

The wheel deal

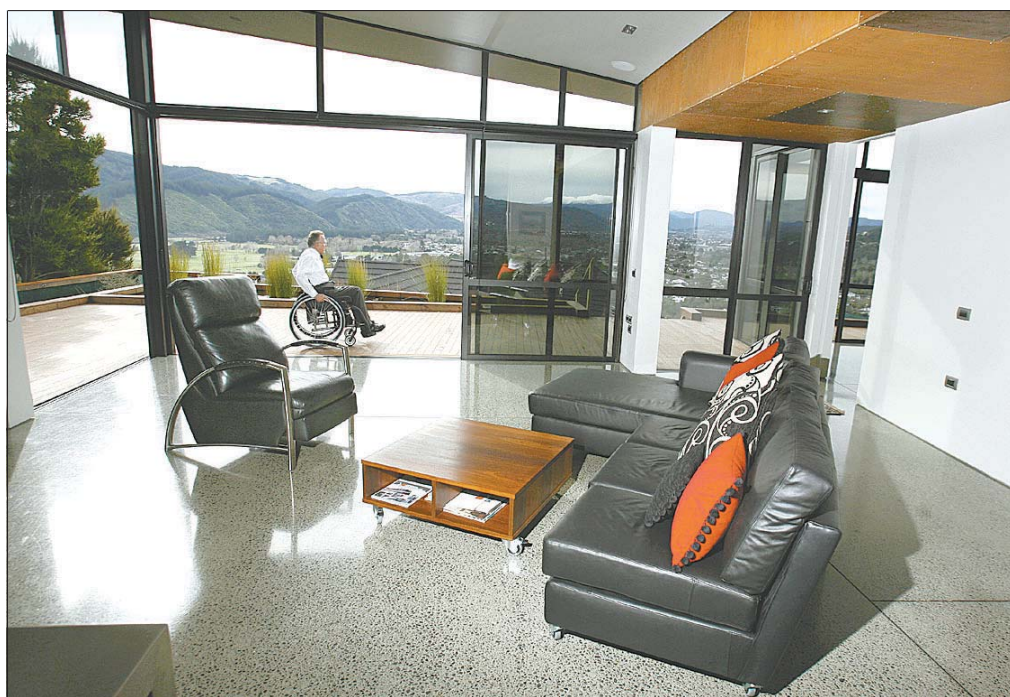
A Silverstream house designed to meet the needs of a man who uses a wheelchair has become much more than the sum of its code-compliant parts. Pictures by Phil Reid.



ANN PACKER



Everything is accessible for Phillip Blundell, including the 150 square metres of kwila decks surrounding the house.



Kadima-designed black leather couches on castors and Phillip's matching stainless steel and leather Zaar armchair set off the living room, which, like the master bedroom, has floor-to-ceiling windows that catch the winter sun.



PHILLIP and Helen Blundell's hillside home enjoys magnificent views across the Upper Hutt valley to the snow-topped Rimutakas.

Views were not a feature of the fiftysomething couple's previous home, down on the valley floor, handy to the schools their now-adult sons attended. But they could see the excavations taking place up in this new subdivision where their boys used to camp out on Saturday nights. And faced with decisions about what to do now the boys had left home, the Blundells took a drive up the hill and found their future.

Their new home has been built to accommodate the needs of Phillip, a wheelchair user since a military helicopter accident 24 years ago. Everything is accessible, from the gently-sloping entry from the street via a full-height extra-width front door, to whole walls that open at a touch to allow smooth progress from the polished concrete aggregate interior floor (modelled on Masterton's Aratoi art museum), to 150 square metres of kwila decks surrounding the house. Sliding doors throughout have handles at a metre height; power outlets and data points are half a metre above floor level.

But this house is more than compliant — it's a joy to live in. Winter sun floods through floor-to-ceiling windows to be soaked up by a corridor wall of polished concrete blocks at the core of the house. Solar panels provide hot water from October through to May and underfloor heating kicks in when the temperature drops. The heat exchange system, which allows variable temperature in different rooms, is controlled from a German ROTEX integrated gas and solar boiler in the garage. It was a first for Scott Marinner of Lower Hutt firm APG Ltd, which has since installed others.

There's a spacious office and a state-of-the-art entertainment centre — both with handsome laminated jarrah benches made by joiner Hadrian Noble of Noble Kitchens



Even the boiler is state of the art — an integrated gas and solar one from Germany.

