



# Historic Present

New Zealand Parliament's SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE,  
Dr The Right Honourable LOCKWOOD Smith MP and  
his wife ALEXANDRA are making their mark on the  
Smith FAMILY HOMESTEAD.



**It's** not the grand kauri dining table that's the beating heart of Lockwood and Alexandra Smith's lovingly extended and refurbished art deco home near Ruawai, Northland. It's the humble Formica table off the kitchen, with its little chrome legs, its matching chairs, and its view of Alexandra's cherished garden and Lockwood's muddy work boots waiting at the back porch. This table says screeds about the couple's wish to honour the past while welcoming the present and, indeed, the future. "People are surprised we've kept the Formica table and chairs," says Lockwood, 61. "But these relics tell a story of family and austere beginnings."

Lockwood, currently Speaker of the House in New Zealand's Parliament, helped his father make this table – a perfect ellipse – at age 12. Since then, it's seen decades of dinners. Dinners dished up first by his mother to Lockwood, his father, two brothers and sister. Now they're dished up by his wife and former university sweetheart Alexandra. "She's a master chef," grins Lockwood. After reuniting and 10 years together, they married in July 2009, at what you could call Lockwood's office: Parliament.

But it's Woodleigh, the 300-hectare property that spans his house and multi-award-winning Belgian Blue beef farm, where his heart lies. "It's my anchor point," says Lockwood, who returns on Fridays from a working week in Wellington. "I grew up on this land, farmed this land. My soul's in this land." Indeed, this house holds his history much more than the House of Representatives.

The family home has stood sentry over the fertile Ruawai flats since the end of World War II, when Lockwood's father David returned from the war to farm and build a house for his family.

Born up the road in Paparoa, baby Lockwood learned to crawl, walk and talk in the modest home. He left as a young man to study, lived away for 20 years (six in Australia) and returned here to farm and represent his electorate in 1984. He's lived here, initially with his mother Heather who died in 1999, ever since.

After a long-distance romance, during which she worked in Whanganui (where her son was still at school), then in Auckland, Alexandra moved here in 2006, taking a counsellor's job at Otamatea High School in nearby Maungaturoto. The self-confessed nester shifted into what was still a very simple cottage. "I never really realised how small it was until we built this place," says Alexandra. There was no shower in the teeny bathroom with its original pedestal basin and tub. "I had to wash my hair in the basin!"

After bringing up four children in a never-finished house with exposed dwangs, extension cords and few ceilings or doors, Alexandra was set on having her dream home at long last. "There's a big difference between moving into someone else's home and making it your home. I didn't want to be disrespectful but I was selfish enough to want my precious things around."

To accommodate a container of antiques, family get-togethers and dinner parties of up to 14, Woodleigh needed to transform from an austere farmhouse into a spacious, comfortable home; to emerge from a Forties time warp into the 21st Century.

"Some people said, 'Why not knock it down?'" Lockwood remembers. "But, for me, there was never a decision to make. This house on the hill is a local icon. Architectural and design students often stop by and ask to photograph it because it's such a good example of art deco/Spanish Mission style." >>



*The minimalist monochrome colour palette is punctuated by antiques and also artworks by Lockwood's brother, Peter James Smith.*



*The spectacular dining table is the fruit of a quarter of a century of patient waiting as the piece of swamp kauri was dried in the shed and then finally kiln-dried before the build.*



Contrasting statement pieces against plain backgrounds is Alexandra's signature style.

So the couple plumped for an extension that would preserve and honour the history, legacy and style of the farmhouse. "It was impossible to match the old house," says Lockwood, "But we wanted to retain the rhythms." That's why the extension's rooflines reflect the art deco lines and edges of the old house (so much so that, from a distance, the house's two halves are almost a mirror image). That's why there are corner windows. That's why Lockwood took painstaking care to ensure that the parapet steppes and flashings matched those of the old house.

As Kevin McCloud, from home-build show *Grand Designs* would say, this house has integrity. You can read the history of both the old quarters and the new extension in it; it's not trying to look like it was all built in the Forties. "It's a modern interpretation of the old house," says Lockwood, "But on a far grander scale."

