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A creative Wellington couple trades their family home for a contemporary cottage up the road.

Text Sharon Stephenson
Photography Simon Devitt

Left The owners of this two-bedroom home wanted a strong contextual link to the sloping section and for the design to work with, rather than against, the elements.

Right Ply shelves in the kitchen display pottery collected over the years and a board is pinned with reminders and family mementos.

Below A moody moment in Island Bay.





Left Lo'CA Architects were influenced by the scale and geometry of a Petone state house by S. Hurst Seager and Cecil Wood. Standing in the place of a former worker's cottage, the home still sits comfortably with its neighbouring cottages.

Far left, below The cast-aluminium hares are by Nick Dryden.

Left below Architect Ana O'Connell describes the elongated hallway as "a central organising element in the traditional state-house plan".

Below The pottery on the cabinetry above Dryden is by New Zealand, Greek and English potters. The dining table is from Add+Vintage. Dryden made the copper pendants above.

What's a couple to do when they find themselves in an empty nest? If you're Barbara Fill and Nick Dryden, you sell the family home, cobbled together 34 years ago from recycled materials, to your eldest son Zen, before moving three doors down and demolishing a worker's cottage, one of four built from Dutch kitsets by the blokes who went on to start Lockwood Group.

"Nick and Barbara owned all the cottages, which were on one title and originally used to house council workers," says architect Tim Lovell who, together with business partner Ana O'Connell of Lo'CA Architects, was called on to create a contemporary two-bedroom home for Fill, a historian, and Dryden, a sculptor and former film-set builder. The Wellington couple had a defined design sensibility: they wanted a home with a strong contextual link to the hilly, sloping section, that worked with, rather than against, the weather conditions, and which accommodated their art collection. Their previous home was 60 stairs up from the road and on several levels, dominated by dark native timber. "This house is a reaction to that," says Lovell. "They wanted something simple, accessible and low maintenance so that they could pursue new interests."

The result is a solid, weathered 124-square-metre cedar box, what O'Connell refers to as a "deconstructed sculptural state house". The architects were heavily influenced by the scale and size of the 1906 S. Hurst Seager and Cecil Wood state house in Petone, which Fill had written a book about. It featured simple geometry and sloping ceilings. "We explored a pared-back, compact house, an artful stripping back to the basics," says O'Connell. This has been achieved by skewing the gabled state-house roof and positioning the ridge on the diagonal, creating "a low-slung dynamic form that follows the natural sloping ground levels around the house".

Constructed from fibre-cement panels, powder-coated aluminium windows and cedar cladding designed to "grey off like a piece of weathered driftwood", the house overhangs the north-eastern corner of the section, appearing to 'float' over the garden like the bow of a ship. The maritime reference is intentional: not only does the house align with the coastal Island Bay environment, but it also resonates with Dryden, a former commercial fisherman and keen sailor. The asymmetric roof, with its birch-ply panelled lining, follows his much-loved rowboat.



“The house isn’t about exposing or celebrating structure but more about a sculptural textured form.”



Left The cedar cladding is taking on a shade of driftwood. O’Connell and her daughter check out the view. On the block wall below is ‘Yuvaika’, a marble sculpture by Dryden.

Far left The figures on the deck are by Dryden.

Below The ‘Song of the Bellbird’ painting by Michael Smither (to the left of the fireplace) inspired the panels on the alcove deck (right). The pendant is from Vitrine. The Arts and Crafts rocking chair and ‘Morris’ chair are family pieces. The ‘Blueboy’ sculpture on the hearth is by Dryden. The paintings are by Michael Smither and Ann Tucker and the embroidery is by Gian McGregor.

Right Lit at night, the coloured panels take on a life of their own.



Below While the plan is compact, generosity is imparted by the high ceiling, partial walls and level changes. Dryden and his grandson Arthur play rummy at the kitchen table. The painting at right is by Tom Mutch. The marble sculpture in the foreground is 'Amphitrite' by Dryden.

