



Japanese origins

WELLINGTON designer **ANDREW SIMPSON** creates a 50-square-metre house on a marginal site in Island Bay. **ANDREA STEVENS** discusses the genesis of the idea and its success as a small house model for New Zealand.

TEXT ANDREA STEVENS PHOTOGRAPHY SIMON DEYITT



Most architects and designers I speak to prefer to make small and intricate buildings over large ones for the same cost. Space trade-offs are often more than compensated for by the greater character and personality offered by a carefully detailed building. I've visited many such houses that prioritise quality over size, but none quite as compact as Andrew Simpson's 50-square-metre house in Wellington. This little jewel box is an exercise in invention and craft producing spaces that are small but not tight, succinct but not mean.

The decision on size was brought about by the need to live near the city at an affordable price, but also by the designer's strong desire to experiment. After living in a variety of small and eclectic inner city apartments – including a self-made corrugated cardboard structure inside a warehouse – Andrew had adapted to living in a compact dwelling. The project would need to meet his and partner Krysty Peebles' needs, but also provoke thought and debate in New Zealand about how to live well in less space.

Part of the affordability equation was the land price, and so they started searching for a 'difficult' site, a site with hidden potential.



PREVIOUS | PERCHED ON ITS STEEP BUSH SITE, THE APPARENT 'HUT ON POLES' REVEALS A RICHLY CRAFTED INTERIOR. OPPOSITE | WITH LITTLE EMBELLISHMENT, THE FRONT DOOR IS ACCESSED FROM A SMALL DECK. THE RIGHT HAND PAINTING IS BY DELIA WOODHAM. ABOVE | THE DOUBLE-HEIGHT LIVING ROOM OPENS DRAMATICALLY TO THE OUTDOORS WITH A FULL-HEIGHT SLIDING GLASS DOOR.



//

It became an exercise in designing the right amount of space for a couple, rather than the maximum space affordable.

//

After a year of looking, 600 square metres came up for sale in the coastal suburb of Island Bay. At fifteen minutes drive from the city it had the proximity they needed for work, and it was certainly difficult to develop. Accessed from the south, with a steep slope covered in bush, Andrew pushed his way up to the ridgeline and pictured a pole house perched amongst the trees to capture the western sun and valley views.

When defining a house type, he didn't see the tiny house as a model - these houses are often not much larger than a caravan. Instead, he looked to small house types, which are typically sized down for affordability, land size and environmental reasons - while still sharing some counter culture values with the tiny house movement, but offering a more practical model. For Andrew, it became an exercise in designing the right amount of space affordable: a very different view of housing in a culture dominated by the concept of 'resale value', which seems to drive so many briefs and designs.

Makoto Masuzawa's 1952 Minimum House became a model together with the nine-square grid house concept, a common design exercise



OPPOSITE | ANDREW STANDS IN THE KITCHEN WITH THE FRONT DOOR OPEN AND THE BATHROOM CONCEALED AT THE RIGHT. ABOVE | A VIEW FROM THE KITCHEN TOWARD THE STAIRCASE AND INTO THE ONLY BATHROOM.

at architecture schools. Andrew had seen Masuzawa's designs at an exhibition in Kyoto a decade earlier, and it had resonances with both his living experiences in Japan, and the current economic climate – Masuzawa's post-war project was also an exercise in economy. The prototype, also known as the '9-Tsubo House', established the basic footprint and a challenging but absorbing set of design constraints.

"There was a huge temptation to make it larger," Andrew confesses, "and there was the option to design a two-bedroom version. But we were used to living in 50-square-metre apartments, and the design exercise in itself appealed."

The house is designed for four – Andrew and Krysty, and their two (large) Whippets. They have no children, so some of the pressures for room numbers and sizes were not a factor. What is apparent from the house layout and detail, are spaces that support personal pursuits like reading, music and film. It is a house that is very connected with its natural environment, and it has a warm homely feel, supportive of a relaxed and quiet way of life.

