

CABIN FEVER

NOT SATISFIED WITH THE TWO-DIMENSIONAL PROCESS OF LEARNING ABOUT HOUSE DESIGN IN THE CLASSROOM, AN ARCHITECTURE GRADUATE PUT THE THEORIES INTO PRACTICE AND BUILT HER OWN ECO-FRIENDLY HUT IN THE WOODS

WORDS POLLY GREEKS
PHOTOGRAPHY DAVID WHORWOOD



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IT'S BEEN CALLED a chapel for its quiet serenity and likened to a Scandinavian sauna for its clean wooden lines but Catherine McEntee views the hut she's built overlooking the Whanganui River as a teacher. While the School of Hard Knocks doesn't usually equate to the hammering of nails into wood, that's what Catherine's extramural education has involved as she's spent her spare hours planning and building her structure.

Recently graduated from Auckland University's School of Architecture, the 28-year-old began work on her place three years ago when lectures on house design proved too inspiring to simply sit back and listen. "The course is primarily theoretical, not practical, and I'm a practical person. I was itching to put the theories into practice."

Teaming up with a now ex-boyfriend, Catherine drew the blueprint for the 18-square-metre building and picked a pine-covered spur on her parents' land near Taumarunui for the construction. A steep learning curve followed as she picked up the building vernacular and came to know her struts from her studs. "I've learnt a lot but I've been very fortunate with the local community. Initially everyone thought I was bonkers but now they all love it. People have been so supportive. I'm going to put on a big party this summer for everyone who has helped. I'm thinking a hangi, pig-on-a-spit; that kind of thing."

Catherine's family bought the Taumarunui property in 2005 as a second base to their home on Waiheke Island and,

along with friends, use it to indulge passions for fly fishing and snow sports. The rolling green land surrounding the property looks like chocolate-box country, with Mounts Ruapehu, Tongariro, Ngaruhoe and Taranaki all visible from the main house. "It's quite a magical spot," Catherine says of the almost-five hectares. "We have converted some of it into an orchard. Mum and Dad love growing things and Dad wants to be able to eat his breakfast straight off the trees."

While the house has electricity, Catherine's building site and the resultant hut do not, which is something she's come to value. "I enjoy not having power. There's an element of peace to it. It's allowed me to observe the rhythm of things in nature. Plus, next door's deer might not visit if the TV was on." Nor does the hut have drive-on access. Instead, visitors must descend the steep ridge from the house or stroll the more genteel way around the hill.

Although it has just been finished, the hut looks as if it has sat in its clearing forever. Its unobtrusiveness is partly thanks to the cladding of old corrugated iron which Catherine nailed to the macrocarpa walls. Sourced from locally felled sheds, the materials cost her \$20 and a box of beer. Recycling is a feature throughout the hut. The matai front door was found at the back of the upper-house wood pile and required 15 hours of elbow grease and three metres of 40-gauge sandpaper to rid it of its seven paint layers. The old woolshed floorboards





STATISTICS

Total cost of hut: \$20,000.

Overall dimensions: 6m x 3m with a mono pitch roof. Rear wall (east) stud height 3m, front wall (west) height 4m.
Construction style/type: Timber frame construction with recycled corrugated iron cladding. The cladding is branded Newport, Great Britain and is believed to date back to before 1930 when New Zealand began rolling its own iron sheets. It's often been called pre-rusticated iron with an emphasis on the rust. However, these older irons are a lot thicker than today's stuff and should have a good few years' wear left in them.

Power and water: The Studio oven allows cooking and stove-top water heating. The converted 1970s light fittings safely house tea-light candles, the moon provides night-time ambience, rainwater is collected from the roof (new long-run corrugated iron to avoid lead poisoning).

Eco aspects: Built by hand using no treated timbers or toxic/synthetic materials. The structural timber is untreated macrocarpa as is the interior lining. The concrete piles, beams, flooring, doors, ladder components and joinery were salvaged from demolition, most of which has been restored by hand. The insulation is EcoWool®. The Studio is a highly efficient woodburner, up to 14Kw/H. Orientated to take advantage

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used inside were also labour intensive; the tawa lengths needing stripping of lanolin and nails, while 50 hours went into the checkerboard kitchen bench top, made from painstakingly laminating together jackstud offcuts left over from the hut's subfloor construction.

Sourced from demolition yards, the windows have all been placed in the west-facing wall to catch sunsets and views of the wide brown river below. A heavy wooden door reminiscent of a woolshed's loading dock slides over a glass door, protecting it when the hut's not in use.

Despite woolsheds being a source of materials, Catherine says high-country mustering huts have been of more inspiration for her. "Architecturally they're not particularly evolved but their integrity, the way they've been put together, is worth looking at." To complete a final university paper she recently spent time in the South Island's high country researching its mustering huts. She returned filled with stories from retired shepherds, some now in their 80s, many of whom had helped construct the huts in order to escape accommodation in old bell tents.

However much Catherine's hut resembles something from the backblocks externally, indoors it is obvious an architect's hand has been involved. Filled with gracious light, the small, clean space flows easily from the kitchen to the living area where a wood-burning Studio oven provides heating. "I use it for baking fish and bread. It was the last thing to come in and it was like the heart

going in."

A tawa bucket seat running the length of the lounge is the width of a single bed and provides storage beneath, while overhead the mezzanine floor has been built of slats, "like a shearing-shed floor", to allow heat and light to filter through. The cantilevered ladder leading up to the mezzanine was co-designed with Catherine's current boyfriend to prevent it from being a visual and spatial interruption, Catherine says, while the upstairs bed has been counter sunk into the floor to allow more head room. A trapdoor in the south-west corner of the kitchen floor reveals a laundry tub suspended between the floor joists and cunningly used as a fridge. "It's the coldest spot. Ice took 36 hours to melt last winter. I got the idea from looking at yachts."

While the dictum for new houses is seemingly "bigger is better", Catherine says she loves small spaces. "There's an energy about them. I live in a very small apartment in Auckland (36 square metres) so I've come to be very aware of the efficiency required in small spaces." However, smallness does come with limitations, as she discovered while constructing her hut. Slightly built, she found certain tasks that involved shifting heavy timber were simply beyond her physical capabilities, requiring manpower help from her boyfriend and neighbours.

But the main hurdle in building the hut was an issue of continuity, with demands of university study keeping

WHAT CATHERINE WILL DO THIS SUMMER

Read: Bill Bryson's *Mother Tongue*, John Reader's *The Propitious Esculent*, Christopher Long's *Josef Frank: Life and Work* and Ghillie Basans *Modern Morrocan: Ancient traditions, Contemporary Cooking* recipe book.

Eat: Her favourite chargrilled eggplant salad, marinated with oregano, lemon juice and olive oil and served with Clevedon buffalo mozzarella. Probably eaten on the deck at Onetangi Beach, Waiheke with a glass of Milton's organic viognier or a Renaissance paradox blonde beer.

Listen to: Decortica, Lawrence of Arabia, Johnny Cash, Pink Floyd and some loud opera.