



POWER

What are the key strengths of this dwelling? Texture, cosiness, colour and design details like no other.

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MOVES



BOTTOM LEFT On the walls in the nook by the front door, Resene Quarter Biscotti has been coated with Resene Sandtex for a Mediterranean effect. Gretchen made the shoe rack from a slab of macrocarpa from Cypress Sawmill and basketballs she filled with concrete. The walls in the hall are in Resene Sea Fog and Resene Double Sea Fog blended with Resene FX Paint Effects Medium for a limewashed look, and the panels are in Resene Eighth Canterbury Clay. Gretchen commissioned ceramicist Deborah Sweeney to make the lightshade (plus a mini version for the main bathroom) based on her favourite vintage jewellery dish. **OPPOSITE** Over the vintage table and chairs is a pendant light that lit up a Czech hotel in the 1950s. They're all from Vitrine.



It took the might of four men to carry the giant timber island into Gretchen Lowe's one-of-a-kind kitchen, and four again to instal the weighty fossil-stone sideboard in her treasure-filled lounge. For all the muscle power she and her husband Blair Houston enlisted to renovate the home they share with their children Gwynnie and Margot, though, there's no force stronger than her own creativity.

Ever since baking her first batch of lamingtons at the age of seven, formidable talent Gretchen has been a maker through and through, and has turned her unique skill set into a career that combines interior design, food styling, recipe creation and photography, and sees her and her content appear in books and magazines, on TV and in a regular slot on Radio NZ. This is the fourth house she's overhauled with Blair. The list of things they've learned to DIY has lengthened by the day, and with a roster of trusted tradies on speed dial, there's almost nothing they couldn't make work.

For this project, Gretchen followed her design instincts wherever they led — whether to the birdbath she upcycled to live in the lounge, or her choice to use the kitchen island's 54 drawers, cupboards and shelves in lieu of a pantry, after spotting the 4m cabinet on Trade Me for a steal, crafted from pine to look aged for a Netflix movie. Although the odd thing gets 'lost' in it, Gretchen says, "We've got set drawers for everything from the Marmite to my herbs and spices. There's a tall one for bottles of olive oil, flat ones for lunchboxes and cake tins, and there's also 'Mum's chocolate drawer' — although I have to change that around when the girls work out which one it is." >

THE PROJECT

With Auckland Design Solutions and builder Jemahl Cattermole of JRC, interior designer/food stylist/recipe creator/photographer Gretchen Lowe and her accountant husband Blair Houston renovated this three-bedroom home in Auckland's Kingsland for themselves and their daughters Gwynnie (10) and Margot (4).





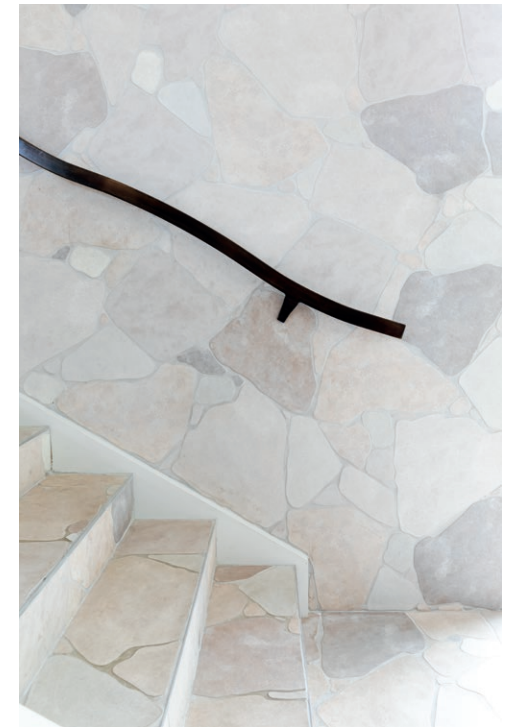
“I DESIGN AND INSTRUCT, AND BLAIR DOES A LOT OF THE GRUNT WORK. I SWEAR, GIVEN THE TIME, HE COULD BUILD A HOUSE FROM SCRATCH.”

