

# HEAVEN IN THE HILLS

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**Standing on the corner of the cantilevered bedroom deck that hovers above the lawn of this Cambridge house, is an exhilarating experience for the owners who treasure a long family history in the Waikato.**

From here, the land drops away to a rural tapestry and, in the distance, the volcanic cone of Mount Pirongia is a familiar presence on the horizon.

When they decided to give up dairy farming for a still-active lifestyle that offered more flexibility, Michelle and John Keeley did not want to surrender the day-to-day immersion in a bucolic landscape. Michelle, who owns a floristry business, and John, who still works in the agricultural sector, bought this site on Maungakawa Mountain because it had enough acreage to still run "a few beefies" but also sported wraparound views – rolling paddocks in the immediate foreground to the pretty river town and, further out, the well-loved landmark of Maungatautari, an ecological sanctuary.

Here was an opportunity to reinvent themselves, and craft a forever place for family and friends. They were impressed by the style of Turner Road Architecture's award-winning Karapiro house. "The Keeleys wanted something contemporary that reflected the same materials as that project – and were fantastic clients who trusted us implicitly," says Lee Turner.

All well and good but this was a more challenging piece of land situated on top of a steep ridgeline. "Context is king in architecture; we believe architecture needs to not only look good in itself, but also in its environment. We wanted a design that would not protrude unnecessarily and interrupt the profile of the mountain," says Lee.



It was natural, then, for the plan to emulate the topography, stepping down and hunkering into the hillside. The dwelling is a lean, low series of pods that has the flavour of the Californian Case Study houses but with a Kiwi twist – a palette of darker tones to retreat rather than reflect. "There are four pods over five different levels," says Lee. The master suite on the highest eastern end of the slope is separated from the main living zone by an office a few steps down, while the bedroom wing is to the west on the lowest part of the site, allowing lots of privacy for the owners and their guests. It is linked to the central living by a glass walkway and covered deck. A garage slotted in on the southern elevation is on yet another level.

"It was a difficult house to build," admits Lee. "There was a lot of excavation and retaining required."



In summer, the clay soil was as hard as rock and come winter, it was extremely slippery. "During the wet weather we had to be careful that the foundation formwork, reinforcing and surrounding soil didn't get washed away before the concrete was poured," he says.

Still, Jono McCullough and his team at Rob May Builders did a sterling job keeping the elements at bay, negotiating access and steep drops-offs with the crane that was brought in to lift the concrete spine of each pod into place.

Composing the house as pods, with interconnected stepped links and external decking, has meant more opportunity to exploit the grandstand vista. Each room has an expanse of windows and glass sliders, which act as a magnificent eyeglass to the view.

The owners were keen on an industrial palette, but the raw materials (think tilt-slab concrete walls and floors, vertical shiplap cedar cladding and black steel) also have texture to soften the effect. Patterns left on the concrete from boarded formwork are beautifully imperfect, the timber has a lovely grain and tonal variance, and even the concrete floors proudly sport the swirl of the polishing pads.

"The floor was ground back to a light salt-and-pepper finish and then highly polished. The concrete mix also had a black oxide added to it, which really highlighted the patination in the concrete," says Lee.

Arriving up the long driveway is like approaching a gallery or a modern cellar door. The forms are strong and the materials robust. On the journey up the somewhat grand entry stair, a decorative weathered-steel panel that shields the

visitor from the elements is also a piece of art. "It features cut-outs of a randomised DNA pattern," says Lee.

The entryway feels welcoming and enclosed but step inside and the mood changes: suddenly the house becomes a frame to the vast landscape.

While the owners love to relax on the north-facing decks, the internal experience is just as special. A layering of materials keeps it interesting – modern but with soul. The fireplace, wrapped in weathered steel, is fitted with a vent to disguise the ducted heating system. "We had visitors the other night who were curious as to where the heatpump was," says Michelle.



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A Designmark kitchen slots into the space harmoniously, with elements of American white oak tops that contrast black cabinetry. A scullery can be closed off when entertaining preparations have got a little out of hand, and a mirrored back wall slides away to provide access to the built-in barbecue bench on the main deck.

The separation of spaces – that stepping down or up between rooms – harks of mid-century architecture but also makes for more intimate moments, while still allowing the expansiveness of the great outdoors. "I love walking up the stairs from the garage into the main living area after work and the nice, peaceful feeling when it just opens up to the view," says Michelle.

This is a home that looks demure in the day, retreating into the background, and at night comes alive with soft washes of light directed up onto the concrete walls and down from the generous soffits.

At 315 square metres, it's by no means small, but fracturing of the floorplate lends it an unassuming presence on the ridge. For Michelle and John, who are first-time builders, it's a dream realised. Thankfully, with their dairying days behind them, the couple has their weekends back to enjoy it to the full. 📍



SION HILL  
BROADWATERS  
TOWN CENTRE  
FRANCHE  
WILTON AVENUE  
HOOBROOK  
STANKLYN LANE  
SHENSTONE

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