

THIS PHOTO Designer Chris Tate's vision for his home was to have two flat white planes – the floor and the ceiling – sandwiched between black planes, and punctuated by black columns and the green of the external foliage.



Into the woods

Seeking neither sun nor views, a surprising new home by Chris Tate snuggles down in native forest west of Auckland

TEXT by Christine McBride PHOTOGRAPHY by Patrick Reynolds STYLING by Alex McLeod



OPPOSITE The house deliberately steps down to the entrance platform, rather than flowing to a traditional level deck. Tate wanted this platform to feel like the forest floor rather than reading as an extension of the home. The bank to the left and curving around the back of the house is a glow worm habitat. The sun loungers are available from Eon Design Centre.

The Holy Grails of every home – sun and views – are Holy for good reasons: they make what might already be a splendid house spectacular. In the densely forested hills of the Auckland suburb of Titirangi, however, there is a house which deliberately shuns both. Tucked away in a deep ravine, it would be easy to step off the side-walk above the house and fall for a reasonably long way before landing on the flat black roof, which is punctuated only by four glass skylights. From the road, the forest-floor creation of designer Chris Tate looks like a rectangle of asphalt or bitumen pressed down into a valley, with a slender set of wooden stairs snaking down beside it.

This minimum-impact approach to design packs a major punch. The slim staircase leads the descent to a short promontory of decking in front of the home's entrance – a deck that tries to be nothing more than an extension of the forest floor, just a little less viscous in wet weather. From the entrance the house can be seen for what it is: a glass box perched amid the bush, with nothing visible around it except massive established trees. "When my wife Jen and I bought the site I hadn't even really been right through it," says Tate. "I sat here and thought 'this is where I want to

"I just wanted to drop a really simple glass structure into this amazing forest."

be'. My concept was more about the environment than the house – I just wanted to drop a really simple glass structure into this amazing forest."

The success of this approach is immediately evident. The sun filters through the leaves and creates a greenish glow within the main room while tui flit through the boughs outside. A particularly striking puriri tree angles out from a bank and curves its thick, sinuous arm around the side of the house. "The house is designed around the curve of this trunk," says Tate. "I thought the house needed to focus on it. The tree is still growing – it's just an unsupported arch floating out of the bank."

The serenity of this small hideaway belies the intrinsic problems of the site. Firstly, Tate was restricted as to what he could construct, because of the site's "managed environment" listing, due to the established native trees. Tate knew that previous owners had designed homes for the site and been refused consent. "The council were a bit against this being developed, but I feel that I have been respectful of the site. If you look at all the planting there's nothing here that shouldn't be. There are no yuccas, no vege gardens. They're all natives, the same species that were here in the

first place. There are no concrete foundations or retaining walls, nothing damaging to the land. I like it – it feels like a camping retreat out here." This back-to-basics theme is continued in the house, where Tate has deliberately not installed a TV, dishwasher or microwave.

Tate is a proponent of "touching the earth lightly" and has strived to embody that concept in this house, with its obvious links to American architect Philip Johnson's Glass House. Such ease of fit wasn't necessarily straightforward, however. The steep site was a big challenge for the builders; just beyond the home's entry, the land drops away about four metres. Even so, Tate's design meant not a scrap of excavation was necessary on the site, not even a light levelling. All the trees were enclosed in scaffolding to protect them and to allow the builders access, then 16 poles were sunk into the earth and the house constructed upon them. "I knew I would need a barrier wall for the slip-sensitive side of the site," says Tate, "so I've formed the barrier with those 16 poles. It's four metres off the ground on one side – you can't walk up the bank under the house, it's so steep." The site precluded using any heavy construction machinery, so steel flitch beams were assembled on site "then we stood them up like Meccano. I knew we'd never get a truck or a crane down there". Even the flood plain passing under the house doesn't faze Tate, as the home's construction

means excess water simply slips down the bank without touching the house. He enjoys the sound of the waterfall that forms nearby during heavy rain.

The house, although visually striking, definitely caters to a certain type of lifestyle. "It's really not a family home," says Tate, "and we're not into having too many possessions, so that works well." There are no hidden storage spaces in the transparent length of the living area, but the study, bathroom and bedroom provide just enough for comfortable living for two. The house terminates in the bedroom, up against the bank, and on this wall a curtain hangs from floor to ceiling, concealing open shelves and wardrobes.

Whatever the house lacks in terms of conventional expectations of views and light, it makes up for in other ways. "I was sitting having a beer with the builders one evening and someone came up to me and said 'Have you put fairy lights in the bush?'" says Tate. "I hadn't, of course, and went out the back to see a bank full of glow worms. I panicked and immediately banned anyone from so much as touching the bank!" The worms survived the building process and now ensure that every evening, Tate's contemplation of his new abode is suffused with a warm glow.



THIS PHOTO The black vertical fitch beams along the length of the living space form the structure of the home and had to be assembled on site. The white 'Day' vases from Bitossi's Metropolis range, the striped 'Up 5' chair and 'Up 6' footstool by Gaetano Pesce for B&B Italia, the 'Alanda' coffee table by Paolo Piva for B&B Italia, the green rug by Avec, the 'Tufty Time' sofa by Patricia Urquiola for B&B Italia and 'Digitable' by Patricia Urquiola for B&B Italia are all from Matisse. The 'Arco' floor lamp by Achille Castiglioni is from ECC Lighting & Living. The lime 'Leaf' chairs around the kitchen table and in the study are by Lievore, Altherr and Molteni for Arper, from ECC Lighting & Living.



THIS PAGE The light green study was designed to be a perch amid the foliage. The 'Leaf' chair by Lievore Altherr Molina for Arper is from ECC Lighting & Living and the Karlsson clock is from Macy Home. The 'CU' bedside tables by Monica Graffeo for Kristalia are from Matisse, and the black bedside lamp is 'Etvoilä' by Italamp from ECC Lighting & Living. The wall sculpture in the hall is by Neil Dawson.

OPPOSITE, TOP Tate designed the bedroom as a foil to the rest of the house, deliberately keeping the textures much softer and more

luxurious, intending it to be a retreat from the openness of the living spaces. The wallpaper is 'Edo' by Osborne & Little from Mokum Textiles, the Canadian maple cabinet is from New York, the Pantone chair by Verner Panton for Vitra is from DeDeCe Design. The Molteni mohair rugs are from Matisse, and the 'Bourgie' lamp by Ferruccio Laviani for Kartell is from Askew.

OPPOSITE, BELOW From the street high above it, the house is an intriguing black shape located low on the forest floor, at the bottom of a long staircase.





LEFT The bathroom's animal skin was a gift from a friend, and the Fornasetti vase by Bitossi is available from Matisse. The basin is from Mico in Parnell, Auckland, and the vanity is custom-made.

ABOVE The study is Tate's work space, although it exudes the same peace and quiet as the rest of the house. The vase is from the 'Green

Frog' Craquele range by Bitossi from Matisse, the desk is a glass 'Wiz' table by Desalto from Matisse, and the Karlsson clock is from Macy Home. The 'Aluminium Group' chair is by Charles Eames for Herman Miller, from Matisse.

RIGHT Designer Chris Tate.

BELOW Sectional sketches show how the home was built on poles.

