

Designer Catherine David draws inspiration from a stunning creek-side setting and the clean, classic lines of her carefully edited home

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By design



THIS PAGE Catherine David on the stairs in her Remuera, Auckland home; the figurines are by Martin Smida of Wuppertal, the German hometown of Catherine's husband, Michel Neeff; the paintings are by Auckland artist Janet Muir and the pendant lamp made from fibreglass pulled over a frame is a 1960s original.

OPPOSITE This collection reflects Catherine's love of the white and quirky; the squirrel lamp was bought at a trade fair: "I just think it's so cute. At night we sometimes switch him on and nothing else."



THIS PAGE When the tide in the Orakei Creek is in, it feels almost as if the house is floating on the water. **OPPOSITE** (clockwise from top) Catherine curled up in her favourite nook; the photographs above her are a black and white series of a friend floating in a swimming pool; behind her is an inflatable light shade from ECC, reminiscent of a blow-up pool toy: "I often joke that if someone was drowning in the creek I could throw in the lampshade." In the lounge; the chairs by the floor to ceiling glass windows are Eames DCW reproductions. Butterflies are preserved behind glass in the upstairs corridor; Michel collected most of them in Malaysia and others were sent by Catherine's sister from Papua New Guinea; the fish is another work by Martin Smida.

ON A LAZY, wet winter's day, I find designer Catherine David curled up on her white chaise longue, gazing out at Remuera's Orakei Creek. "This is my favourite place to be," she says of her perch beside a floor to ceiling window that invites the outdoors in. "There aren't many spots smack-bang in the middle of the city where you can look out a window unimpeded for 500 metres."

Our eyes travel from her tropical garden immediately below out to the creek bed, where pukeko forage and ducklings totter. The tidal stretch looks like a swamp right now. "But, when the water's up high, you feel like you're on holiday. There's always something to watch out there. It's like a *National Geographic* programme."

This is the spot where Catherine, who lives here with ear, nose and throat surgeon husband Michel Neeff and nephew Jacob, 25, gets her inspiration for her homeware designs, which range from lighting and tableware to kitchen and bathroom ware and stationery. "As a designer, you're meant to 'look far'. Your eye actually relaxes when you look into the distance."

Her retreat from the world is a small box squatting on what was the neighbour's steep back section until the home, designed by architects Vlad Cekus and Biba Boban, was built here in 1999. >





THIS PAGE (clockwise from above) One of Catherine's designs adorns a tea towel in the small kitchen. Michel's mother collected cherrywood furniture for him when he was growing up: "When he moved to New Zealand, she sent a container with tables, chairs, bits and pieces." The big clock on the landing was also sent by Michel's mother; the smaller one was a gift from Catherine's mother on her 14th birthday and the smallest was brought back from Germany by Michel. View from the office deck.
OPPOSITE Catherine's collection of Chinese thermoses on the kitchen shelf. >



THIS PAGE An old Chinese screen hangs above the bed in the master bedroom; Catherine bought it from Webb's auction house in Auckland.

OPPOSITE (clockwise from top left) Catherine has just completed the renovation of her "resort style" dream bathroom; the waterfall shower comes straight from the ceiling and the free-standing tub is a favourite place in which to relax. Ferns and lifelike bulrush sculptures fringe the creek: "Everyone thinks they are real plants," says Catherine. Mirrors and glass bring light into the bathroom as figurines of Buddha and his disciples, bought in Penang, Malaysia, look on.

