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BREAKING THE BARRIERS

A HOUSE WITH NO BOUNDARIES LOOKING OUT OVER UPPER HUTT

WORDS **SORAYA NICHOLAS** PHOTOGRAPHY **IVOR EARP**

IN THEIR QUEST TO FIND A SUITABLE ARCHITECT TO conceptualise their new home, Phillip and Helen Blundell chose a small selection of designers to visit their section, primarily to gauge their individual reactions. When Davor Milkulcic, previously of Pilbrow Design Group Architects and now principal architect and director of **Studio MWA Ltd**, stood on their hill top section, it was clear he was the one for them. "Davor had a real passion and enthusiasm," says Phillip, and most importantly he shared their vision. From this point on, the Blundells almost gave their architect a free rein, and he in turn made them choose from three available options in most instances.

Yet the Blundells new home wasn't just about aesthetics. With Phillip in a wheelchair, it was imperative for the house to have no boundaries. "One of the things we did was to eliminate all unnecessary walls from the plan," says Phillip. This made the house as open-pan as possible, with the theme even continued out to the expansive deck. Every room opens to the deck, which is at the same level as the interior, to make moving from inside to out effortless for Phillip. "It was all about having no barriers internally or externally. No steps or lifts."

Talented architect Davor didn't just stop at designing the house either. According to the Blundells, he was instrumental in the style and complete design of the bathrooms, kitchen and all of the built-in furniture and fittings. The kitchen area was one of the most crucial spaces within the home to get right, and with the exceptional work of Hadrian Noble from **Noble Kitchens**, it is near perfect.

"Hadrian at Noble Kitchens really went the extra mile," agree Phillip and Helen. They did a full mock-up in their workshop of the precise design of the kitchen, to enable Phillip and Helen to test the ergonomics of the design, such as Phillip's sitting position at the breakfast bar to determine whether it was going to work. A minor change did have to be made, but because they had literally made a complete prototype of the kitchen, nothing was difficult to change at this early stage. "Hadrian liked that we appreciated his work and what he could do, and we in return thoroughly appreciated his complete dedication."

The resulting kitchen is a stylish and contemporary design, but the average person would have no clue that

The house recently won a local NZIA Resene award, for the category Architecture Residential - Special Needs. It also received top awards from the Master Builders Federation for the Wellington region.

☐ THE SPECS	Upper Hutt $600 000+ 269 Sq m	2	3 + study	2 + toilet

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it was designed to work for Phillip in his wheelchair. The kitchen cabinetry is Parbury's low-pressure laminate in colour Slate Grey, with the benchtops made from brushed stainless steel.

Another collaboration between the architect and Hadrian was the bathroom joinery, made from solid and veneer Jarrah.

For Phillip, making the home as liveable as possible meant strategically considering all of the doorways. Both doors themselves and doorways had to be measured out with care, with minor dimensions making a big difference. Although all of the doors were made by **Hoults Doors Ltd**, in-wall cavity sliders were exclusively chosen for the home, to virtually eliminate hinged doors, even for the wardrobes.

The selection of cavity slider doors eliminated unnecessary boundaries, and this theme was continued for the exterior doors as well. Tracking systems are concealed, in keeping with the contemporary design of the house, and allow Phillip to easily slide the large bi-fold doors back from his chair, and move without assistance or hesitation out to the deck. For other new homes, such inclusions may mean that in the case of an accident, there is no reason to move to a house able to accommodate for a wheelchair.

The Blundells home is most definitely a success in that context, being accessible and most definitely barrier free. In November, the house was featured in the CCS Disability Action project Lifetime Design launch. The organization has worked with the building industry, architects and the government, discussing the topic of home "accessibility", and detailing the concept that one should never have to move from one's home. By eliminating built in and natural barriers, and by making everything in a house accessible, disabilities and wheelchairs needn't ever be a hindrance within the confines of the home.

The introduction of polished concrete floors by **BM Scott Ltd** has also been an advantage for Phillip, with the polished surface easy for him to move upon. The Blundells love the easy care nature of the concrete too.

