

The tree house

Five incredible levels ascending a bush-clad hill, this family home is the height of ingenuity.

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LEFT The spine of the home is a staircase lit by skylights. **BELOW** Oliver in the winter room. “The louvres are great, both a nod to modernist design and supplying constant airflow,” says Francine. “Plus cleaning them is easy – they can be thrown into the dishwasher.”

TRY FOR A MINUTE TO RECALL THE childhood sensation of climbing a tree: the shadows at the base giving way to light, the thrill of being so high, the bird’s-eye view of the world below. Pass through the dusky blue entryway and up, up, up the steep central staircase in the house Francine Smith and David Cunneen built, and you get a similar sense of floating on air.

This house is nothing short of spectacular: five beautifully crafted levels scaling a Titirangi hill. “Our architect, Hamish Stirrat of Fabricate Architecture, is young and passionate about design, so we gave him the artistic freedom to surprise us with it,” says Francine, who relocated to Auckland with David and their sons in 2012, after the 2011 earthquake changed life forever in their previous home of Christchurch. “We were working within council height restrictions and, as well as creating a great family home, wanted to step lightly on the earth. The end result works so well. There’s an overall connectedness about it where every corner is utilised.”

Clad in cedar that has been left to “silver off” and blend into the surrounding natives, and with American oak underfoot and angled birch ply ceilings overhead, the house is conceived as a series of distinct living areas (a summer room, a winter room and a kids’ >



SUMMER ROOM This mezzanine-like living area on the home’s top storey overlooks the winter room and opens onto the courtyard out the back. Here the birch plywood ceiling meets walls painted in Dulux Okarito.

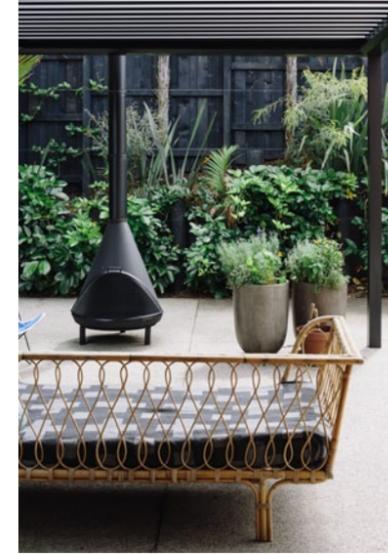


THE PROJECT

Interior designer Francine Smith and her builder husband David Cunneen built this four-bedroom home in Auckland's Titirangi for themselves and their children Oliver (14), Finn (12) and Leo (9).

KITCHEN "I wanted to feature mustard Dulux Mana somewhere prominent, so the pantry doors were perfect," says Francine. "Using the Muuto Dots as handles adds a textural effect. The stainless steel benchtops are hard-wearing and bring an industrial element to the kitchen that we enjoy, and we also love black ply, so that was an easy choice for the cabinetry; we used it for the main bathroom's vanity too."

DINING “This is where we tend to come together for homework, dinner and drinking wine with friends,” says Francine of the top-storey space that includes a wrap-around window seat with hidden storage. David gets a kick out of paying attention to detail and in this room recessed the blinds so they’re concealed. “And there are lights under there as well,” says Francine, “so at night, they glow.”



RIGHT The view from the deck off the kitchen extends right out to the Waitemata Harbour. **BELOW** Decorating the base of the pool – and framed perfectly by the dining room window – is an artwork the family commissioned local artist Andrew J Steel to create.



lounge) linked by a 2m-wide hallway comprising 42 stairs that lead from the ground-floor entrance to the kitchen high above. “And they all work,” says Francine, “from sitting in front of the fire watching a movie with the kids, to us hanging out with friends upstairs, to the kids playing with their mates in their living area.” Each child’s bedroom is on a different floor, with the couple’s master suite separate again.

Arriving in the eye of a storm, *homestyle* watched from the open-plan kitchen/dining area as clouds rolled across the suburb below. Throughout the house, cleverly arranged windows draw the eye out to the Waitemata and Manukau harbours, through Cornwall Park and over the Bombay Hills.

“To help us finalise the orientation of the windows, we brought a chair into the shell of the house and sat in each room to gauge the best vantage points for the light and views,” says Francine, an interior designer who regularly joins forces with builder David on projects. They also paid close attention to privacy, requesting oversized windows on the plans, then downscaling them visually while sitting inside the home’s framework to ensure maximum seclusion from the neighbours.

It might appear sprawling, but in fact the rooms are modest, every inch serving a >



LEFT This wall in the master bedroom, painted in Dulux White Island Double, is beautified by a photographic print, *Float*, by Keryn Sweeney from The Market NZ. **BELOW** The couple carved out some space in the kids' lounge (painted in Dulux Masterton) to use as an office.

purpose. The décor is a mix of old and new, with a focus on the functionality that's a hallmark of Francine's style; she believes a home should be an expression of your best self and embody the Danish hygge ideal of human connection, warmth and pleasure. "We love Scandi, modernist and minimalist design, so our finds are a bit eclectic," she says. "But combining ideas and looks is what makes a house a home."

