

01 Architect Carolyn Smith in her Auckland home.



# Carolyn SMITH of Architecture Smith + Scully

Carolyn Smith is one of the directors of Auckland based practice Architecture Smith + Scully. She talks to Claire Ellery about running a practice and her life in architecture.

**Did you study architecture at Auckland University?**

I did a music degree at Auckland University before I did architecture and then used that music degree as a sort of intermediate to switch across. I was majoring in composition so it was kind of structural and spatial music and there was a relationship between them for me. So I went to Auckland Architecture School and finished in 1986, graduating just in time for the 1987 crash the next year.

**Do you think the way you approach architecture, then or now, was influenced by your peers and teachers at university?**

I think for me I was possibly more influenced by some architects who were in practice at the time. At university it was the studio tutors who I think had the most influence. I had David Mitchell and Claude Megson, who was fantastic really because he was so passionate. You didn't always agree with him. He was a very stubborn man but he did some amazing designs and they were kind of unique and he pushed you to follow an idea.

Clinton Bird was another tutor I really learned a lot from - more about detailed planning, and thinking about spaces left over. He is more of an urban designer but a very thoughtful man and I really appreciated his approach. Also, most probably Sarah

Treadwell. Sarah was the only female tutor when I was there and she's head of school now, which is fantastic. She taught lovely studio programmes that always attracted me. Her programmes felt the most suitable to cross over some of my thinking from my music degree with spaciousness and awareness of space and she just seemed to have projects that were more suited.

Also my mother was probably a big influence. She was a solo mum and she trained as an accountant at night school and then got a job running the office as office manager for what was then Fairhead Sang and Carnachan Architects. When they split she went with Simon Carnachan and ran his office. She was with them for about 21 years. She was really interested in architecture and gave me a bit of a nudge in that direction.

I used to go into the office when I was a student and make models for Simon Carnachan and think 'wow - amazing houses'. I really liked the office and it seemed like a really nice bunch of people. Ron Sang would always take me aside and make helpful suggestions - he once said always have a little project of your own on the side, that's how architects can get ahead, and so I have done that. I've done a few houses for myself along the way and Ron spoke at my mum's funeral just recently because they became very close

friends. So they have also influenced me, Simon and Ron.

**Their practice must have seemed pretty cool?**

Yes it did, and they were very nice people, genuinely interested in you. So what attracted me to architecture in a way was the people and the fact they seemed to enjoy what they did and were making these cool, gorgeous houses; it all seemed pretty good to me. So that was quite a big influence. When we were going through to architecture school I was very keen on the work that Pip Cheshire and Pete Bossley were doing. I aspired to do something like that.

**Let's talk about your practice. How did Architecture Smith + Scully start?**

Hilary and I have been in partnership 16 years now I think, maybe 17. We met on the first day of architecture school. We were in the queue to meet with the dean and I'm Smith and she's Scully so she went in before me and we sort of became good friends through architecture school.

Then we went and did our own thing. I went and worked for Bossley Cheshire Architects and then Hilary went off to London and worked for a few years, got registered in London and then I went off to London and worked there for a while too. ►



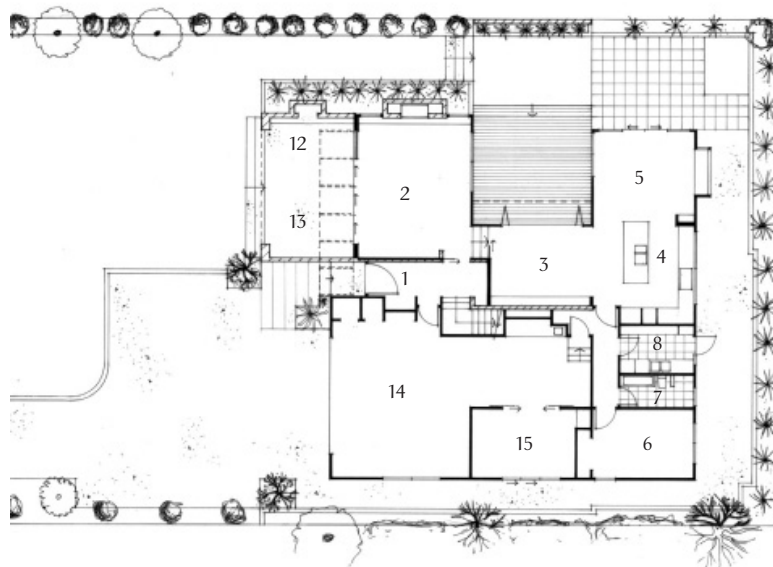
02 The west elevation of the St Andrews Road house.

