

Flair in the Forest



A Designer's Journey from Obscurity to Celebrity

'Total immersion' is a term more normally applied to learning a new language; designer Chris Tate gave the words an architectural twist when he decided on an audacious plan for a steep bush-clad site in Auckland's Waitakere Ranges.

"Someone else would have built at the top of the site on the road frontage and placed the house on a platform, but I wanted to be inside the forest not above it," says Chris. The advantage of youth meant that the young solo practitioner had the energy, nerve and flair to see the ambitious project through to an acclaimed conclusion.

The desire to relax in his home and look out through expanses of glass into the surrounding foliage meant that Tate would have to build across a gully at the bottom of his property – a plan that demanded the most exacting and light-footed construction methods if his vision was to be fully realised without wrecking the environment that was to form the 'wallpaper' for his home life.

"The trees were so amazing and so sympathetic to a glass structure inside the forest," he said. The simple cubic design that Tate settled on – and helped build – floats above the leaf-strewn ground on poles, and was extensively glazed with Altherm aluminium joinery. The house recently won four of the eight awards handed out at the Architectural Designers (ADNZ) Auckland/Northland 2007 design awards ceremony.

Chris has gone from obscurity to celebrity in one fell swoop with overseas architectural magazines flying in writers and photographers to record for northern hemisphere readers his stylish juxtaposition of architectural simplicity amidst South Seas ecological profusion. Now he is getting enquiries and commissions from all round the world – an unlikely outcome for a man who started out as a social worker and then decided on a radical change of career.

It was while working with Auckland architect Brent Hulena as the site manager for a family member's new home that Tate really got the design bug. Earlier he had cut his teeth designing a Mediterranean-style home for himself on Waiheke Island but Hulena's preference for cleanly detailed, well illuminated spaces fired his ambition and put the seal on a new vocation in architecture.





Special flat beads were applied to fixed lights above opening sashes to ensure continuous sight lines

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Travel across America and Europe in 2003 soaking up architectural history and trends was followed by a drafting course at Unitec. On this do-it-yourself CV of practical experience, OE and a dash of academic polish Chris launched into the design and construction of the Titirangi house with his chosen builder Angus Robertson.

The plan to build many metres from the road with minimum disruption to the lush West Auckland bush meant that steel beams could not be got to the site. So the idea of a flitched column and beam construction was decided on with welded 6mm angles and all bolted together on site in a sustained week-long spurt of innovative kiwi craftsmanship.

Tate's attention to detail and desire for uniform lines showed in his cooperative solution with window manufacturer, Altherm West Auckland, to achieve continuous sightlines where the large expanses of fixed glass adjoined opening windows. It was decided to apply flat beads of aluminium around the perimeter of the fixed lights to ensure that the transition from panes to sashes was visually seamless.

The publicity that has attended the unveiling of the house has led to a full order book for Tate, with a mix of new homes and renovations on the go. It all adds up to a 'mission accomplished' for young man who had the courage to chase his unlikely dream.

"I've always loved design," says Chris. "Now it's my living. It's amazing."