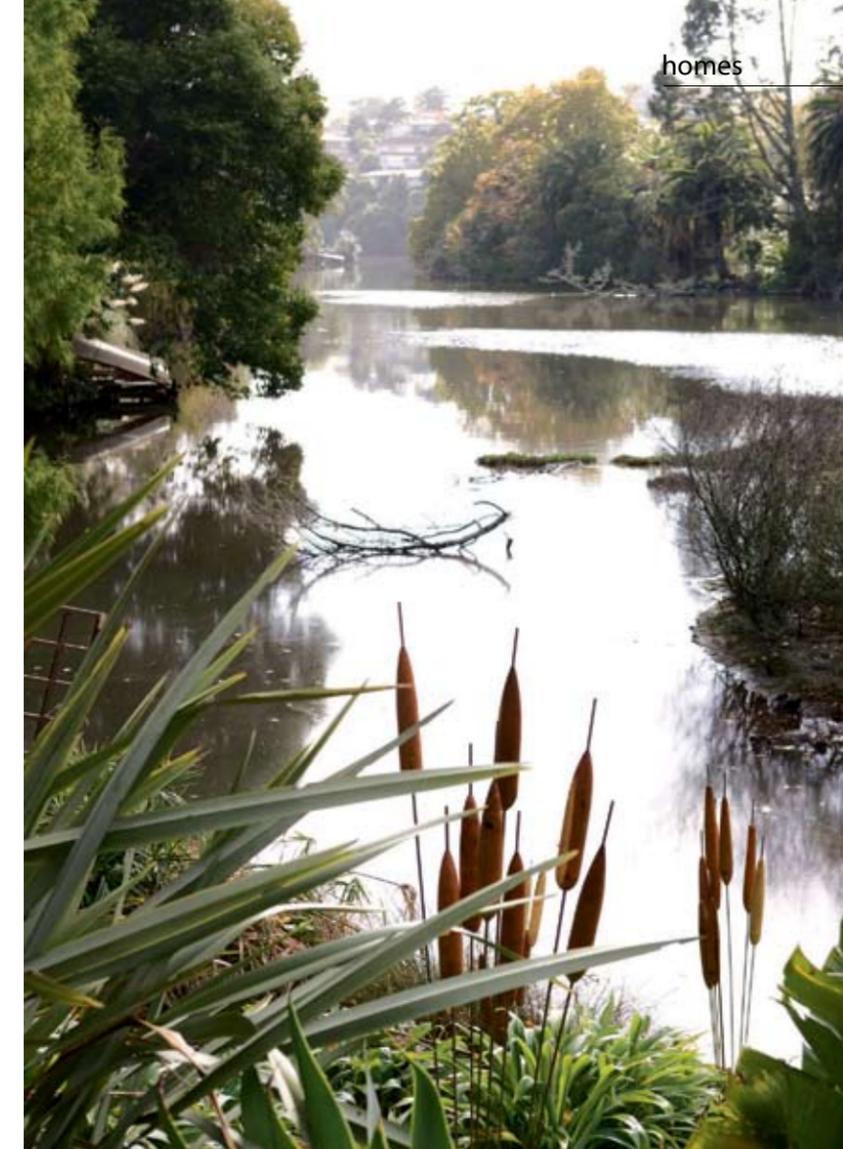


The logistical challenge of a small section was solved by a three-level, 247sqm building that went up, not out. Catherine's office is downstairs, the living area is on the middle floor and the bedrooms are upstairs via a suspended staircase, with sun streaming in from the skylight above. The top-floor mezzanine and oodles of glass give the illusion of space.

Despite the many items on display, the house has a clean, uncluttered style. "I've always liked minimalism. I've never liked stuff everywhere." Although the house embraces wood – the prized Slovenian oak parquet floor, cherrywood furniture sent by Michel's mother from Germany – the palette is largely monochrome. "But as I get older I'm getting less nervous about colour and more confident about my personal style."

Elegant in an all-black outfit and statement necklace, Catherine suits her house, or vice versa, with the same classic, clean lines in a muted palette. Essentially, she likes things to look just so. Lack of visual appeal affronts her. "When Michel or Jacob are dressed funny, I get visually assaulted. That's bad isn't it!" she says with a laugh. "And if something doesn't look nice in the house, I can't leave it here. I have to drive it away."

