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john mills architects



A photograph of a modern house at dusk. The house features large glass windows and a prominent stone staircase leading to a deck. The interior lights are on, and the sky is a deep blue. The house is surrounded by trees and a lawn.

# From bush to beach

Architectural elements that respond to the natural features of a site create a harmony which makes for a very relaxed living environment



## Nature trail

Set amidst meandering streams and towering native trees, this new house captures a sense of local history

Clear-felling land to create a vacant lot may have been a common practice a hundred years ago, but it's not always a favoured course of action today. Designing a house to fit with the natural landscape is a much preferred option, as this project illustrates.

The house replaces a smaller cottage that stood on the site for nearly a century. Architect John Mills says the original

house was one of the first to be built in the seaside town.

"Even back then, this would have been a natural building site," he says. "Elevated between two small streams, surrounded by native bush and with a great sea view, it provides an ideal building platform."

Mills says the owners of the former cottage wanted a bigger home for their growing family. However, the larger size

*Previous pages:* A soaring roof and wide decks maximise the winter sun in this coastal property.

*These pages:* The house and its floating boardwalks and decks are built around existing native trees.



**Top:** The exterior of the house features black creosote-stained weatherboards—a visual reference to the original cottage on the site. To add interest, the top-floor balcony is clad in alternating strips of copper and macrocarpa.

**Above:** A three-sided sunset porch is reminiscent of the former veranda on the original homestead. Cut-out doorways frame bush views.

**Right:** As well as the main outdoor living area, there are smaller, more intimate, cantilevered decks beneath the native trees. A free-form pool also fits with the natural setting.

of the new house meant it encroached on the surrounding native trees.

“The solution was to nudge the house against the trees,” says Mills. “We wanted the house to look as though it has grown up amongst the bush, and is part of the natural order of things. Throughout the house, the glazing has been positioned to allow glimpses of the tree canopy—with a different perspective from every room.”

Mills says black, creosote-stained weatherboards were specified to blend with the bush setting, and reference the





**Above:** Colour is a significant element within the house. It is used to create different moods in different rooms and to complement the owners' extensive art collection. This feature wall incorporates a totara mantle and cantilevered concrete hearth, which is heated during winter.

**Right:** An angled blue wall makes a dramatic statement in the family room and frames a view of a spreading rata tree.

**Facing page:** Flowing curves are another feature of the house, as evidenced in the kitchen cabinetry and semi-freestanding walls in the open-plan area.



cladding on the original cottage.

"We have used larger, non-standard planks to give the house a more robust, very physical presence that balances the lighter aspect of the trees."

A large, semi-enclosed evening porch is another visual link to the old cottage. Mills says the owners particularly liked the original three-sided veranda for evening drinks and meals.

"We have re-invented this in the same space, and given the new veranda a classic sense of proportion. It's an old-fashioned



space, but it's a great place to sit and watch the sun set over the sea."

Other elements that helped determine the design of the house included a respect for feng shui principles, and the owners' love of art.

"We wanted to weave the art and craft of the building into the actual structure," says Mills. "The wooden weave of the front door is the first place where that can be recognised."

"We didn't want everything to look too homogenous – it was important to

incorporate special features, such as the copper and macrocarpa strips on the top-floor deck."

Another noticeable feature of the exterior is a sculptural wall on the outside of the kitchen and family room. Square panels of copper alternate with bronze and powdercoated steel panels in bright colours.

"The exterior of the wall expresses the action, movement, colour and personality of the living space within," says Mills.

To balance the angular lines of the

house, Mills introduced curves – both inside and out. The curved boardwalks that appear to float above the ground are similar to those seen in native bush walks.

"Curves soften a design visually. They provide flow and offer different perspectives from different points as you move around the home," he says.

Several curved walls on the interior form part of a larger curve on the floorplan, which works as a unifying element. These include semi-freestanding, bright-red structural walls in the family room.



**Above:** The staircase, made from structural steel with swamp totara treads and hand-forged native raupo-bulrush railings, has an organic feel. Architect John Mills says the stairs create a sense of drama, similar to many traditional staircases. However, the overall effect is much lighter, due to the open treads and overhead glazing. The curve of the staircase is a continuation of a curve that includes the semi-freestanding red walls in the family areas.



**Right and facing page:** Bedrooms and bathrooms maximise the view of the tree canopy.

**Photography by Paul McCredie**

"These form part of the central curve, and signify the heart of the home," says Mills. "They are reference points within the open layout, and can be glimpsed from many rooms and the stairs."

Contours are also a feature of the kitchen, which has a rounded peninsula and curved rear wall joinery made from maple oak and maple plywood. Gaps above and below this wall enhance the sense of an art installation. The wall, which accommodates two ovens, conceals two walk-in pantries.

Colour also makes an impact within the house. A brown-toned feature wall complements a favourite painting in the formal living room, while a bright blue, angled wall makes a statement in the family living area.

"The angled wall meets the ceiling on the perpendicular, which emphasises the angle of the roof and reflects the way the rata tree outside grows upwards and outwards," says Mills.

A custom-designed, organic stairway, made from structural steel and swamp totara, leads to the second floor bedrooms.

**Architect:** John Mills, John Mills Architects (Wellington)

**Main contractor:** McKee Works

**Interior design:** John Mills Architects and owners

**Kitchen designer and manufacturer:** John Calvert

**Pool design:** Nigel Donaldson

**Stonework:** Bosworth Stone

**Steelwork:** Metamorphic

**Feng shui consultant:** Bepie Vaags

**Window and door joinery:** First Windows

**Window and door hardware:** Sopers NZ

**Tiles:** Bisazza from Jacobsen Creative Surfaces

**Flooring:** Feltex wool carpet

**Paints:** Dulux; Resene

**Lighting:** ECC; Aesthetics; Kristil Home Automation Systems

**Heating:** Engineering Services

**Furniture:** John Calvert Furniture; Home; ECC

**Home automation:** Kristil Home Automation Systems

**Front door:** John Calvert Furniture

**Kitchen benchtops:** American black walnut

**Sink:** Reginox

**Taps:** Metrix

**Oven, hob and hood:** Bosch from Tharcolds

**Dishwasher:** Fisher & Paykel DishDrawer

**Bath:** Metrix

**Basin:** Duravit

**Taps:** Vola