

Sea change

Blue-sky thinking by Nic Owen and Josephine Backhouse of Nic Owen Architects means every day is a holiday in their family home on the Christchurch coast.

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They call it a bach, but it's not really. It tends towards a family home. And yet it's more than that too. It's also an architectural experiment, a learning curve and an art installation.

Nic Owen and Josephine Backhouse are the creative duo behind Nic Owen Architects, and the homeowners. Nic is the architect and Josephine, who is also an artist, acts as sounding board and big-picture dreamer with a keen eye for design.

Originally from Christchurch, Nic met Josephine in her home city of Melbourne, and they lived and worked in the central city there for more than 20 years. It was the surf beaches that eventually drew them to New Zealand.

"We dreamed about our sea change once we had children," says Josephine. "Rather than thinking about going to the beach for holidays and living right in the city, we've flipped it. Why not be on holiday every day?"

Nic had been away from Christchurch for a long time but still had family in the area, so he and Josephine – with children Cedar and Oceano – explored Sumner together. "We rented a property," says Nic, "and it sold us on the idea that we could create something wonderful here that we want to live and work in."

The search for a site began, with some requirements in mind. "Most importantly," says Nic, "particularly in Christchurch, we wanted northern orientation. We wanted the sun from the morning all the way through to sunset. I think having access to sunlight, from an architectural perspective, is absolutely paramount."

This spot, part of an old golf course on Richmond Hill, fit the bill.

On paper, the brief for the home sounds reasonably conventional: a high-performing house with three bedrooms, an office, an art studio and indoor-outdoor living. However, the advantages and restrictions of the site, as well as the couple's big ideas, dictated the stunning final outcome.

"It was a very tricky piece of land and that's what led us into doing a somewhat interesting house on it. I love constraints. I've spent 20 years doing very small houses in inner Melbourne, trying to make tiny Victorian terraces seem bigger and lighter, so I love the challenge."



The Bora cooktop extractor perfectly fits the vision of a minimal, streamlined kitchen. It was important to Nic and Josephine that all the appliances were extremely reliable and functional as well as matching the aesthetic.

Neolith benchtops throughout were installed by Shane Boyd Granite Benchtops, carrying the material through from kitchen to bathrooms for a consistent feel. They were chosen for durability and that all-important texture. "It has a slight shimmer," says designer and homeowner Josephine Backhouse of Nic Owen Architects.

In fine form

The kitchen is a pivotal space for homeowners Nic Owen and Josephine Backhouse and its design is very pared back. The couple also wanted to incorporate textured materials, such as the charred timber used on the exterior. This meant the execution had to be flawless so it was entrusted to Advanced Joinery, with 40 years' experience in the design, manufacture and installation of kitchens, bathrooms and all other joinery requirements.





The floor plan is concise. “Nic hates wasted space,” says Josephine. Rooms work hard, like the library, which doubles as a guest room and a hallway-slash-laundry. Bedrooms were intentionally kept small. Says Nic, “It was about being economical and having space just where you need it.”

Initially conceived as a one-storey structure, the house was pulled into two levels to reduce the footprint and make space for gardens. Despite that, it doesn’t dominate the landscape, cleverly working with the contours of a steep site that falls away in two directions.

But it’s the couple’s bold design vision that really brings the magic. The dark and chiselled structure is intended to be slightly mysterious.

“It’s a bit of sculpture sitting in the landscape,” says Nic. “We didn’t want it to look like a house.”

Key to that is the charred timber cladding, which the couple first encountered at a London architectural festival about 12 years ago. “I have a fascination with

creating a house homogeneously from one material. Josephine is a ceramic artist, using one material, and there’s something in that. Because it’s our own house, we pushed the boundaries, trying to create something beautiful and sculptural.”

With minimal windows on the street-facing side, it’s enigmatic. “We liked that element of ambiguity, of people wondering, ‘What is it?’”

The street-level front door is low-key, adding to the sense of drama, says Josephine: “It’s small and dark, funnelling you through the space and then opening up.” This emphasises the surprise of the expansive views once you enter as the land drops away at the back, she says. “One step in, and you’re flying.”

The interiors are a celebration of texture as much as the outside. In fact, the charred timber material was carried through to furniture and shelves, backs of doors and a lot of the interior joinery, including the kitchen, much to the joiner’s surprise.



Elsewhere, oriented strand board has been used on walls and ceilings. “It has a nice texture, and it’s bulletproof,” says Nic.

