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State of the art living

What do you do when open homes and property listings fail to impress? Build your own.

Ann Packer

"I LIKE other people's villas," says Peter Wilkins, "but I never want to own one."

When Peter and wife Janette moved from Auckland to the capital for work, it took them some years to settle down.

They lived in Whitby and Plimmerton – both handy to Todd Park, where they are managers at Mitsubishi Motors – but each had drawbacks. After what seemed like years "in real estate" – that is, trudging around open homes – the couple decided to build from scratch. "That's why we built," says Peter, "and we're very happy with what we've built."

They bought a section in a Khandallah subdivision on former electricity substation land and, like their neighbours, have lived for some years with building, landscaping and an inevitable stream of trucks going up and down the shared driveway.

After a false start with an architect who didn't seem to be on their wavelength, Peter and Janette found Davor Mikulcic of Studio MWA through word-of-mouth recommendation. The Wilkinses had worked out "a long list" of what they wanted, and Bosnian-born New Zealander Mikulcic – who commutes between the capital and Brisbane – addressed it in detail.

"Davor was able to look at everything and argue about everything," says Peter. "He would discuss any issues we raised but always had a reason why we should do it."

When the Wilkinses got the final plans, nothing needed changing, apart from slightly extending an internal bedroom wall (to conceal shoe storage).

As in other Mikulcic buildings, including the Blundell house in Silverstream and the Pendrous house in Newlands, all the joinery was designed by the firm, which includes interior designer Michael Maddern, and apart from the kitchen – finished in car lacquer – it was all made using jarrah by joiner Hadrian Noble of Upper Hutt firm Noble Kitchens. Foreman Ryan Freer kept the building project moving.

Although they were not anticipating a three-level house, computer renderings helped give the Wilkinses a clear idea of what the finished structure would look like, from the exterior – clad in a mix of Linea fibre-cement weatherboards, plaster, long-run iron and schist – to interior aspects such as the three-storey void, with its glass feature on the outside of the lift (to assist later resale of a three-storey home, says Janette).

A handsome staircase of kwila treads adds drama to an entrance lobby where Janette has stacked lush variegated dracaenas, scarlet-flowered anthuriums and maidenhair ferns interspersed with glazed ceramic columns for extra impact.

The couple are thrilled with the way the architect's subtle variations add visual interest – changes in angles ("enough to give the builders nightmares"), changes in texture from smooth to rough (bathroom tiles) and the use of schist, glass and dark-stained wood. They also like the borrowed light from interior windows – a horizontal one above the bath and a large one in the shower, which looks down to the front entrance.

Glass is also used as a bridge across the landing between staircase and living rooms on the middle floor, where kitchen and dining spaces flow into the entertainment area. A large office to one side looks out through a low window over the desk to natural bush and on another wall to the developing garden.

With decks equivalent to half the house area around the outside – every bedroom opens to decking – Peter and Janette have plenty of choices depending on the weather. They've cleared gorse and rubbish from a small patch of shared reserve on the back edge of the section, underplanted a track with ferns and planted the rest of the garden area to a plan by Rebecca Wilson, of Earthworks, with a mix of natives and shrubs, such as hebes and sweet-smelling daphnes.

Everything that can be automated is incorporated into state-of-the-art technology that controls temperature, audio-visual systems, lighting and blinds.

Moving into such a contemporary home gave the couple an excuse to invest in new furniture. Apart from one couch that was reupholstered, all the suites and chairs are new leather pieces from Parker Ferguson or Fifth Avenue.

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Janette bought her foyer plants at California Garden Centre, 139 Park Rd, Miramar, (04) 388 3260 and landscaping plants were supplied by Plantworks, 12 Innes Place, Palmerston North (06) 357 4532.

Auckland importer Signature Rug Co supplied the large floor rugs, all made in India. Phone (09) 572 0030 for local retailers.

Home automation was installed by Building Automation Systems, (04) 803 3488, and audio-visual equipment installed by Wired Sound 021 266 6660.

Left, new leather furniture and a deep-red Indian rug add richness to the entertainment room. Above, a glass bridge passes between the three-storey kwila staircase and what will become a water feature on the lift wall.

Photos: ANDREW GORRIE

A horizontal window offers a bathtime view to the city.

Sunlight floods in from floor-to-ceiling windows in the central sitting room.

All the large floor rugs were made in India.