

Rooms WITH A VIEW

Being a middle-income family doesn't have to stop you from building your own sustainable, stylish house on a budget. Sarah Lang sails to Waiheke Island to see how it's done

PHOTOS: PETER LAWRENCE





It's the spider I see first. At the front door, above a 'rain-chain' fashioned from miniature buckets, this Goliath of the insect world stands sentry over its silky labyrinth. The Waiheke Island couple I've come here to meet are happy to let it enjoy its home, just as they are enjoying theirs.

Friendly, forthright Lyndal Jefferies, 38, is an award-winning sculptor who also works as an art teacher, curator and writer. Her affable Brit-born husband, Paul Chambers, 41, is Auckland Regional Council's sustainability manager. Their keen veggie-gardener son Jude Arohanui, 4, is at a friend's house, but 19-month-old, strawberry blonde Flynn Kahurangi toddles in with a handful of just-plucked purple beans.

With Paul's 'mini-me' in tow, the couple show me around their nest of three-and-a-half years. Incredibly light and airy, the simple wooden house epitomises stylish minimalism, a clean palette and open-plan living. Shaped like a shed, albeit a three-level one given the steep slope, this house is the Kiwi bach with a splash of luxury. "My philosophy is less is more," explains Lyndal.

In any case, who'd want to outshine that view? Beyond the living room and out onto the deck, the eye travels from the veggie garden below, over the waving manuka, and out to the heart-shaped inlet of Omiha Bay with the Hunuas and, just faintly, the Coromandel Peninsula in the distance. The 270-hectare Whakanewha Regional Park unfolds from the bottom of their native tree-filled

garden, which is home to tui, native dotterels and rare shining cuckoos.

"You can see the tides come in and out, the sun rise and set, and these stacked-up islands seem to shapeshift back and forth," says Lyndal. The couple's determination to do as little as possible to spoil the view explains why there are only a few of Lyndal's paintings and sculptures around the house. "The view's the art," she says. Two giant glass sliding doors, which look open even when they're closed, are its enormous picture frame.

Down a tucked-away staircase are the boys' room and bathroom; the master suite is upstairs, where both bedroom and bathroom open onto a private deck, so even when the sliding doors are shut it feels as if you're showering outdoors.

"The best thing is lying in our low bed looking at the Milky Way," says Paul. "On our first night here there were shooting stars."

The couple met in 2002 when Paul took Lyndal's stone-sculpture course, then hung out at her gallery until she clicked it wasn't just the art he was keen on. But Paul wouldn't give up his Rocky Bay bachelor's pad for anything except a site on Bella Vista Road. "It came on the market at 9am and we'd bought it by 12," says Lyndal. That was 2004. They hired architect Johann Bernhardt, a sustainable-building specialist, and spent the next year working out what they wanted: looking at the sun, climbing trees, deciding which plants would stay and which would go.

Building a house from scratch was always going to



grow their carbon footprint. “That was a huge thing for me,” admits Paul. “I want to walk the talk in my life as well as my job. So it was really important I build a house which minimised our footprint and respected the land.”

The couple knew what they wanted: a minimalist, modern design that maximised the view, blended into the landscape, was healthy and economically and environmentally sustainable. The challenge was fitting the vision onto a difficult site. Unlike the \$10-million, five-hectare properties across the bay, this steep 810-square-metre plot is a mere 16 metres wide, and around 50 metres long.

The house was built around the trees—manukas, pungas, ferns—and the pair have planted nearly 300 natives on their land so far. Looking at it now from the beach, the glass reflects the trees to the extent that the building almost disappears. Permission to build the house four metres higher than originally planned both preserved the view from the street—a must for the couple—and meant they could see over the tallest trees.

There was no question whether they’d use eco building materials; it was how to afford them. Since the kids came along, Lyndal and Paul have been on one regular, modest income. But they decided there’d be no compromising. Hours were devoted researching products’ green credentials, never just taking the manufacturer’s word for it.

Pooling proceeds from previous houses and taking on a “whopping mortgage”, the couple stretched a meagre budget by haggling, following friends’ tips, developing relationships and shopping around to get the best bargains, like the second-hand Poggenpohl kitchen. Where

possible, materials were sourced locally or second-hand.

The house’s big environmental ticks come from being compact and using minimal concrete. Other eco-features include a rooftop succulent garden, decks that double as roofs, an underground rainwater tank, locally sourced or Greenpeace-approved timber, and no formaldehyde-filled building products like MDF, plywood or particle board. Downpipes fill buckets that water the garden, bath and shower water is reused for irrigation and sewage is treated onsite with a JetWaste system. The house is naturally warm eight months of the year thanks to windows that capture morning sun, recycled wool insulation in the walls, roof and underfloor, a heat pump and thermal curtains.

Financially, it hasn’t been easy. “We overstepped what we could afford,” says Lyndal. “There have been tough times in the past year when we’ve thought about selling, but we wouldn’t, couldn’t let it go. So rather than freak out and sell, we’ve got strategic.”

Renting out the house on www.bookabach.co.nz for summer stretches, the family takes mini-breaks. When we meet, they’re about to spend two weeks at the Whakanewha camping ground down the hill. “It’s much easier for the house to earn \$450 a day than it is for me,” laughs Lyndal. “If the house can get us into the shit, it can get us out.”

“And when we come back, the house is immaculate and I think, ‘Here we are for our luxury holiday on Waiheke Island’. You have these moments when you step back from it and think, this is so much more beautiful and better than anywhere else we’ve been. I wouldn’t swap it for anything.”
Sarah Lang

