

people with style

HILLSIDE HEAVEN

The living is easy at “Hotel Matheson” where classic meets contemporary and nature abounds.

Writer: Claire McCall. Photographer: Nicole England

Caption





Caption



*Qui raectetus, sum, am qui ate porerion res et andita dolupta estiberiorem
que verferibusam quam, conecus inctur?*
*Cum estium is comni od que cores qui venihic tem cuptatibust ressittem
repudae pudiorehene iur a verit, et liquunt ibusam que nos utas si il eume
re voluptatur, ilicidi psantur?*



It's comforting to know that life never runs out of things to teach us: surprise and understanding wait like a patient tag team just around the corner.

For Peter Lancaster and Donna Higginson, building their home on a bush-blanketed section at Matheson Bay, Leigh, was not only peppered with practicalities but layered with philosophical lessons.

For one thing, the pair never intended to build from scratch. For another, the coastal village of Leigh was way off the house-hunt radar.

“We wanted to buy a do-up in Mangawhai,” explains Donna. But nothing hit the right note.

On yet another weekend excursion that had still not yielded a property, they travelled back to Auckland via Leigh. “We came across a piece of land that sloped down to Matheson Bay,” says Peter. “I loved that bay for its old Kiwi family beach appeal.”

Memories of attending a martial arts course here in the Seventies, on the same weekend the authorities laid the plaque to turn Goat Island into a marine reserve, came drifting back. The nostalgia factor, and the potential for 180-degree vistas that stretched to Great Barrier and the tip of the Coromandel Peninsula, proved the catalyst to sign on the dotted line.

The couple had the idea to clear much of the land and site the house near the top of the section to maximise their expansive ocean view. The council had other ideas. “The need for resource consent put the brakes on our plans,” says Donna. “And thank goodness.”

The council insisted they retain many more trees than they wanted to and that they build six metres down from the road.

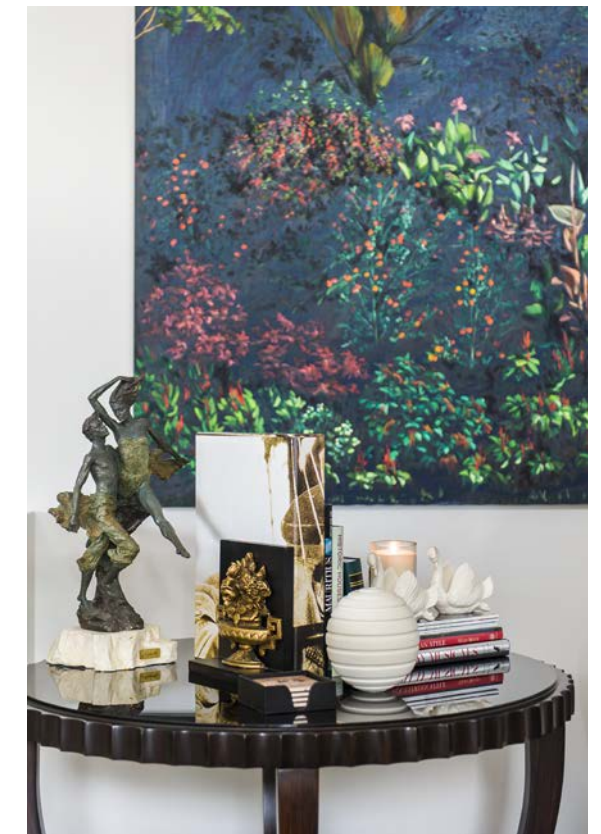
What was a red-tape minefield has turned into a green-eyed blessing. The house hunkers into the hillside discreetly – and the ocean is glimpsed through a leafy frame of kahikatea, ponga ferns, totara and manuka. “The birdlife is prolific,” says Peter. “We have so many tuis, wax-eyes and wood pigeons.”

Natural wonders aside, sculpting a manmade haven, together with their architect, John Durkin from Abri Architecture, moved them into new territory. As co-owners of Sarsfield Brooke, a wholesale furniture company that exclusively represents manufacturers from Italy, Spain and Ecuador, they have a trained eye for quality design. Yet this experience was one step beyond.

For Donna, who is used to renovating character houses, the new-build process was especially revealing. “John really listened to our needs and challenged us on much of our thinking. Architects are much cleverer than I ever gave them credit for.”



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Their brief was for a house with straight, modern lines – a plain canvas that was not over-detailed so they could dress it with art, furniture and fabrics.

Invisible from the road and sympathetic to its neighbours, the home is clad in a mix of black-stained cedar boards and Eterpan, a modern version of fibrolite. “It’s fixed with industrial studs, and our builder, Nathan Masters of Hempstead Homes, was so particular that all the heads of the fixings are facing exactly the same way,” explains Peter.