2011

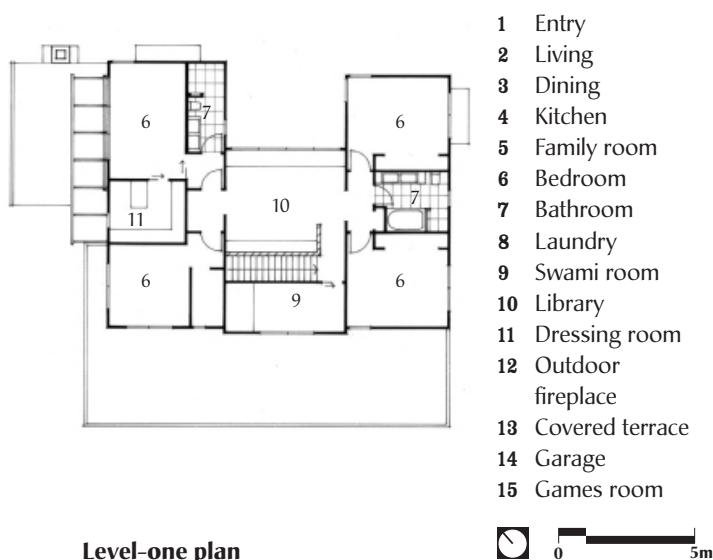
## St Andrews Road HOUSE

• AUCKLAND •

Our clients wanted a subtly modern house that would sit comfortably within the context of the surrounding traditional housing forms and styles. Using gable forms and weatherboard cladding this house was designed to retain a large grassy front lawn for family cricket matches, to protect an existing cherry tree and provide a generous sense of spaciousness. A sunny cut-away courtyard to the north and covered outdoor terrace to the west provide options for sheltered outdoor living whatever the weather. Carolyn Smith



**Ground-level plan**



Level-one plan

When we came back we both worked for Amanda Reynolds and Hames Sharley in retail architecture, which was quite fun. I don't know if we were particularly good at retail, but we were good shoppers. Then Hilary had her first child and after a year called me up and said "shall we set up a practice?". We'd been talking about how we could keep being architects and be mothers and for us it was a huge dilemma because there weren't too many out there to be honest. Some women chose not to have children.

We thought this might be a good idea, we could set up a practice that meant we could sort of run it part time and not pull right out of architecture. We could see that women were pulling out when they had children and not coming back in and we didn't want to do that. Also you just lose touch and lose confidence; things are changing all the time in architecture and I think it's very easy to lose your confidence.

So we set it up. We were doing multi-unit residential projects and retail to start with. As I had a child then we found it was quite hard to meet their deadlines and fully commit, so we both designed and built a house each for ourselves. We got quite a lot of profile from those houses. They were both published in *Architecture New Zealand*. My one was on Homefront on TV and we got some fantastic profile and just managed to shift ourselves into the domestic single dwelling market, which suited us. With that we found we really enjoyed working with people, we were working for people who really cared about the result, more so than say a developer.

### What are the good things about running a practice?

It's the people and the opportunities. I think what both of us enjoy, really, is the opportunity to make something better for someone. A new house is something they've been dreaming about and planning for a long time and it's huge. But also house alterations - just making their day better by improving how the house works and how warm they are and how cool they are and whether it's easier to have parties and it's easier to cook and all those things. I think we both get a lot of satisfaction out of that and you meet this huge range of people from planning consultants, engineers, and builders to suppliers, cabinet makers and clients. That's another part that we really enjoy.

**Do you do mostly new houses or additions and alterations?**

I don't know why, but it's probably slightly more new houses that we've done to date. I love new houses, they're great.