But various collections have made the grade, carefully spaced out so as not to overwhelm the rooms. Upstairs, you'll find everything from butterflies in glass frames to grandfather clocks. Downstairs, the eye is drawn to flower-patterned Chinese thermoses, figurines of Buddha and his disciples and antique toys. >



My favourite kitchen appliance is: My KitchenAid – pasta and pizza doughs are a breeze.

The best money we ever spent was: Our beautiful Slovenian oak parquet flooring – it was a great deal, as it was the last of a job lot.

The best piece of advice I ever received was: To put the skylight on the south side of the house.

My favourite part of the house is: Sitting on the chaise on a rainy day and looking out at the water.

The home improvement that caused the most debate was: Our new bathroom – it was a little over the top.

The one tip I think other homeowners should know about is: Double glaze, double glaze, double glaze – whether renovating or building new.

At the moment I am enjoying eating: Pineapple with soy sauce. Mmmmm.

The most important thing to me is: That our house is our retreat from the world.

Catherine David



“What I like – what I’ve always – is detail against

“Germans are big collectors,” jokes Catherine, blaming the collections on Michel. But the bug has proved catching; since the couple got together, they’ve treasure-hunted in Germany, Malaysia and at home.

“What I like – what I’ve always really liked – is detail against a really plain background. Everywhere you look, there’s something you can look at, and look at for a long time. But I do believe everything needs to have a function. People might argue, ‘You’ve got all this useless bric-a-brac’, but all of it had a use. These toys were played with. This Buddha was worshipped. Perhaps it’s that past use I like.”

And then there’s the loo. It’s like stepping into a miniature chapel, or at least a shrine to religious iconography: there are crosses, candles, paintings of Mary and Jesus. “Some people find it funny but others find it unnerving,” says Catherine, a long-lapsed Catholic. “It’s not meant to upset anyone, it’s just where that particular collection fits.” She knows the toilet – and the house – isn’t to everyone’s taste. “People have asked me if I like living here. I laugh, I don’t get offended.”

Wegged into the dressing room, the office, anywhere unobtrusive, are boxes bursting with more collections: “stamps, coins, toys, jelly moulds, paperweights...” It must take restraint not to display more, but minimalism demands that each collection must fight for its place.

Given her recently completed master’s degree in museum and cultural heritage, perhaps she could start her own museum? “We could just take over the family museum in Rawene,” she says with a smile. That’s Clendon House, former residence of James Reddy Clendon, trader, Treaty of Waitangi witness and our first US Consul. Catherine is his great-great-granddaughter through her mother. Her father is from Penang, Malaysia, where Catherine lived until age 14 before coming here for boarding school, then to study architecture.

She started Catherine David Designs in 1995 and is now stocked in stores throughout Australasia as well as custom-making for homes as far away as Sweden, France and the US. Her functional homeware has been tagged as quirky, funky, humorous, risqué, original, sophisticated and witty. “I like an element of surprise and humour in my work, but there’s not a lot of my stuff here because, if you can see your work, you’re always thinking work. You can’t really relax.”

To prevent work/home boundaries blurring, there’s no internal access to the basement office with its view of the garden. “Going outside and down the steps is like going out to work and coming home again,” she says.

really liked a really plain background”

Flush with tropical plants instead of flowers, the garden is low-maintenance, with bulrush sculptures that are often mistaken for plants. Catherine and Michel kayak in the creek, grow veges in a tiny glasshouse and have planted natives on a little unclaimed “island” that’s risen just off their property. In summer, they often sit out on the deck overlooking the water. Come evening, tree-hugging globes light the garden and a squirrel lamp and wall candles glow inside.

“This is absolutely my dream home,” says Catherine, curling up again on the chaise longue. “I’ve been here 10 years and never once thought about moving. This is where I’m me.”

See Catherine’s website at catherinedaviddesigns.com. ■

THIS PAGE Steps lead down from the house to the bottom of the garden where kayaks await an excursion.

OPPOSITE Built-in shelves in the lounge house Michel’s collection of antique toys; the top shelf holds Japanese “Happy Planes”; “scientific bottles” collected by Michel’s mother fill the bottom shelf.



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