

The Colorsteel corrugated cladding is reminiscent of New Zealand's iconic rural red sheds, a nod to the site's history as farmland. It's also a full tactile experience for the architect and homeowner Steven Chambers' children.

# Fully engaged

In designing his own home in Tauranga, Stufkens+Chambers Architects' principal Steven Chambers created a sensory feast for his neurodiverse children.

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Steven Chambers' house is an interactive one. "It's interesting to see the children walking along the side of the house, running their hands along the corrugated steel and hearing the sound as it ripples through."

A principal of Stufkens+Chambers Architects, Steven had plenty to consider when designing his first new build for himself, not least of which were the sensory needs of his two youngest children.

He knew all the benefits of creating an environment that's as soothing as possible, such as including natural timbers. "We had some specific things in mind. I'd previously done another house for a client who had an autistic child so I'd done a lot of research. My children are very sensory, so fragrance, textures and acoustic environments were really important, and we factored all that into the design process."

A sense of wellbeing and delight have always been part of Steven's work. He describes it as creating emotional landscapes.

"I'm interested in architecture being not solely about aesthetics, but about experience: how you feel when you're approaching a space, when you're moving through a space. I'll find myself flying on the floor, soaking up the perspective of what's happening with different materials as the sun moves."

Sensory input is not the only unique factor of this home. It's small and it's quirky, and deliberately so.

"The home itself didn't want to be anything that was showy. Spatially it's beautiful, but I'm not one for excess; I don't think you need large spaces."

Technically the house is two dwellings. "We designed it with a bedsit scenario that we could Airbnb or use when our older children come home. It has a slight separation from the main volume. It's nice – a little intimate space with a sleeping loft that you climb up to with a ladder."

Tucked under the loft is a green mosaic bathroom for a pop of colour. Otherwise this secondary dwelling is predominantly white, with the sleeping loft in timber, giving it a cocoon-like feel.

In an opposite duality, the main house is mostly timber with touches of white and a serene blue hallway connecting the bedrooms and bathroom. "So each time you move between spaces, you're re-entering this calm zone."

Steven embraces the nature of materials and leaves them untreated wherever possible. He used Lawson cypress timber as the interior lining, left unsealed to maximise the spicy scent the children enjoy.

"It's a very fragrant and light timber," he says. "I wanted to use something soft, and I don't have any issues with the floor being marked because, to me, that just shows the history. I like a building to age gracefully."

A macrocarpa deck is left to silver and connect to the landscape. Its functionality was more important: it's long enough for kids to run and scooter on.



Steven also chose to disregard the resale factor. The rooms are modest, there's no garage, and the section is planted out rather than grassed because the family prefers to spend its time out and about walking the dog to nearby parks and avoiding the time trap of maintenance and mowing.

This all ties into the Stufkens+Chambers Architects' philosophy on sustainability, which includes minimising product and chemical use, and avoiding waste. On this particular build, Steven purposefully designed to incorporate excess materials from a previous project with which the practice had been involved. The entry canopies, for example, are remnant cladding panels used in a different manner and still expressing their history, complete with screw holes purposefully left exposed.

"This is telling you the history of this material and part of the responsibility of reuse is changing our view around those things. Everything doesn't have to start new; it can be a continuum."

Being his own home, Steven could fully indulge in his exploration of these concepts. "The majority of people won't share those views. But then, this project was not for other people."





Adding another complication to this already unusual project was the challenging site.

"We came across the section five or so years ago. And it was one of those sections that no one wants because it's steep, and has an awkward shape. Only an architect or a fool would buy it."

It's located on an access track to a farm that was in the area 100 years ago, all since subdivided.

A silver lining to a difficult site is that it forces you to creatively think about how to solve the issues, says Steven. He and wife Clair Herron would often picnic there and weigh up the options.

"You start with very big picture stuff: the orientation, the sun," says Steven. "We knew where the nice spots were to sit and watch the sunset. We knew the nuances." The trick, he says, once you've discovered the best spot on your site is not to place the building right on top of it. "I want to make sure once it's built, I don't lose those experiences that drew us to the site in the first place."

The colour of the house is a reference to the vernacular and history of the site. "It's also the connection to Papatūānuku, that kind of earthy red."

Despite its shortcomings, Steven had hopes of only touching the land lightly. Smoothing the way, luckily, was Matt Saathof, owner of Totara Construction.

"It was very tricky site access," he concedes. Not to mention he and his crew had to take care with some landscape planting that had already taken place. But

organisation, forward-thinking and establishing clear lines of communication are the key to a successful build, he says, and the project was completed in a quick eight months, even while mostly taking place over a wet winter.

"It was important to create a construction methodology before we even started on how we wanted to tackle it. There are technical considerations to cater to a site like that: for example, the concrete had to be pumped from the top of the road."

Setting a firm plan in place meant any pivot to take into consideration some on-the-fly design changes wasn't a problem. Totara Construction and Stufkens+Chambers Architects have a good relationship, having worked on a few projects together, with more to come, and Matt has plenty of experience with high-end architectural builds.

"We incorporated lots of different elements that he had all in his mind," says Matt. "We wanted to ensure that what Steven wanted was what was being built. It suits him and his family to a T. It was definitely fun."

Steven agrees. "He understood where we were coming from," he says. "He threw good ideas into the mix and it was a great team. I enjoyed working with them."

In fact, he loved the whole process of creating his family home beginning to end. "I love architecture. To me, it's all about being mindful, being aware of your environment and enjoying it. I think you can have a richer and fuller life because of it."



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