**You get to put your stamp on them?**

Yes, but actually we've noticed in the last few years with this recessionary time, definitely more alterations have come our way and we're happy to do them. Alterations can be frustrating in that you have to do so much work for them, particularly for the council now. You have to draw so much, and if the alteration isn't a very big one sometimes you feel gosh that's a lot of money to have to spend; sometimes the documentation requirements are not much different for a small alteration as a whole new house.

**Do you think that because so many Auckland homes are old villas that are cold and damp, clients stand to gain a lot from a thoughtful renovation?**

Yes, they can be cold and very damp and dark. I just looked at one that is incredibly dark and quite dysfunctional in plan really.

The parents were telling me the kids are all dressed up in the morning with all their warm gear and get outside and realise it's a really nice day. It's going to be a pleasure to turn that house around, which is essentially what they've got to do, and try and do it the most efficient way we can. It will change their day and that's quite exciting.

**Do you think New Zealanders are used to living in houses that are not really fit for purpose just because we always have?**

Yes, because the houses were designed for the street and not for the sun. It's crazy, and of course they were not insulated. I think that's changing, I think people's expectations are really changing and they expect more from a house because most clients that come to us are actually very well aware of what's wrong with their house already and they know what they want. They want sunshine, they want flow, they want good cross ventilation.

I think New Zealanders really know quite a lot about houses and how they should be and how they'd like to live. Probably because there's such a plethora of

design programmes on TV. Grand Designs - that's one of the most popular programmes in New Zealand - so people love houses. They see all these things, all these ideas in magazines, and I think they're quite an inspired lot really. It's just that it costs so much.

**When you look back on the work that you've done are there houses that stand out for you as being particularly interesting?**

One of the recent ones in Wright Road I am particularly pleased with. That one was quite a challenge because it had soft ground and public drains and it was quite steep and incredibly narrow - it was 12 meters wide, very long and sloping so it made it very difficult to meet the planning restraints or requirements, but I had good clients who could recognise those issues and I was really pleased with how that process went. Sometimes things line up and you get a good client, good builder and a reasonable budget for what they want to do. That one came together really nicely considering it could have been quite ►

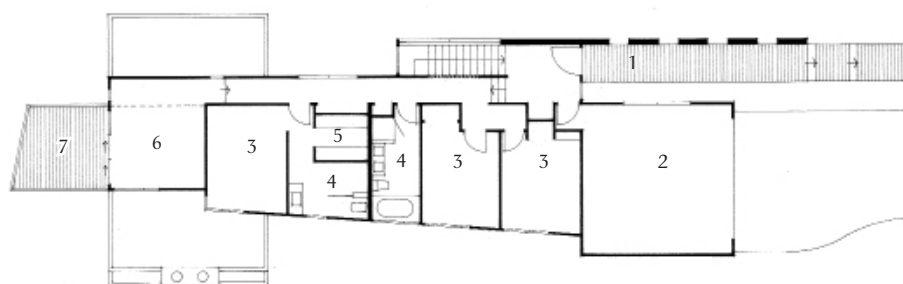
2010

## Wright Road HOUSE

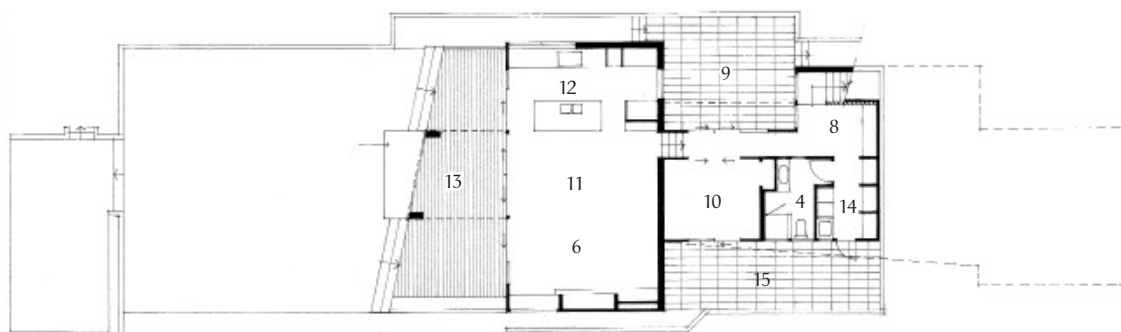
• AUCKLAND •

Working with a long, sloping, 12 metre wide site, with a flood path across it, the idea underlying this house was to create a sleek, black box with cut-away courtyards to the east and the west for maximum sunshine access. A modest and yet inviting frontage to the street has been designed to draw one down through the house, gradually revealing more and more openness and light.

