

NINE TSUBO HOUSE 50M²
ISLAND BAY, WELLINGTON
WIREDOG ARCHITECTURE

Photography by Paul McCredie





PAGES 50–51 Austere form and simple details reference the part Japanese architect Makoto Masuzawa played in influencing the design process.

OPPOSITE All daytime living functions take place on the ground floor, while sleep and work shelters behind the shelves that enclose the half-depth mezzanine above.

Financial constraints might not be the most glamorous starting point to drive a piece of smart design, but they do have a way of concentrating the mind. Architectural designer Andrew Simpson of WireDog Architecture welcomes rather than fears them. 'Constraints of all kinds are seldom a bad thing, because they have a way of imposing discipline and they are a place to start. Budget is perhaps the most intractable obstacle, but things like a small footprint are always soluble.'

In fact, living small has long been a design principle that Simpson has demonstrated a personal commitment to. For years Simpson and his partner, Krysty Peebles, had lived in a succession of inner-city dwellings — some apartments, some detached, but all small — designed and built by various architectural colleagues. They knew first-hand that living in a small area did not have to mean a diminished quality of life.

Simpson's willingness to engage in exploring compact living was sparked by discovering the work of Japanese architect Makoto Masuzawa when working as an architectural intern in Japan. Masuzawa's Nine Tsubo House, an answer to Japan's post-war housing crisis, was based on and named after the standard size of Japanese *tatami* matting. It so intrigued Simpson that he drew up his own version of it and had it priced, before life got in the way and it was put away in a back drawer.

However, soaring property prices and the need for a long-term home for him and Peebles caused him to revisit the idea. Realising that a cheap site and a house with a footprint no larger than Masuzawa's would make building a new home significantly cheaper than renovating an older one in a distant suburb, Simpson set about looking for the sort of site no one else wanted. Eventually this



OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Storage is incorporated in the half-height wall enclosing the mezzanine; Deliberately unobtrusive, the siting of the entrance door alludes to the Japanese conventions of rejecting the street in favour of the personal world of the dwelling within; Huge views open to the rear of the dwelling in contrast to the modesty of the street approaches; Intimacy is encouraged by the positioning of a slot window alongside the sofa in the den, embracing the wider surroundings while offering a sense of protection.

presented itself in Island Bay, and it was all systems go.

What now stands on that supposedly unbuildable site is a triumph of intelligent design over indulgence. Positioned in such a way that neighbours are screened out, and with an austere corrugated-iron façade revealing little of what to expect of its interior, it wears its deliberate referencing of a Japanese heritage on its sleeve. As Simpson points out, 'One of the threads running through Japanese architecture is the rejection of the street. Here, because the site has outlook and sunlight away from the street, it made sense to lead through a small door into a wider environment.'

Inside that discreet little door is an interior as unexpected in its sense of generosity as in the way it physically embraces the realities of small-house living. The oversize double-height glazed doors which form the rear wall create an immediate first impression. These, and the extension provided by the 'jetty' of the deck, lead the eye to a wide vista of the valley below, and mitigate the fact that the ground floor area is a mere 30m². Even with the addition of a 20m² mezzanine sleeping and work platform, this is undeniably a small space. However, it is one that cleverly engages with the wider world.

¹ Cost control led Simpson and his father to teach themselves joinery so that they could finish the interior once the shell had been completed to lock-up stage by a licensed builder. Even Simpson has to admit the frustrations of attempting to marry his desire for a high finish with a lack of skills and tools. 'We got a decent skill-saw halfway through, and that helped, but mainly we learnt on the job — hugely! I have a whole new respect for what joiners do now.'

Nevertheless, the result is an interior as detailed as a piece of furniture, with walls clad in pale poplar ply complementing



OPPOSITE, TOP TO BOTTOM A carefully contained interior landscape is dramatised by the pitched ceiling and open shelving; Simple interior forms frame the excitement of wide exterior views.

PAGE 59 The apparent lack of enclosure to the deck allows an unfettered engagement with the views and expands the dimensions of the interior space.

the deeper tones of the ash floors and ceilings. Echoing and contrasting with these core elements are the lighter colours of the kitchen cabinetry and generous open storage units that line the sleeping platform, which are made from blonde Italian poplar plywood. Concealed storage is hidden beneath the treads in the staircase, while the second living area, a television nook tucked beneath the work area of the mezzanine, is personalised with belongings displayed on open shelves along one exterior wall. The surprise here is the way a small window, secreted among the owners' possessions, allows a snatch of the bush surroundings.

What has evolved from less than auspicious beginnings is, in Simpson's words, 'transformative. The difference we have got from living in an uplifting space is incredible. We have built something exactly the way we wanted, and which upholds values that are dear to us. This is a space that shows that small doesn't have to be Spartan.'

Design notes

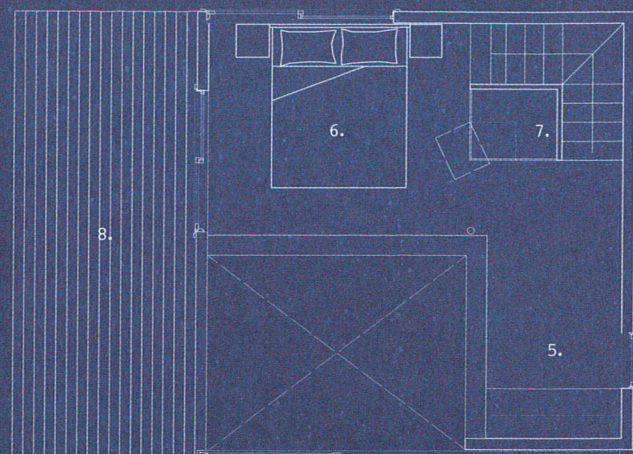
A restricted materials palette visually enhances the illusion of space, while considered display areas for personal belongings provide texture and visual interest.

Storage is introduced into every available nook and cranny. Hidden drawers are secreted under and around the staircase, and open shelves line the exterior of the sleeping platform, the kitchen and the television snug.

All of the space is open plan except for the laundry and bathroom, which are concealed within the rear of the core that supports the sleeping platform.

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- 1. Living
- 2. Den
- 3. Bathroom/Laundry
- 4. Kitchen
- 5. Study
- 6. Bedroom
- 7. Wardrobe
- 8. Deck



Level Two



Level One