Aside from wanting a home that made "a statement", Phillip and Helen were determined to utilise solar gain, hence the property's ideal positioning for the sun. For them, a combination of solar energy and gas has created what they consider to be a highly energy efficient and practical heating solution. After contacting **Advanced Plumbing & Gas Fitting Services Ltd**, they decided to select a relatively new product to the market (a Rotex gas solar unit boiler) and use underfloor hot water heating as their only source of home heating. Operating on a zoned system, the floor is heated by either gas or solar energy, or both. Over summer, the Blundells turn the gas off completely, and their house is warmed underfoot via the sun. This unique system also heats the towel rails in each bathroom. The temperature can be easily controlled, and because it operates in different zones, varying levels of heat can be accommodated for by separate thermostats.

In case their needs ever change, Advanced Plumbing & Gas Fitting Services Ltd, who also completed all of the general

The most intriguing aspect of the now finished home "is that it doesn't say disability," says Phillip. "Anyone could move in and live here and they'd love it."

plumbing for the home, installed plumbing to allow for the connection of radiators at a later date if required.

The design of the house itself is a very contemporary statement of style, and to maintain this manicured appearance, the architect selected a sleek roof in a dark tone. Supplied and manufactured by **Silbery Longrun Roofing**, and made from New Zealand steel, the roof is a beautiful example of a well-created product that has been expertly laid. The roof has been manufactured in a corrugate profile, and was chosen in Endura colour Ebony, which was also used for the spouting to encourage colour continuity. This striking dark black gloss shade is thought to add strength and security to the appearance of the home.

In a conscious design effort to use a combination of exterior cladding materials, the roofing steel has also been strategically laid on the outer walls of the house. Endura steel is pre-painted prior to installation, and is ideal for the moderate to severe environmental conditions in both the North and South island.

For the Blundells, the interior of their house had to seem like a "get away" of sorts, with Phillip never wanting to feel claustrophobic at home. The view and wide open spaces were a most appropriate start, but the interior colour also had a huge overall impact. By Dulux, colour Haast in a workable low-sheen finish was chosen for the walls and ceilings, due to its light, earth-infused nature. Both the Blundells and their architect spent many hours exploring the available samples of white shades available before making their decision. Painted by **Clode Decorating**, the soft hues encourage a natural flow between the inside and outside living spaces. The experienced painting and decorating company also used timber enhancing, multi-coloured stain for the ceiling panels that extend out to the exterior.

The walls exist in contrast to the Slate Grey colour of the kitchen cabinetry, and the dark internal cavity slider doors, however the light, hardwearing finish is most fitting with the overall design.

Although a building site at the top of a hill hardly sounds like the kind of place for a wheelchair to easily manoeuvre about, Phillip had no problems visiting the site when they were building, and enjoyed the overall process. "The team from **Maridale Construction Ltd** were wonderful," he enthuses. "They all had a great eye for detail." Planks were always laid out so he could come up and look at the progress, all over the construction site. Maridale Construction are gold medal award winning builders, and their eye for detail is absolute.

The most intriguing aspect of the now finished home, "is that it doesn't say disability, anyone could move in and live here and they'd love it." ■