The material palette incorporates complementary textures and fittings throughout; the couple used natural materials wherever possible, including Hemptech curtains to soften the living areas, leather for the window seats and sound-absorbing cork in the kids' lounge. All the glass includes argon gas to minimise heat loss and the concrete blocks on the entry level's exterior also retain warmth.

The blown-glass pendant lights in the dining room were a previous purchase from Matisse and dictated the colour scheme. No one in the family needed convincing to make bold choices such as in the kitchen and on the front door, which is painted in soft pink Dulux Dunedin.

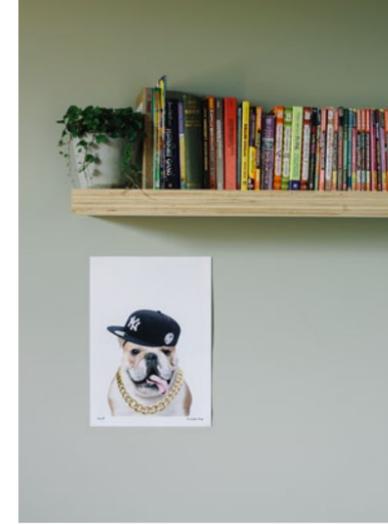
"The kids are interested in design and colour, so it's something we encourage, and this experience has reiterated the importance of being true to what you want," says Francine. ▶



ENSUITE Having lived without a bath for some time, it was a must for Francine to have one in this house. Combined with a smoky grey glass shower box and matching pendant lights, "it's a bit glam and grown-up", she says.



FINN'S BEDROOM This sun-drenched space features open shelving and a Kiss light by Catherine David Designs. A Banana pillow by Thing Industries teams with bed linen from Father Rabbit and a cushion made with leftover curtain fabric by Marimekko from Bolt of Cloth.



ABOVE & BELOW Oliver's (above) and Leo's (below) rooms are painted in Resene Lemon Grass. This artwork in Oliver's room is by LoCo Graphic Design. Leo sleeps in a Freedom bed with linen by Goosebumps; on the table is a Douglas and Bec lamp. **RIGHT** Leo in the summer room's hanging chair – a Trade Me find.



“For years we’ve seen things we’ve liked, and we were able to bring it all to life in this house.”

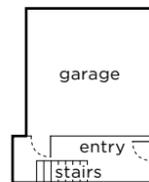
At the very top of the ‘tree’ is a multi-level courtyard with a fire and barbecue area and the pool David made from the container used to transport the family’s possessions up from Christchurch. It’s been such a success, he’s keen to branch into making more. “I’d been tossing around the idea for a pool made from a shipping container for a while, before it became ‘cool,’” he says. “It’s cost-effective and a great upcycling idea that we made work by creating our own conversion and design process to create an awesome family pool that we can also take with us if we move.”

Having weathered the upheaval of the earthquake and a subsequent short-lived shift to the Gold Coast, the couple reason that home is not a thing but where the heart is. “If you’ve got your family, it doesn’t matter where you are,” says Francine.

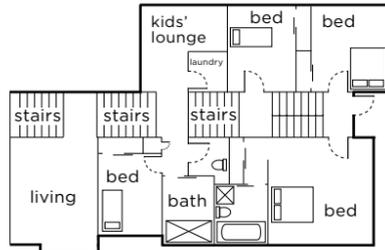
That doesn’t stop them being rapt with their latest creation. “When we walk in the door, we feel at home,” says Francine. “We all have our own space, yet can easily gather together – the house accommodates everything. Dave has said it’s a gentle and relaxed house, and it is. It’s beautiful but not precious. It’s soft but with some hard edges, warm, unique and comfortable in its own skin.”