Artworks abound, thanks to Josephine’s talents, and she changes the works on display regularly. In some areas of the house, such as the dining room, there are walls for hanging art where a window out to the water would have been expected. “At night, there’s no view,” says Nic. “The beach isn’t lit up, so you don’t see anything. So Josephine created this wonderful painting inspired by the sun; that’s our view.”

Clever lighting was another sensory element of the home. “I really wanted the lights to be either showing off the texture of the walls or feeling like light sculptures themselves,” says Josephine. “At night, when we have all of the different dimmed lights on, it’s a different experience than during the day.”

The decor has been kept simple with a limited colour palette to let the home’s architecture shine. Josephine wanted a warm, textural backdrop to family life, and she has a soft spot for chairs. “I love things that are sculptural but functional. They’re beautiful and actually very comfortable, and quite compact, so they don’t overwhelm a space.”


The kitchen is sleek and very minimal. “The kitchen is always the centre of any house so you have to get it right. When you have friends over, you’re going to end up in the kitchen no matter what. It has to be a good working space,” says Nic. The handleless design with integrated appliances features 8m-long cabinetry extending into the living area, intended to look like a piece of furniture.

Josephine’s key to the kitchen design was “refine, refine, refine”.

The bathrooms are equally thoughtful. “There’s a Japanese ceramic technique called kurinuki,” says Josephine. “You carve the clay; you actually take away from it. And for me, the bathrooms are like that. They’re like carved-out little caves, quite dark and moody.”

There are practical reasons behind the aesthetics, too. The boxy grid on the back of the house, for example, stops the summer sun from belting in, says Nic, and provides privacy. It also creates platforms for sitting on and accessing the enormous wall of windows for maintenance.

Timbers of New Zealand carried out the installation and finishing of the floors and stairs: a solid timber New Zealand ash in mixed widths, which adds warmth to the pared-back interior design. It was sourced locally from Canterbury woodlots.




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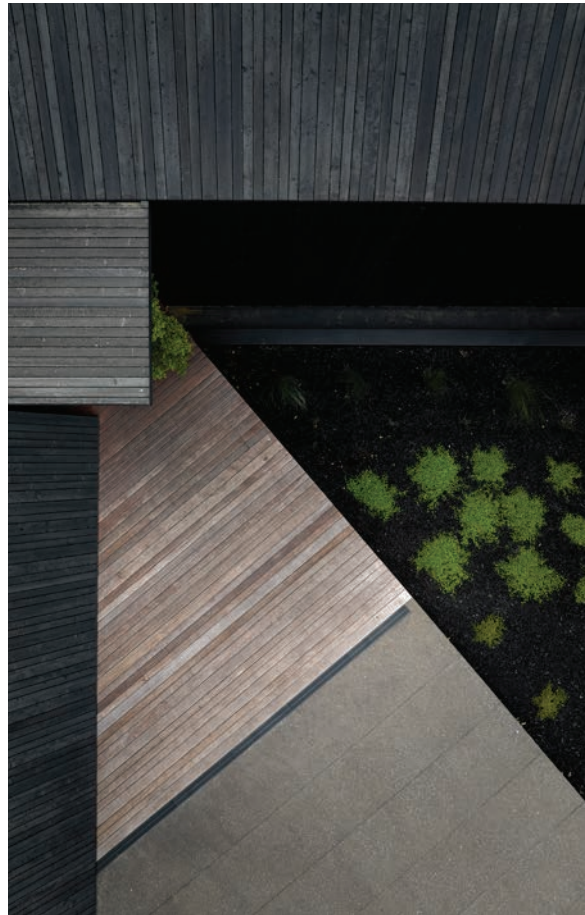
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After working together for so long, Nic and Josephine have complementary, considered approaches to design and they're excited about this new phase extending Nic Owen Architects into New Zealand.

They have renovated several of their own homes but this is their first new build for themselves, and Nic was fully immersed.

"Usually I go back to Melbourne once a month with projects over there, but Covid-19 put a stop to that. So I ended up doing a lot of project management on this house. I was instantly involved with every single detail. Because it's our own house, we tried out a lot of things and pushed the boundaries, but you do labour over every decision. I learned a whole bunch about sustainable building and high-performance houses. I enjoyed it, but more to the point, I was trying to avoid any mistakes and living with the legacy of that!"

He says he gained almost as much from this experience as he did at university. His biggest takeaway? "Follow the dream," he says. "As a designer you'll come up with an idea and often things get whittled away, for a number of reasons. If I'd listened to everyone, this house wouldn't have come to fruition. But I realised you have to stick to it and have faith, because it's all about trying to create a bit of architecture that speaks to you, that has soul, and that moves you."

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