With its cubic dimensions, the house exterior is about as simple as it can be. A pitched gable roof and corrugated iron cladding form essentially a shed perched on poles. Three small decks extend to form an entry landing, and outdoor spaces off the





GROUND LEVEL

LEVEL 1

- | | | | | |
|-----------|----------|------------|-----------|-----------|
| ① ENTRY | ③ LIVING | ⑤ DEN | ⑦ LAUNDRY | ⑨ BEDROOM |
| ② KITCHEN | ④ DECK | ⑥ BATHROOM | ⑧ STUDY | ⑩ VOID |



bedroom and living room on the western side. The simple flush front door leads straight into the kitchen with a staircase and 'hidden' bathroom to the left, but your attention is immediately grabbed by the two-storey high glass doors and double height living space.

Flooded with light and with a strong connection to the view and bush outside, the small house feels expansive. It points towards the setting winter sun, with small compositional windows to bring in details of surrounding trees at the other compass points. A dining space lies immediately in front of the kitchen bench, and a small TV snug is tucked under the mezzanine opposite. Upstairs is the bedroom and study, both overlooking the void and out through the huge glass doors.

The great success of the house is how generous it feels despite its five-and-a-half-metre-square plan. Each room borrows space from the others so they all feel generous. The bedroom is the best example of this – at a standard size as measured by floor area, it is open to the full building width and length, looking out through the doors to the valley beyond. Storage is expertly handled upstairs and downstairs by metres of built-in shelving, which adds to the house both functionally and aesthetically with its lattice effect.

PREVIOUS | WITH SUCH A SMALL FOOTPRINT, THE EXPERIENCE OF THE OUTDOORS IS FAR MORE PALPABLE THAN IN A LARGER HOUSE. FEATURING A WARM LIVING SPACE WITH A TIMBER ATRIUM THAT HUGS THE ROOM. ABOVE | UPSTAIRS, THE BEDROOM LOOKS ONTO AN EASTERN DECK AND ACROSS THE DOUBLE HEIGHT SPACE. ABOVE | INLAID BRASS CHANNELS TAKE THE WHEELS OF THE UNFOLDING, 'HIDDEN' WARDROBE.

DROP BOX

ARCHITECT WireDog Architecture
BUILDER John Kaveney

WIREDOG ARCHITECTURE
(64) 4387 4433
wiredogarchitecture.co.nz

FURNITURE

Custom bedhead and vintage bedside tables made by Andrew Simpson and Chris Simpson (WireDog Architecture). In Living Room, Santa Barbara couches from Stacks Furniture. In Living Room, Panasonic 42" LED TV and in-wall speakers from Polk Audio.

LIGHTING

Living room pendant light by Castellani & Smith.

FINISHES

Interior paint finishes Karen Walker Butter White. Kitchen bench in Hoop pine with Formica Sage surface made by WireDog Architecture. Exposed floor joists and Fitch beams by Lawsen Cypress Farmers Shelter Belt. Floor and ceiling paint throughout in White Ash by Herman Pacific. Internal Cladding throughout, Blonded Italian Poplar from Plytech.

FIXED & FITTED

Blonded Italian Poplar shelving made by Andrew Simpson and Chris Simpson (WireDog Architecture). Kitchen: Foraze Panni sink by Heritage Hardware. Tapware throughout Innox Quatro Octavo by Marine and More. Smeg Pyrolitic Oven. Bosch Induction Hob. Mitsubishi Fridge Freezer. Bath, ceramic shower and toilet by Catalano. PueVida shower by Hans Grohe.



The original Japanese model impacted the house size more than its planning. But I can't help seeing similarities with Japanese timberwork in its softness and the designer's obvious enjoyment in combining natural timbers with exposed construction detail. Andrew and his father actually built all the joinery themselves with a skill saw, leaving a few rough edges but a great sense of satisfaction and participation in its making.

One of the misunderstood ideas about the project from its initial public reaction was that it was a cheap house to build. It was 'cheap' because of its small size, but its square metre rate is in fact similar to a medium-spec architectural house. "I could have made it cheaper by using plywood instead of solid timber for example," says Andrew, "but the cost savings we made by building small still far outweighed the extra square metre cost to build."

By adapting and updating a 1950s Japanese model to suit local New Zealand construction, materials and space planning, Andrew creates a new type and achieves a great depth of character in a small area.