

THE LONG VIEW

A modern update transforms an iconic Wellington home into a treetop haven

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THESE PAGES In the new living area in Nicholas and Fiona Robinson's Wellington home, the floor to ceiling windows push back for easy access to what Nicholas describes as "an almost-infinity deck" in unstained pine; the glass balustrades provide security: "Kids do get a health and safety briefing as they come in," he says; the black Cordia chair is by COR and the slat chair is a Scandia Senior by Fjordfiesta; the mid-century side table is rosewood, bought cheaply on eBay while the couple were living in London, before mid-century furniture became hugely popular.



THIS PAGE Against walls painted in 'Stone' by ColourMaster, *My Journey* splashes colour into the couple's newly created living room; Nicholas and Fiona bought the painting in Fort Kochi, Kerala, while on their honeymoon in India: "I love it because I see something new every time I look at it," says Nicholas; the sofa is Consetta by Cor, the lights are from Tom Dixon's Beat range and the ceramics are from Kamaka Pottery in Hawke's Bay.

OPPOSITE (clockwise from top) Nicholas and Brix, a seven-year-old standard poodle, enjoy the sun and view. The painting in the living room is by Robert Wells. The new deck had to be cut carefully around a fully grown karo tree, which, along with the house's elevation, adds to its treetop feel.



NICHOLAS ROBINSON STEPS outside and utters words rarely heard in Wellington: "It's fantastic out here in a southerly. We're so sheltered here."

He's referring to the deck that's part of an extension to Nicholas and his wife Fiona's 1970s house, designed by the late Sir Ian Athfield. The deck, with its show-stopping harbour view, leads into a sitting room and both were part of additions that won a string of Wellington/Wairarapa awards in the 2015 Master Builders House of the Year Awards, including the local Supreme Renovation Award.

The renovation saw the demolition of a snug, a small room accessed down a short flight of stairs from the dining room.

"It was lovely down there with a cup of tea and guests loved it. The view was perfectly framed – it was like you were sitting on the harbour. But it was small and the ceiling was low, which is not great if you're over six foot. Fiona and I wanted somewhere to sit comfortably, decompress after work and enjoy the view."

So that little wing of the split-level, two-bedroomed timber house was replaced by this open-plan, extensively glazed sitting room on the same level as the other living areas.

The huge windows and deck act as a giant TV screen – ideal for watching tugs come and go in the harbour and the clouds scampering ahead of the wind. >

THIS PAGE The dining room connects the brand new living room to the original 1970s kitchen; the Larino dining room pendants are by Masterlight, the farmhouse table is 18th century French cherry wood, and the Otto cafe chairs are from Thonet.

OPPOSITE (clockwise from left) The ceramic works on the occasional table in the dining room are by Wellington ceramicists Raewyn Atkinson and Katherine Smyth. French doors in the dining room "that went out onto nothing" were replaced by a large window. The "bachy" kitchen is next on the list for refurbishment, but at the moment it's suiting the couple well: "We are really keen cooks so you'd think we would have done it by now, but we wanted to see how it worked first. I don't think we will be changing the layout - the challenge will be finding a modern kitchen that keeps the warmth," says Nicholas.



But the new extension is just the headline act. When Nicholas and Fiona moved in four years ago, having returned after 12 years in London, their new home wasn't in great shape. "It was freezing. There was no insulation at all - aside from rat poo, dead rats and leaves in the roof cavity," says Nicholas.

"The flat area of roof was pretty much just chipboard painted with Traffigard to waterproof it. The iron parts of the roof were 40 years old and rusting away. And, of course, it leaked."

So, the heavy iron roof came off. Insulation went in, and an aluminium roof was installed.

The rooftop has become a feature, complete with a raised vege bed and a small hive of bees. Nicholas is now in corporate affairs, but his undergraduate degree was in zoology. "I love bees. I'm a fourth-generation beekeeper, so I grew up with bees. It made sense to get some." >



The timber exterior of the house was revitalised – any rotted cedar was replaced and it was all repainted. Every window in the house was double glazed, replaced where necessary. Ducted heating was installed, along with a small log-burner next to Nicholas’ desk in what they call “the middle room”, between the kitchen and bedrooms.

“It’s so warm here now,” says Nicholas. “It’s a completely different house to live in. It’s funny, in the UK you don’t talk about insulation and warm houses because they just are warm. When we first returned, it seemed like at every dinner party all we talked about was insulation and heat pumps.”

The new rooftop is also the best place to fully appreciate Sir Ian Athfield’s design. The house hugs its cliff-side site, its multiple gabled roofs suggestive of 19th century colonial style abutting Japanese pagodas. Also in the mix are two domed cylindrical skylights – once leaky, now watertight.

By happy accident, the architect for the extension was John Mills who once worked under Sir Ian. Nicholas says for the first couple of meetings John didn’t even mention the house.