Internally, the couple asked for a really wide hallway as well as a rock-wall “spine” that runs from the front door directly to the view.

“It was something we picked up from a house in Switzerland that features in 150 Best New House Ideas,” says Donna. The book, published by HarperCollins, became their bible for aspects of the materiality. The rock wall comprises schist, bluestone and white soapstone and provides just one of the textural influences that elevate the interiors past show-home bland.

Black joinery adds a Zen feel that is complemented by deep-brown-stained oak flooring. The dramatic impact of this dark palette allows the greenery to “pop” through the swathes of glass ocean-side.

At “Hotel Matheson” as the place is affectionately called, it’s the kitchen that offers light relief both in its tones and in the sheer pleasure it provides.



“I wish I’d discovered the joy of cooking years ago.”

DONNA HIGGINSON



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Designed by Linda Christensen of Kitchens by Design, it has banks of open shelving and a 2.8m marble top, which is like an artwork in itself. Above the honed marble bench, two pendant lights in copper reflect the culinary happenings below. And there is plenty to reflect. Another unexpected bonus of building here is that Donna has discovered a passion for cooking. With few distractions bar the beach, she's able to devote the entire day to dreaming up a meal, shopping for the ingredients at the nearby market in Matakana, and preparing it. There's delicious taste with no stress on the menu.

"I wish I'd discovered the joy of cooking years ago," says Donna, who likes to work with fresh, seasonal ingredients. Peter is happy to assume the role of "clean-up dude" and if he fails in his duties, they can always hide the dishes and detritus in the generous walk-in scullery. Of course, dressing the home as a byproduct of their international work trips has also given them great delight. Often the furniture they source from Europe and South America is destined only for the showroom but now it lives and breathes right here at home.

The couple's skill lies in mixing the classical with the contemporary to create a place that feels easy to relax in. "When friends come to visit and fall asleep on the sofa, you know you've done a perfect job," says Peter.

With Leigh in mind, they made a special expedition to the French town of Lille on the Belgian border where they unearthed some gems. Their industrial-steel dining table was once a desk in a government department. "At the end of World War II, there were many mechanised plants in France that produced steel furniture," says Peter. "It was pretty commonplace." A round steel mirror above the fireplace in the open-plan living zone ties in with the dining table. It hangs from a length of chain with links as thick as a finger.

Here, also, are two French chairs from the Twenties and Forties. The couple had the chairs restored in tan leather with the intention of leaving them to "re-age". The Butterfly Sofa by Angelo Cappellini (an Italian company established in 1870), in grape-coloured linen, blends in beautifully.

This sense of history combines with fresh-off-the-block architecture to lend a certain magic to the home. Peter's grandmother's carriage clocks mark the passing of time in unhurried quietude while the purpose-built workstation in the living room acknowledges that, these days, family and friends bring with them a host of gadgetry that itself needs a place to recharge.

Although many items were bought especially for the house, in a clear case of give and take, the home had to be designed in part to embrace existing furniture. The Art Deco Venetian mirrored-glass sideboard is a case in point. It's now a sparkling, glamorous drinks cabinet with drawers lined in velvet.



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PETER LANCASTER

While European design both old and new features strongly here, Kiwi creativity is not forgotten. Donna’s first piece of original art, a night scene by Karl Maughan, has a starring role in the second living zone near the drinks cabinet. The painting belongs: its Nikau trees echo those that grow vigorously on the section. Off this room is the “Wellywood” bedroom where black-and-white photos of McKenzie & Willis, the iconic White Lady takeaway bus, and a vintage Christchurch tram from the movie *Bride Flight*, are richly evocative of New Zealand’s past. “My brother is a film-location scout and all of these are photos from his projects,” explains Donna.

He most probably has his eye on the couple’s bedroom for a future shoot for it is like something you’d find in a five-star European hotel. Silver leaf cabinets from Ecuador bring the bling factor while an Italian bedhead and delicate linens paint the picture of the ultimate romantic boudoir. A free-standing bath is well used by the lady of the house who loves to linger in the bubbles with a glass or two in hand as she overlooks a garden filled with ferns and bromeliads.

Downstairs, another level of the home is a secluded, self-contained apartment and the happy recipient of artwork such as Michael Hight’s beehives and Mike Petre’s poplar trees. It easily accommodates guests who clamour to book in for the weekend. And who could blame them? This escape is a feast for the senses in so many ways.

All those council rules, the couple admits, have actually enhanced the end result. “We are at eye level with the birds and I love the peek-a-boo seaview,” says Donna.

Decamping here for relaxed weekends and playing host and hostess has changed their perspective in a much more important way. Just one hour from the city feels like a hundred hours away in terms of lifestyle.

“Because we have the opportunity to spend more time with people, we’ve rediscovered our friends.” Now that’s an investment with an unsurpassed rate of return. ■