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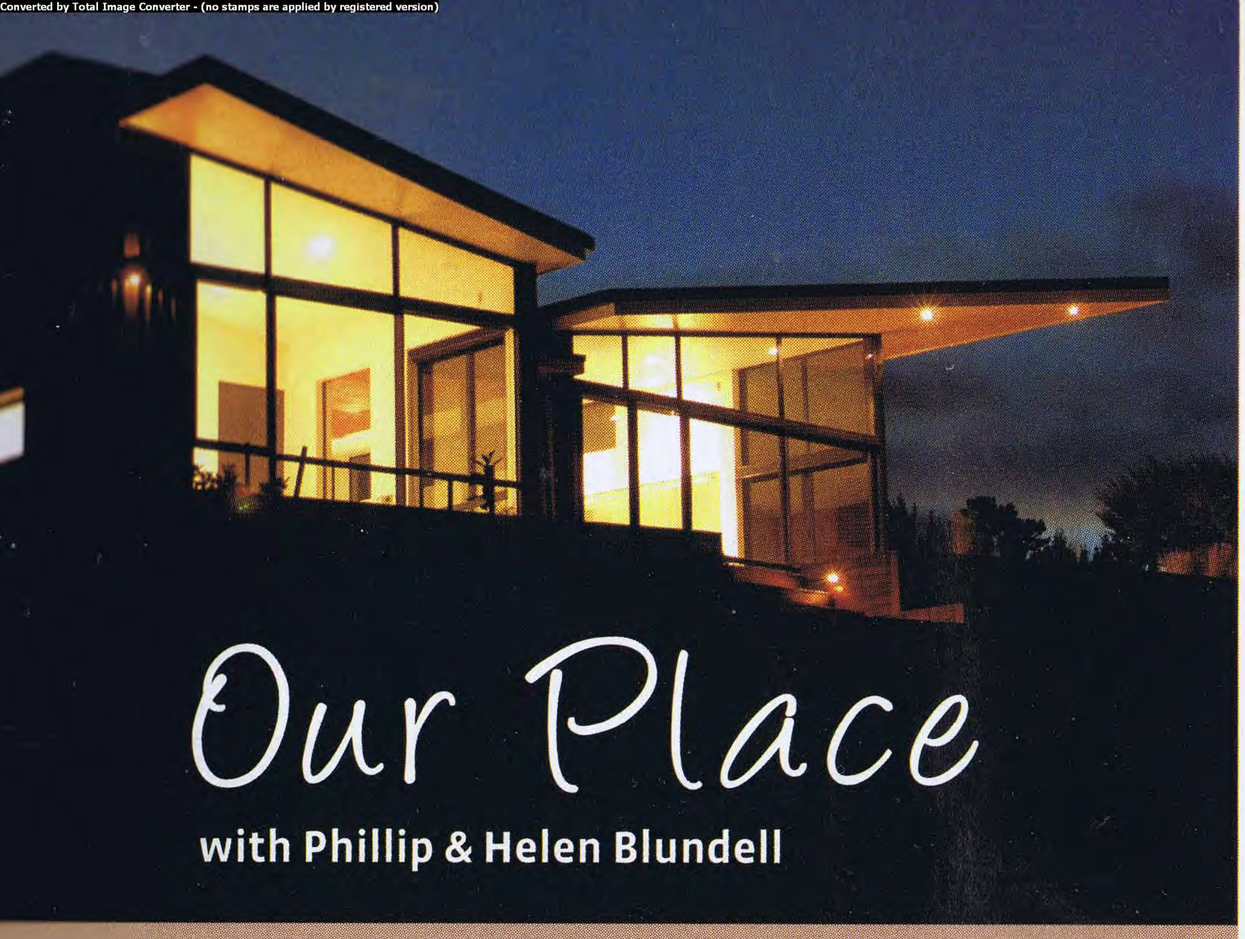