Right Dryden on the marble seat beside his 'Gypsy'.

Far right The rainwater and mains taps are given a sculptural marble plinth.

Furthest right A Shibui pendant by Joshua Lee Design from Yoyo hangs in the main bedroom.



The house is organised around two key elements: the spaces created by two recessed decks and an entrance that opens into a long hallway flanked with bookcases and recessed storage. "The elongated hallway is a central organising element in the traditional state-house plan, which we've also utilised in this project," says Lovell.

Leading off the hall are two bedrooms, an ensuite with sauna, an office, a small bathroom and laundry. At the end, it opens out into a generous living space located under a high central clinker ceiling with spaces divided by either part-height walls or level changes. This imparts a feeling of generosity to the house, while keeping the plan compact. Two slender, exposed steel posts, one above the kitchen joinery and another between the living and dining rooms, permit a smaller ridge-beam. "The house isn't about exposing or celebrating structure but more about a sculptural textured form," says O'Connell. American-oak floors, birch-ply paneling and cabinetry add to a feeling of lightness.

Two recessed decks tucked into eaves on the northern and eastern sides of the house come into play when dealing with those pesky Wellington northerlies. Just off the kitchen, the deck is so sheltered that the sliding kitchen doors can be left open in all weather. Off the living room, meanwhile, a second alcove is sheltered from the south-easterlies and enjoys late afternoon sun.

The owners' art collection also played a part in the design of the home. The architects designed a space specifically for Dryden's sculpture 'The Wind Eater', carved from a reclaimed hunk of totara and now living in front of an over-sized window at the far end of the entrance hall. Outside, the brightly coloured blocks adorning the walls of the kitchen alcove were inspired by a Michael Smither painting, 'Song of the Bellbird', which hangs in the living room. "Michael is a friend of the owners and when they asked if they could reproduce his painting on the alcove wall he was thrilled,"

says Lovell. "It has become something of a talking point because at night it's lit and visible from across the area, which the local residents love."

Landscaping duties fell to the couple's landscape-architect son Yanos, who lives in Sydney. He stepped the section to create areas of interest, including a flat, narrow strip of lawn. More than 200 large marble slabs, many of which are inscribed with poems and were part of Dryden's 2005 exhibition about demolished Wellington buildings, were given a new life as paving stones and retaining walls. The slabs come from the former Maritime House on Wellington's Customhouse Quay, sourced from the same Golden Bay quarry that supplied marble to Parliament.

Although it's barely a shadow of its former self, the house snuggles comfortably into the Island Bay hillside, entirely at home among the humble worker's cottages. Downsizing rarely looks this good. 🏡

Design notebook

Q&A with Tim Lovell
of Lo'CA Architects



Above PLEASE PROVIDE DESIGN DETAIL FOR THIS IMAGE.



Right A Shibui pendant by Joshua Lee Design from Yoyo hangs in the main bedroom.



How can good design minimise the impact of Wellington's notorious winds? Shelter is the key. The idea is that there will always be a covered outdoor space to escape to. In a storm, the indoor spaces are designed to feel very connected to the surrounding landscape. Sliding doors are good for sites with high winds as they don't slam and the amount of opening can be finely controlled. Hunkering bedrooms into more sheltered, well-insulated, quiet areas ensures a peaceful sleep even in a strong storm.

What was your best design decision with this house? The asymmetric angled roof and ceiling. It's simple, sculptural and playful and follows the angle of the hill on which it's sited.

How does good design complement rather than distract from the spectacular view? A space is there to facilitate a connection with the surrounding landscape. We have the luxury in New Zealand of having the problem of how to manage often jaw-droppingly spectacular views. We are interested in the idea of the house as a view finder, enabling an experience and connection to the landscape.



1. Deck
2. Living
3. Study
4. Hallway
5. Kitchen
6. Bedroom
7. Bathroom
8. Garage
9. Entry
10. Ensuite
11. Sauna