THESE PAGES Clovelly Crazy Pave tiles from Jacobsen were laid floor to ceiling in the stairwell linking to the extension by the couple's master tiler friend Ken Wood, and paired with a brass handrail Gretchen designed and had made by Sam Grimmer of SG Fabrication. On the opposite wall, Blair and his cousin Elliot Zonneveld of Plumbing Services Limited (who lent his expertise throughout the project) installed flat-pack Laminex Melteca Mist cabinetry from Uduit and Karu handles by Lo & Co. The benchtop and shelves are made from Brittanica engineered stone by Sunhome and the tapware is by ABI Interiors. Gretchen — who sings the praises of her Haier freestanding electric oven with a gas cooktop — aced the walls using Resene FX Paint Effects Medium tinted to Resene Contented Pink.

Along with liberal servings of this kind of individuality, essential interior ingredients for Gretchen include delicious warmth and texture. “Home” for me is a sanctuary that feels cosy yet sophisticated, and where I can play with personal expression,” she says. “I don’t follow a set aesthetic, but rather buy things I love and slowly piece them together. I love combining new with vintage for character and depth, and candles and incense are a massive thing for me. I’ve got a friend who has a word for it — she says I ‘Gretchen-ify’ a home.”

Lights, camera, Gretchen, who in playing casting director here opted for more than just the kitchen island with a cinematic background. Fun facts: the family’s thrifted bar stools beside the island have also done time on a film set; the couple’s friend Tristan Stretz builds amazing props for movies and TV shows and brought Gretchen’s ideas for a bespoke rangehood to life; plus the home’s previous owners ran a film company and shot some of *Sione’s Wedding* out the back.

A lot has changed since then. Sold on the central Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland location, the north-facing site graced with mature trees, the original fireplace that recalled the rustic appeal of homes in Italy and France, and the view of the lit-up Sky Tower at night, the couple embarked on a renovation that involved ripping off rundown parts of the century-old “butchered bungalow”, which had suffered a fire in the ’70s and having some dodgy additions made to it. After sketching out what she wanted to achieve, Gretchen and Blair engaged Auckland Design Solutions to draft the plans for an upgrade and manage the consent process. >





THESE PAGES Although the main living area is open-plan, Gretchen enjoys the embracing feel of distinct areas within that, and uses substantial pieces to ground each zone before adding small vignettes. Lots of vintage has worked its way into this home, and in the lounge, almost everything is second-hand, including the stone sideboard from Babelogue (left), the birdbath from auction house Cordy's upcycled with Resene Smooth Surface Sealer and Resene Lustacryl tinted with Resene Apple Blossom and Resene Sakura (bottom, far left), and the cabinet from a hospice shop jazzed up with Resene Avant Garde (page 70).

Over the year and a half that's passed since they moved into the home with no gib on the walls and exposed insulation, they've redone piling, raised ceilings and rewired; added arches in the hallway and 3D panelling to the walls; fixed the flooring and fireplace; expanded the main bedroom suite; and built a kitchen-and-dining extension at the rear. Surprisingly for this popular cook, ahead of even the kitchen, Gretchen's priority was a ducted heating/cooling system, as she and Blair know the inside temperature is one thing that makes or breaks them. "I really feel the cold but can make a beautiful meal in the most modest of situations — in this case a plug-in induction element, a bucket, a second-hand sink and a wardrobe from the Salvation Army that I painted and used for about a year until we could afford to put the kitchen in."

This new extension is a standout and proof that fortune favours the brave. It's entered via a crazy-paved stairwell with a Gretchen-designed railing that guides you down into the space that's surrounded by glass on three sides and a custom-coloured wall on the other. Saving themselves thousands, the couple took on most of the finishing touches in this abode themselves, including the painting and much of the tiling. Teaming with Resene, Gretchen steered away from white, while leaning into her love of neutrals and pushing the boat out with textural effects and colour-driven makeovers of second-hand gems.

"I love the look and the quality you can get from found pieces, and they're a great option in the time of Covid when there are often long lead times on furniture," she says. "There's so much to love about vintage from a sustainability standpoint and it tends to be >



THESE PAGES Positioned below woven works by Ruth Castle, the sofa was bought off Trade Me for \$50. "Of course, reupholstering isn't always the cheapest option," Gretchen concedes of subsequently having it covered, "but it's next on my list of things to learn." On a vintage rug from Yuva is a 1980s marble coffee table sourced through Gina Fabish. Meanwhile, Gretchen wanted the hearth (opposite) to look as good as old, so the handmade Moroccan tiles she had stored away were ideal.