Our Place

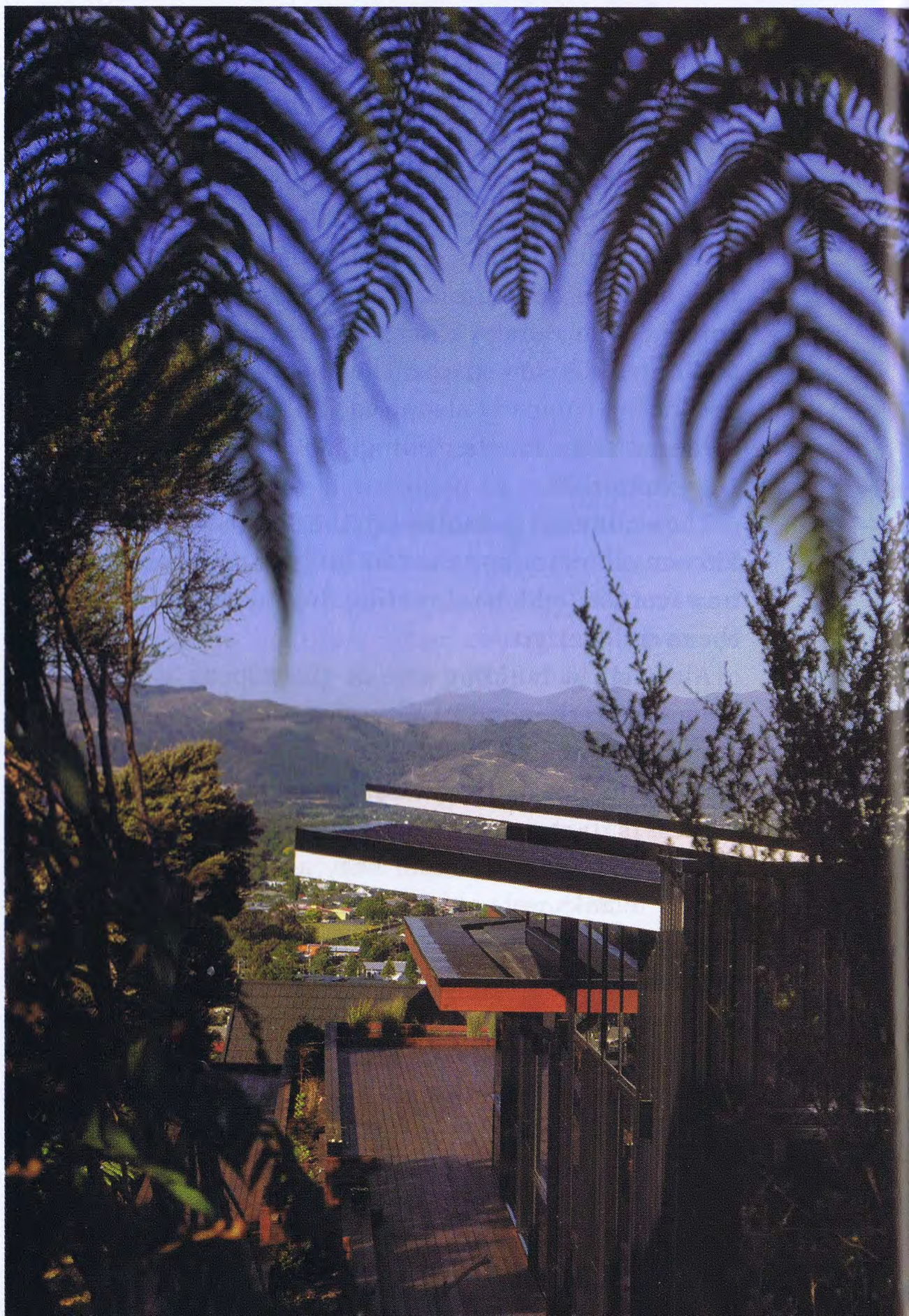
with Phillip & Helen Blundell

What do friends and family love about your home?
Phillip: A quadriplegic friend of mine thinks it's heaven, because there are no barriers. A wheelchair can even fit in the spare third toilet.
Most people come in and say, "Wow look at that view". The best thing is that the view looks different wherever you are sitting. You never feel locked in the house, it's more like a holiday once you come up the hill.

What is your favourite room in the house?
Phillip: The lounge, because of the sound system and home theatre. It also gets all the afternoon sun, and looks out to the reserve.
Helen: The laundry! It's quite wonderful how it is simply hidden behind three sliding doors in an expansive hall.

What would you change, if anything?
When we were going over the budget prior to building, we cut out a skylight. In hindsight, for what it saved we probably should have left it! Likewise, as a cost saver, we used hinged doors rather than cavity sliders for the two spare bedrooms, and it didn't save much money when considered in the greater context.

What advice would you give to others preparing to build?
Phillip: Get a good builder – look at their work first. Always use an architect, or at least have an architect look over your plans. Avoid just plonking a house on a section! Architects are worth their money, and they should be mandatory. Also, think carefully about situating the house well on the section, and how you can best create solar gain.
Helen: Don't be in a hurry. Planning is all important to ensure you achieve the out look you are seeking.

Favourite buy?
Phillip: The full home theatre surround sound system.
Helen: All of the kitchen appliances. They are understated and work very well, blending into a discrete design.

Helen and Phillip with architect Davor Milkucic