— plus a room with a home exercise machine and equipment provided through ACC. Everything has been considered, right down to the location of speakers in six zones, including a couple outside on the deck, and gas points that allow for outdoor heaters and a barbecue.

Faced with building their first new house — one that would take them into retirement — the Blundells interviewed three architects, one of whom was an ACC specialist, and specified maximum views, maximum sun and solar gain. But the one who got the brief was Davor Mikulcic, a recent Croatian immigrant whose passion inspired his clients. "We didn't want functional," explains Phillip, "we wanted exciting! But it is super-functional and it also makes a statement."

Within a week, the architect had photographed the site. An inspired initial two-storeyed house design quickly gave way to a single-level one. "Two storeys even with a lift is still a barrier," insists Phillip, who wanted unrestricted access to every part of his home.



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Under the big pin on Wakefield Street





Above left, sliding doors in the kitchen – like elsewhere – have handles at a metre height, while the benches are low, which happens to suit Helen as well as Phillip; above, Phillip's ensuite has a detail other users with disabilities envy – a small basin beside the loo; left, the decking around the house flows into a garden designed to survive without too much attention and not to date.



Steel-braced soaring roof lines giving the appearance of the house flying off the hill have allowed the removal of major internal walls, giving more room for the wheelchair to move around. They incorporate high level windows – two of which are electrically operated – that catch the winter sun while at the core of the house lower ceilings give a more intimate feel. Exterior cladding – longrun roofing steel and Titan board panels – is black except for brown cedar fascias, garage doors and front door. A down-pipe outside the front door is painted fire-engine red.

"Everything is significant," says Phillip. "Davor has a great eye for detail. He gave us options and colours inside and out – everything he suggested was dead right, but it's still our house."

In the kitchen, the microwave opens downward and the oven sideways. Benches are low, which happens to suit Helen as well as Phillip. Drawers rather than shelves give access to virtually anything needed for cooking. The laundry, behind triple sliding doors, is designed so Phillip can stow dirty clothes in pull-out bins, use the combination under-bench washer/dryer or take washing to the outside line accessible off the deck near the spa pool.

Two of the three wheelchair-accessible bathrooms have wet-area showers, which make visits a breeze for elderly parents. Phillip's ensuite has a detail other users with disabilities envy – a small basin beside the loo, which allows personal hygiene needs to be dealt with immediately, rather than crossing to the larger handbasin. The chrome ladder towel rail is heated from the underfloor system.

The Blundells closely monitored the project, which they say would not have been so successful without builder Brian Marriner of Maridale Construction and his talented team. "It required team buy-in," says Phillip. "We'd have regular briefings. And there wasn't one weekend we couldn't access the site – Brian would put planks across the site for the wheelchair."

A sustainable garden – one that will survive without too much attention and won't date – includes a pond and raised planter boxes for Phillip's vegetable garden. Designed by Boffa Miskell to fit the architect's layout, there are more than 400 holes dug by the couple's sons plus labourers from Student Job Search and filled with mostly native plants from Talisman nurseries in Otaki, where Alister Turnbull suggested some variants more suitable for the hillside environment.

"This gives us a lifestyle," says Helen. "It's warm and cosy, it's got the view to the horizon and into the native bush. It allows us a quality of life to take us into the future."

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Power outlets and data points are half a metre above floor level, while winter sun is soaked up by a corridor wall of polished concrete blocks at the core of the house.

MORE ABOUT

Oamaru Stone sculptures by Noel Williamson of Raumatī (Easter Island heads, right) come from the annual **January Archibald Stone Carving Symposium** at Harcourt Park, Upper Hutt.



Helen treats herself to floral arrangements from **Kristin's Flower Shop** in Upper Hutt. Ph (04) 528 0760.



Seaview firm **Kadima Design Direct** designed the black leather couches – on castors for easy movement – to suit the living room space. Phillip's matching stainless steel and leather Zaar armchair becomes a recliner. Ph (04) 568 8800; 0800 1100 022.

For more about designing for accessibility, see **Homes Without Barriers: A Guide to Accessible Houses**, published by BRANZ (\$39.95). www.branz.co.nz.

Lifetime Design is a concept being developed in New Zealand by **CCS Disability Action** to promote comfortable, safe and accessible homes that can adapt to the changing needs of families over the years. Contact Viv Maidaborn on (04) 801 0853; vmaidaborn@no.ccs.org.nz.

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