



## Award-winning eco house treads lightly on sensitive coastal site



Designed by Darren O'Neil of O'Neil Architecture, this cliff-top eco house has won an ADNZ-Resene Architectural Design Award.

Five hundred-year-old pohutukawa trees weren't the only sensitive elements to consider when planning this cliff-top home, which has just won two ADNZ-Resene Architectural Design Awards.

Christchurch architectural designer Darren O'Neil of O'Neil Architecture says the site, at Moureeses Bay, north of Whangarei, also featured ancient Maori burial grounds of archeological interest that needed to be protected.

"The site, on the top of a hill, is very prominent and its archeological significance is registered, which made the design a considerable challenge. It needed to be sensitive to the environment. The council didn't want a big white plastered box going up there, and was keen to ensure the design would work in with the location.



One entire side of the house opens up to a long timber deck for easy indoor-outdoor living.

"The 500-year-old pohutukawas had never been touched, so that was another aspect to take into account."

These challenges prompted the desire to cantilever large areas of the house to minimise the actual footprint on the site. "This meant we could avoid damaging the ground or disturbing the roots of the trees."

With this in mind, O'Neil introduced one large cantilever out towards the main approach and another cantilever out towards the sea and the view. "The 'wings' create a floating feeling, enhancing and framing the enchanting views of the ocean and natural bush."

O'Neil says the day he visited the site for the first time, he had to fly up from Christchurch to Whangarei and then take a car ride up to the bay and walk around the land with the owners.

"We then drove back to Whangarei and I got on a plane to Auckland. By the time we landed I had it designed, with a plan roughed out and elevations done, which is very unusual, but it all fell into place that quickly."

O'Neil says the owners, who live in Australia when not in New Zealand, gave him a completely open brief. "That was great, but after I sent the concept drawings to them I had an anxious wait to get their reaction. But it was fine. They absolutely loved it."

"We could have gone one of two ways in terms of the aesthetics," says O'Neil. "We could have opted for a log cabin-style home, or do something very simple and sculptural, which is what was chosen. The house looks like a piece of sculpture sitting on the hill, and while we did use natural materials, we did so in a very modern, restrained way that disguises the complexity of the structure itself."

Vertical cedar cladding mimics the form of the trees. Black aluminium joinery also references the silhouetted trunks and branches. "The black will also ensure that when the cedar weathers to grey, the house will still look sharp," the designer says.

Timber also features on the interior, where all the ceilings are plywood. The owners chose high-end bathroom and kitchen fittings and tapware.

But the environment determined a lot more than the look of the house – this is also a house that is completely self-sufficient. Photovoltaic cells on the roof generate enough electricity to power the entire house and feed the surplus back to the national grid.

The house, which was built by Whangarei-based Bella Homes, is also heavily insulated and double-glazed. And rainwater is collected and stored in one of three large tanks under the house. Another of the tanks stores greywater for use on the garden.

The ADNZ-Resene awards won by O'Neil are the Cat 2 Residential New Home Award and the Resene Colour in Design Award.

**- Stuff**