THIS PAGE Flauti tiles from Ceramic Vogue beautify the new ensuite, which the couple painted with Resene Ravine on the ceiling, Resene Quarter Tea on the walls and Resene Vantage Point on the decorative panels from Archi Profiles. The pink tones seen elsewhere in the house continue in the asymmetrical arch around the mirror in Resene Cashmere. To create this detail, Gretchen drew around the shower screen to replicate its shape, and waterproofed the back of a mirror from Farmers with Resene Sureseal to get it bathroom-ready beside Artis Opal Globe lights from Lighting Direct.

RIGHT The floorboards in here are mostly original kauri Blair learned how to restore alongside his brother-in-law Ben Degiorgio using reclaimed kauri from Century Timber Products, before Richard Hood of Universal Flooring finished them off with an invisible Bona sealant. **BOTTOM RIGHT** In the couple's bedroom, Resene Sea Fog combines with a wall in Resene Quarter Truffle texturised with Resene Sandtex. Gretchen grew up in Ōpōtiki and knows the local artist, Tangimoe Clay, who wove the basket above the bed. The 1970s wall lights are from Trade Me and through the archway into the walk-in wardrobe there's a pendant light savvily bought at auction from Webb's.



durable, decreasing disposal rates. I also love the thrill of seeking it out, knowing when I've got a great piece and restoring it."

Coming from a family of original thinkers and craftspeople, what others might consider risky moves are second nature to Gretchen. "The thing about creating your own spaces is you get to be as brave as you like, and the confidence to back myself has come with experience," she says. "I have a deep desire to create and love doing things differently – it fuels me! Even as a child, I just wanted to make in any sense; I used to sew clothes and soft toys, I helped my grandmother in her wedding cake business, I'd go round to my friends' houses and redesign their bedrooms. Now, I'm constantly moving things around and restyling. I love nothing more than pottering about in the house and kitchen. Blair and I are so drawn to these lovely old places and get great joy from creating beauty out of something almost derelict."

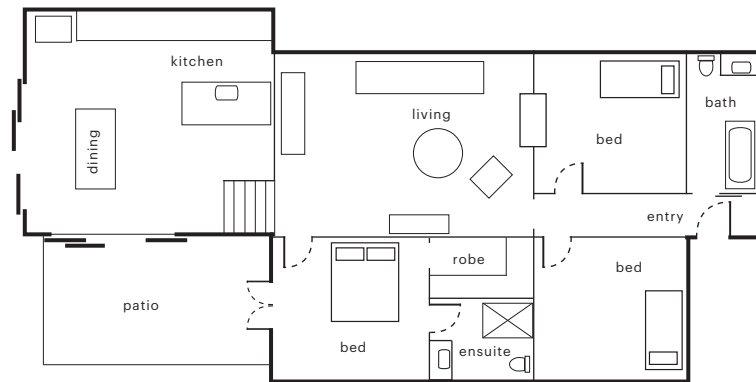
Gretchen-ify: *verb*, to go boldly where your imagination takes you to make the ordinary singularly sublime. Today, there are sock-it-to-'em moments in every single room.

"I feel so proud of what we've done," says Gretchen. "Being an accountant, Blair's very particular, and things really have to be done properly, whereas I've got all these ideas I don't quite know how to execute and need someone to help me. We're a great team. When people visit, they say they've never seen anything like it, which makes me so happy. At night, when all the candles are lit and the kids are in bed, we're like, 'Yeah, this is pretty cool.'" 🍷





LEFT In Gwynnie's bedroom, the hero statement is this wallpaper from Resene's French Impressionist collection, teamed with a fan from BoConcept and wall panels in Resene Atomic. **OPPOSITE** Seen in the foreground of this shot of the main bathroom and in several spots throughout the house are brass vases by Emma Harding, Gretchen's partner in the floral art business they run together, Houston & Harding.



THIS PAGE Tearing apart then rebuilding the main bathroom using YouTube videos as their guide saw the couple use Resene Spacecote Low Sheen Kitchen & Bathroom tinted with Resene Eighth Bison Hide on the walls and Resene Half Bison Hide on the panels, protected with Resene Smooth Surface Sealer. As well as a new nib wall, a Coronet vanity by Lucino went in — a subtle link to the kitchen benchtop.

THIS PAGE For Margot's room, the walls of which are in Resene Half Sea Fog with panels in Resene Quarter Joss, Gretchen turned a second-hand record holder into a book trolley with Resene Hot Toddy. The artwork was also bought at auction from Webb's. "It's all about keeping an eye out for things," says Gretchen.

