calvert island bench. His stained and sculpted timber installations are integral components in many John Mills interiors.

The tinted windows act like sunglasses in the dual purpose area where couches soak up low sunlight in winter. In summer the family eats here off a table topped with a laminated 1927 Public Trust map of New Zealand.

In warm weather bifold doors are thrown wide open, depending on whether the wind is the prevailing

nor'wester or the less common southerly. If there's no wind at all the family can step outside on to the Juliet balcony.

A believer in ripeness – as in "leaving the fruit on the tree till it's ready to eat" – John left many of the decisions about where to make divisions like doors and ceilings until the last moment in the building process.

"I don't like slick, sharp interiors – they don't say much about who we are as New Zealanders.

"So it's not austere, restrained and disciplined like a bondage parlour. We're a casual culture – so it's like relaxed urbanity.

"I'm not aiming for absolute perfection; I'm slightly on the edge of breaking down – that's where you're learning. I'm busy enjoying the learning process." □

In December John won a 2002 NZIA-Resene Wellington local architecture award and a Resene colour award for the house.



OPPOSITE: A no-fuss en suite adults only bathroom is tucked behind the stairway wall. Wellington potter Paul Winspear made the basin.

ABOVE: John and Juliet's bedroom is curtained in feather-laced French fabric made up by Cheryl Wye. The upholstered bench is built in.

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Auckland: 15 February 2003 at the Sky City Conference Centre. Wellington: 22 March 2003 at the Wellington Town Hall.



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