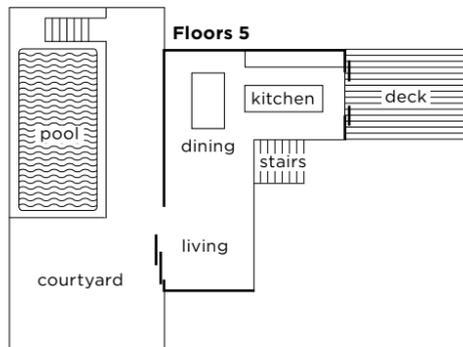
Ground floor



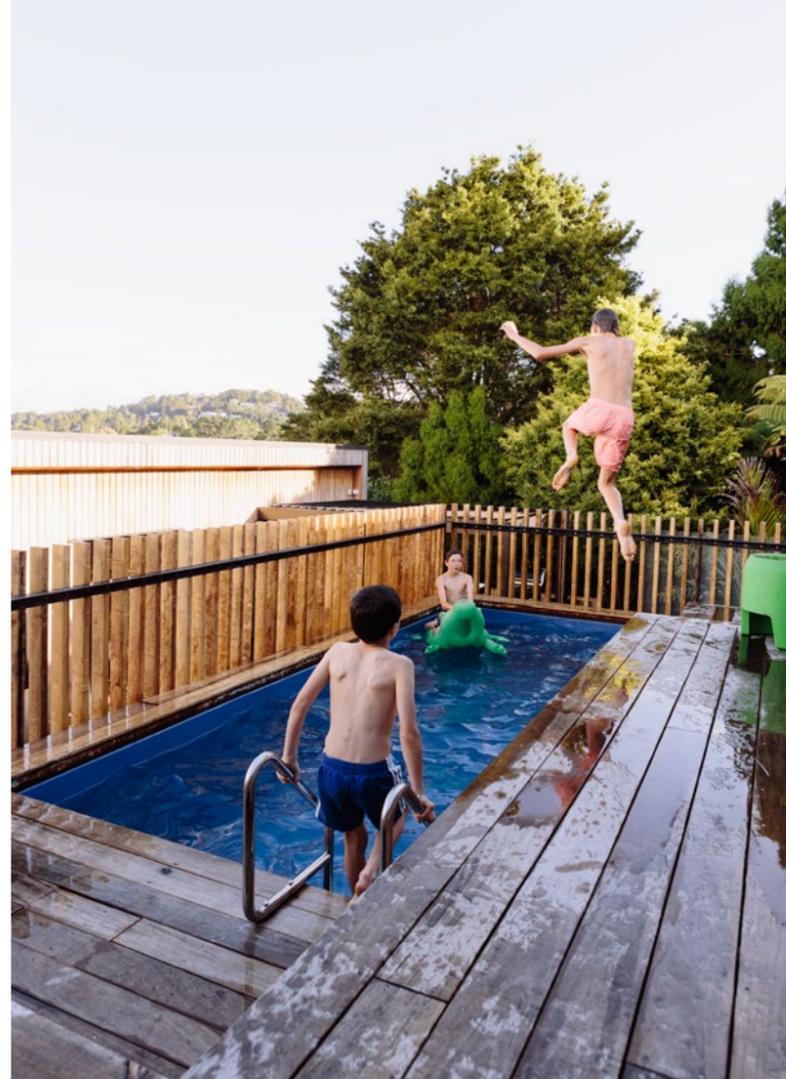
Floors 1 - 4



Floors 5



TOP With a louvre system overhead, the barbecue area outside the summer room is functional in all weather. **RIGHT** Surrounded by a hardwood Vitex deck, David's container pool has been an absolute hit. The couple intend to add bamboo in moveable planters behind it to form an organic screen for privacy.



DESIGN DETAILS



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Chouchin 1 and Chouchin 2 pendant lights by Ionna Vautrin for Foscarini, \$1345 each, ecc.co.nz. Black Letterpress Hieroglyphic print by Andrew J Steel, \$150, andrewjsteel.com. Round stool, \$380, tessuti.co.nz. Marl cushion cover, \$70; cotton velvet cushion cover, \$45, cittadesign.com. The Dots coat hooks by Lars Tornøe for Muuto, \$62 each, bauhaus.co.nz. Callisia plant in Reneé Boyd pot, \$94, plantandpot.nz. Tip Ton chair by Edward Barber and Jay Osgerby for Vitra, \$500, matisse.co.nz.

ASK THE BUILDER:

David Cunneen of Cunneen Construction

David, it must feel good to live in a home you've built with your own hands. Yeah, it's great. It's a real buzz to know that your kids are sleeping in something you've made and to be able to tell them that – constantly!

You put a lot of effort into the negative detail in the stairwell – how has it added to the look of the home? Negative detail is the process of creating a definitive space between materials, such as between walls and ceiling junctions. It's a strong detail that's really effective and in our home works between the ply and the gib to create a 'floating' ceiling down the hall passage.

What do you wish people understood about the building process, and how can they be sure that they're hiring the right professionals for the job? Building is a real skill that I think

people underestimate. The best way to find the right builder is to ask around. I'd go for a LBP [Licensed Building Practitioner] or Master Builder, and then most 'good' builders like them will have subcontractors that they regularly use and trust. Ask for a terms of trade agreement and contract from your builder at the very beginning – it will safeguard both you and them.

As for architects, we prefer to work with young professionals because they've got a sense of freedom – they haven't been put into a box yet.

If something does go wrong, what's the best way to approach it? It's important to have open communication from the outset, before the project starts, to get on the right footing – whether over a cup of tea or a few beers. Most quality builders want to produce a home that both the owners and themselves are happy with and proud of, but there will be things that come up and have to be addressed, and if you can talk to each other openly, it'll ease the bumps in the road.