



The house sits lightly on its green pad in the bush.

Photos: ROSS GIBLIN

The butterfly has landed



Ann Packer

Their new home in Akatarawa made a change from a caravan for its owners.

HERE'S nothing quite like building your own house from the ground up – not only starting from scratch, but doing it all yourself, with the help of family. Dianne and Barry Dulieu camped out on their Akatarawa property and cooked on a barbecue while they were building their retirement dream home; when the weather got colder, they moved into a caravan.

Not surprisingly, once they moved into the soaring spaces of the Davor Mikulcic-designed home Barry built with the help of his son Rhys, the Dulieus rather missed the confines of their wee caravan. Dianne, a nurse at Hutt Hospital, reckons it took her two months to get used to her new home. "It's such a different house," she says. "The polished concrete floors and the height of the ceilings – all are very familiar now."

With its back to an arc of bush, the house – which the architect saw as a butterfly landing in the clearing – makes the most of its surroundings, sheltered from the southerly and most northerly winds. While the couple have a strict policy of planting only natives on land they cleared of blackberry and gorse, their everyday living room looks across to a tall stand of eucalypts on the next-door property, and taking centre stage is a golden-leaved weeping willow that Barry limbed up to a classic shape. Across undulating grass is the family's favourite swimming hole in the river. Landscaping is under way – a series of ponds in the lowest parts of the clearing are starting to settle; pukekos are multiplying, there's a kingfisher in residence and the tui are back.

This is not the first "weekend house" – as in "built in his spare time at weekends" – that Barry, a building tutor at Weltec, has built. But it will certainly be the last, he says. "It's the most difficult I've ever built."

With a hammer in one hand and documentation in the other, it was very challenging "but very satisfying, too, keeping the job going and doing something of this nature. It's the unseen things in the house's structure, what holds it together and what's in the ground."

Access made the building job even more difficult – a narrow gravel driveway winds down to the site. The roof had to be walked down, rather than trucked.

What saved Barry's sanity were his trips to sea and training with the Naval Reserve, to which he's belonged for several years. "It took my mind off what was going on here."

In all his years of building houses, Barry had never used an architect before meeting Studio MWA principal Mikulcic at Upper Hutt residential development firm Lendrums. Invited to visit the site, Bosnian-born Mikulcic says it was an incredible experience to be there in the early mornings and evenings, to see the sunset and sunrise and experience the rain and wind.

The house, which has two large living spaces at the front and a smaller entertainment room at the rear, called for a new look. "We couldn't put most of our old furniture in it," says Dianne. "We had to get rid of it."

They splurged on some items and went budget on others. In the kitchen and family room, facing north, four substantial bar stools pull up to the kitchen island, while those wanting to relax can choose from updated retro leather armchairs or the old faithful leather two-seaters the family have had for years. In the "chill-out corner" to



Overarching structures create modern verandahs that shelter the house within.



In the "chill-out corner", a reproduction Eames chair and ottoman offer a view to the far side of the Akatarawa valley.



A streamlined kitchen is at the heart of this retirement dream home.



An intimate hallway connecting living and sleeping areas is a gallery for family photographs.



White leather couches are a foil for floor to ceiling schist in the formal living cum dining room.

more

Studio MWA, studiomwa.co.nz
rhysconstruction.co.nz

Nood at 4 Jackson St, Petone, sells replicas of many classic chair designs such as the black leather and rosewood Eames chair, (04) 587 0531, nood.co.nz

Christchurch furniture store McKenzie and Willis is where Dianne found the white Natuzzi couches, mckenzieandwillis.co.nz



French stonemasons helped craft details like this schist wall.

one side, is a reproduction Eames chair and ottoman. A pair of avocado-coloured shag-pile rugs (standard Briscoe's stock) relate well to the bush setting, and in summer the walls open up completely to a deck protected from the weather by a dramatic boxed overhang.

In the more formal lounge, white leather couches Dianne found while on holiday in Christchurch are a foil for the floor-to-ceiling schist fireplace wall, built by Upper Hutt stonemasons Bosworth Stone. A back-to-back fireplace outside allows al fresco comfort even on cool nights.

Behind the kitchen a short corridor that shows off family snapshots – "we didn't want long hallways," says Barry – links to bedrooms behind, and an office-for-two with glass walls that can be rolled away.

The couple have enjoyed a whole year of seasons here now. "We're just two minutes away from town but we have the best setting in the world."