Grand is right. Indeed, arrival is a jaw-dropping experience. As the visitor enters through the front door, they instinctively look to the right, past the piano in the gallery, through the black arch, to the giant kitchen island (more of a continent, really) with its barstools and white-backed glass which reflects the light. Like moths to a flame, visitors head toward the kitchen to take in the rest of the extension: the atrium (the main living area) which flows into a sitting room and out to a patio, complete with outdoor fireplace. Past the kitchen, at the back of the house, are a scullery, bathroom, garage and gym, while the gallery leads into the couple's private wing: master bedroom, main bathroom and dressing room. The focal point of the spacious bathroom is a free-standing bath, which can be curtained off into a pocket surrounded by glass and a Japanese garden. "I love to lie in the bath and watch the stars," says Alexandra.

However, turn left at the front door, and you'd walk into the "old house". An extensive renovation has transformed it into a guest wing, with three double bedrooms and its own bathroom. "We wanted to be able to accommodate everyone without tripping over each other," says Alexandra. The transition space is the well-used library, with its cosy, informal feel, raspberry walls and art deco concrete fireplace. The couple likes nothing more than to light the fire and cuddle up to watch the news, *Grand Designs* or a movie with a glass of wine, cheese and crackers, or bread and dukkah.

This place has been a long time in the making. Three years from go to whoa, from the first survey in July 2006, until the 18-month build wrapped up in November 2009. At Christmas 2008, Lockwood proposed in the gallery, then an empty shell, as an astonished Alexandra unwrapped a ring box and card in front of her four children, grandson and sons-in-law. "I finally had a lovely home to offer her."

Throughout the planning and the build, they made joint decisions. "We had a 'no-surprises' policy," says Lockwood. "Alexandra organised me on the days I wasn't tied up in Parliament, dragged me round the shops in Auckland according to her itinerary," he says, shooting a smile at his always-on-the-go wife. "I'm a planner!" she says brightly. "Everything in the house was planned around what we already had and how to best use it."

*"It's my anchor point, I grew up on this land, farmed this land. My soul's in this land."* LOCKWOOD SMITH



Facing page: Bathing in style, the scene from the bathroom is a sweeping survey of the fertile Ruawai flats upon which the house has stood sentry since the end of World War II.

The atrium was designed around the dining room table and the gallery was designed around the piano (where pianist Alexandra accompanies Lockwood's baritone, as she did 40 years ago). Just as the old house was built around the bones of the art – two enormous paintings by Lockwood's grandmother Rosa Taylor – so too was the new house. "We designed around the paintings as the focal points and layered from there," explains Alexandra.

After nearly a century, Rosa's masterpieces have been carefully restored to their former glory, minus the flyspots, marks and the tear where a young Lockwood threw something at his brother and missed. "Now it's every bit as good as the original," says the culprit. Each work of art commands its surrounding spaces: *Silver and Gold* in the entry, *In Time of Peril* in the library. A singer, pianist and painter, Rosa passed on her former talent to Lockwood and her latter talent to another grandson, Peter.

That's Peter James Smith, Lockwood's brother. The walls were bare when they were little – wallpaper was put up later – and when it was stripped off during this renovation, Peter's childhood scribbles and drawings were uncovered. Now his scribbles and drawings still grace the walls, albeit of a more polished kind. The house has nearly 20 paintings by the Melbourne-based professor of mathematics and art, whose cinematic, illusionist depictions of the natural world, science and history blend images and words with scientific data and mathematical equations. You could almost call Woodleigh a gallery of his work; certainly it's the world's finest Peter James Smith collection.

In line with an open plan design, rooms are connected and you never feel hemmed in. Though there's no denying this is a large house, nowhere does it feel too big. Pockets of smaller spaces within the whole, like the sitting room, add intimacy. "We wanted the house to accommodate large groups of people, but we also wanted it to be intimate," says Lockwood. "You can be in it on your own without feeling like you're crashing round in a large space."

Design-wise, a fusion of the classical and minimalist demands that every detail is just so. Alexandra, a qualified interior designer (though she's never worked as one), was responsible for the modern look. Lockwood's got used to monochrome. "I like it now." Just as well: even the flowers are white.

Setting statement pieces against plain backgrounds has always been Alexandra's thing. Take Peter's showpiece painting *The Wahine founders off Barrett Reef* in the sitting room, where the accent colour orange interplays with the natural light. Spaces are linked by colour and meaning, like the green painting beside the kitchen table, which blends with the greenery outdoors.