“He asked us about us – what we liked doing, how we liked living, even what poems, colours, textures we liked. He spent a lot of time literally feeling the house and listening to us. It wasn’t until he had a really good sense of us and the house that he went away and started drawing. >



THIS PAGE Skylights and high windows feature in the Ian Athfield house, bringing in plenty of light and sun; however, Nicholas and Fiona wanted more and added the large upper window; the desk is in Nicholas’ “man corner”.

OPPOSITE (clockwise from top) Brix sits quietly between the kitchen and dining room. A perfectly placed window offers a slice of view: “Ian Athfield made sure that wherever you walk in the house there’s a glimpse of the harbour,” says Nicholas. Behind the circular door is “the cell”, a hidden space converted into a “not very well-ordered” wine cellar.



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THIS PAGE (clockwise from right) Nicholas and Fiona’s bedroom has a distinctive curved ceiling; the house has only two bedrooms “but people often remark it feels bigger. It’s perfect for the two of us.” Nicholas walks up the short flight of stairs from the spare room towards the perplexingly named painting *I’m Confused Too*, which the couple picked up in India: “Apparently it’s a self-portrait,” says Nicholas. The curved ceilings continue in the split-level spare room with its sleep-defying harbour view. **OPPOSITE** Nicholas and Fiona opted for perfectly proportioned, functional furniture in their bedroom rather than decorative decor: “Our bedroom is small and there’s no en suite, but we can sit in bed with our tea and toast and look through to the view and watch the tui.”



“We assumed he’d come back with a pitched roof extension like the rest of the house. But he said because we have quite an iconic house, we should pay homage to it not by designing a pastiche but by something resolutely modern that enhances the original. All that time spent talking meant John’s first iteration was 99 per cent spot on.”

Scotty’s Construction carried out the building work, undaunted by the 127 steps that access the steep site. “The builders liked it! They got fit,” says Nicholas.

“We had really great builders. They worked so sympathetically joining the new part to the older house, matching in all the rough-sawn timber. Their attention to detail was amazing.”

Nicholas points out the precision used to deck around an existing native karo tree. “Apparently they’re really sensitive and we were told it would probably die. But it’s doing very well.” >





THIS PAGE (from top) Nicholas stands on the new deck in front of the chimneys; their straight lines contrast with the pagoda-style concave roof. The house's rooftop has been totally redone and is now a usable space – as long as visitors aren't afraid of heights or allergic to bees; Nicholas has created a vegetable garden underneath a Japanese clothes line, with his beehive just out of view. The front entrance is Japanese-inspired; its serenity is perhaps best appreciated if arriving via cable car, rather than the 127 steps.

OPPOSITE (from top) The view up the harbour from the new deck; the outdoor table and chairs are from Emu's Heaven range. These days the two brick chimneys are decorative rather than functional: "Apparently that was Athfield giving the council two fingers – or so I'm told," says Nicholas.

Nicholas and Fiona have no regrets about their decision to move back to New Zealand. They've got a view, which they've always wanted, and an Ian Athfield house.

"I've always admired his homes and his spirit," says Nicholas. "I was at Massey University when he built the library in Palmerston North and I love that building.

"He created a strong partnership between the home and the environment. It feels like he wasn't just about sticking a massive house somewhere. You get the feeling he considered the view from every aspect, so wherever you walk you get glimpses. We are so privileged to live here. The view is such a balm." □



A CLOSER LOOK



GLOBES Non Random pendant lights by Moooi are a modern-day version of the paper globes that once hung here. The black echoes the dark wood, but the translucent quality means they appear to take up less space.



BEEHIVE Nicholas' Flow beehive, a new design that allows the honey to be extracted without removing frames and disturbing the bees. He's yet to harvest but is looking forward to some honey in a few months.



DAY BED This vintage French day bed, bought in London, was originally leather but Nicholas and Fiona had it reupholstered in cashmere velvet. The sides can be removed and replaced in three different positions.



Q&A

BEST THING ABOUT LIVING IN ROSENEATH: Coming from London, being close to the city was important for us, so we're only a 15-minute walk away. And we're really close to the Southern Walkway, which is important for the dog.

BEST THING ABOUT LIVING IN AN IAN ATHFIELD HOUSE: It captures the spirit of an era. This house is quite 70s, so it's not cookie-cutter. Without a big master bedroom, walk-in closet or en suite bathroom it won't tick everyone's boxes, but we love it.

FAVOURITE STYLE OF FURNITURE: I love mid-century furniture and bought a lot of it in London for not much before it got popular. Its small dimensions mean it fits well into apartments or small houses like this one.

BEST ADVICE FOR DOING UP AN OLDER HOUSE: Don't skimp on price. You need to have quality materials and great workmanship so that it all connects together nicely.

HARDEST THING ABOUT THE RENOVATION: Living here while it was going on. And it took ages – the weather was really bad. It was quite depressing for a while, then all of a sudden it's revealed and you want to rush in and live in here.

Nicholas Robinson