At the other end of the kitchen, there's no missing a slab of swamp kauri (well, two slabs joined in the middle), carbon dated to 40,000 years ago. It's now their dining table. Given to Lockwood, whose ancestors logged the local kauri, this wood stayed in the shed for a quarter of a century until the couple had it kiln-dried before the build.



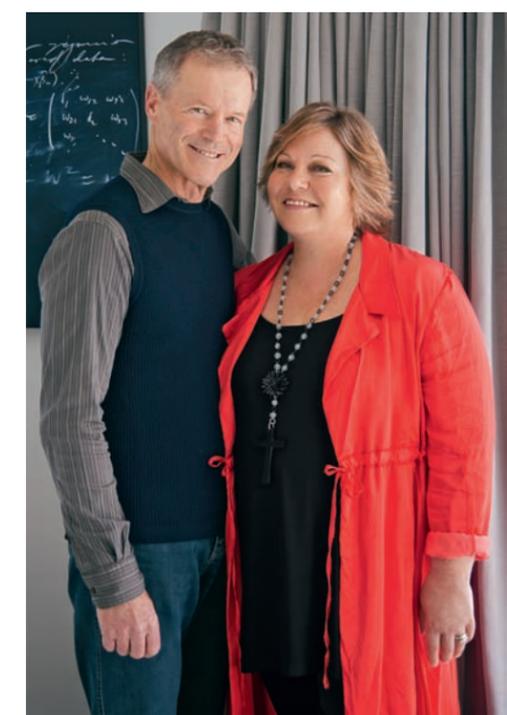
*A free-standing bath can be curtained off into a pocket surrounded by glass and a Japanese garden.*





On the wall one of Rosa Taylor's (Lockwood's grandmother) restored paintings takes pride of place. The room was designed around it.

*"It was impossible to match the old house, but we wanted to retain the rhythms."* Lockwood Smith



The original part of the house retains its cosy feel with a well-used library, raspberry walls and big comfy armchairs.



The tree-trunk's craggy, etched edges invite the touch, compelling you to run your hand along the crevices. Says Alexandra: "We didn't want all the beauty of the kauri cut off, but we didn't realise how beautiful it would be until it was done." And no, she didn't need to scout far and wide for those overhanging chandeliers, picked up at an antique shop down the road.

Something old, something new: it could be the philosophy of the build. You walk over the original kauri floor, looking up at a ceiling of whitewashed pine milled by Lockwood's father. The dining room table and chairs are the only new furniture. Sofas that have been in Alexandra's family for decades have been re-covered. The fabrics she's long adored add a splash of personality: take the dining room chairs' brave jacket of faux calligraphy strokes, which mirror the juvenile lancewoods outside the window.

Nothing beats the view at the dining room window. It's a work of art in itself, framed by ceiling-to-floor glass. Lockwood often finds himself standing by there, particularly at dusk, looking out over the farm, two silos and an old Maori church to Tokatoka Peak and beyond. "He can see a cow out there and know she's calving. I don't even see the cow!" laughs Alexandra.

But she can see just about everything else from her kitchen HQ. Alexandra, who's long yearned to design her dream kitchen, has thought of everything; from the built-in cling film dispenser to the island's pop-up, three-point plug. A whistling kettle reminds Alexandra of a childhood boiling the jug on a wood stove.

Duck through a door and you're in her scullery (a spacious

second kitchen), where she whips up her signature dishes and Lockwood uncorks one of 100-odd bottles of wine at his beloved bar with its stainless-steel bench and mirrored back that reflects your vino to infinity.

Take only a few more steps and you've left the bar for a series of 'garden rooms' outside. "So the challenge has been the transition from one space to another," explains Alexandra. Indeed, each 'garden room' flows naturally into the next. There's a low-impact green and white entrance garden, a native garden, a Japanese-inspired garden, two enclosed ferneries, perennial and rose borders, a veggie patch, an orchard and a sitting area among the roses and sweetpeas. Alexandra's always had green fingers. "She loves her plants like I love and care for the cattle," says Lockwood. "She gets distressed when her plants are distressed."

Right now, the couple's still finishing the garden and landscaping and, while they're enjoying the process, they can't wait for the moment when all is complete.

As the MP and his wife are well known locally, plenty of people have seen their mushrooming house on the hill. "One boy at school said, 'You live in a posh house, Miss,' and I said 'Well, I've waited long enough. I'm nearly 60 and once I had three babies and a makeshift kitchen, a real pioneer woman. He said 'Miss, you've gone from shit to gold.'"

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