Carolyn Smith



**Entry-level plan**



**Lower-level plan**

- 1 Entry walkway
- 2 Garage
- 3 Bedroom
- 4 Bathroom
- 5 Dressing room
- 6 Living
- 7 Upstairs deck
- 8 Homework bay
- 9 Morning courtyard
- 10 Guest room/living
- 11 Dining
- 12 Kitchen
- 13 Covered deck
- 14 Laundry
- 15 Service courtyard





03 The Wright Road house  
viewed from north end  
of the site.

04 The garage and entry to the Johnstone Street house.



05 The open plan dining and kitchen space in the Johnstone Street house.

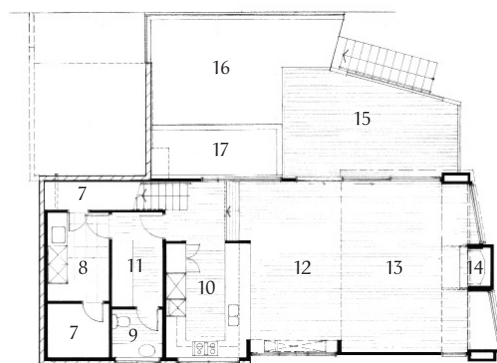


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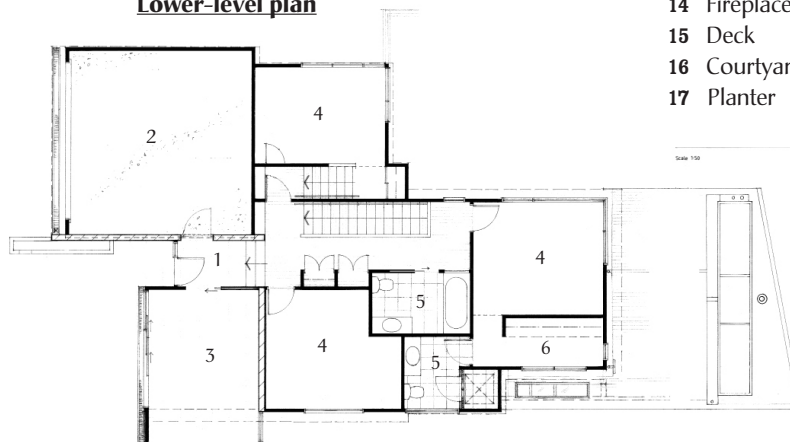
# Johnstone Street HOUSE

• AUCKLAND •

When this property came on the market, I saw an opportunity to sub-divide and build a new house for my family. It was a challenging site with unstable ground, sloping to the south, protected trees, riparian rights, building over a public drain, and being situated in the coastal and cliff line tree amenity zones. The result (after several years of hard graft) is a pleasure to live in. It is quiet, private, thermally comfortable, filled with natural light and connected with the beautiful landscape surrounding it. *Carolyn Smith*



Lower-level plan



Upper-level plan

- 1 Entry
- 2 Garage
- 3 Family room
- 4 Bedroom
- 5 Bathroom
- 6 Dressing room
- 7 Store
- 8 Laundry
- 9 WC
- 10 Kitchen
- 11 Office
- 12 Dining
- 13 Living
- 14 Fireplace
- 15 Deck
- 16 Courtyard
- 17 Planter

a funny looking house on such a skinny little steep site. We were quite pleased with that one.

Of the ones that come to mind, probably one of the more difficult houses was my house. That was cheap land that no-one else could build on, which of course presents some real challenges. It was really steep. It was classed as geotech unstable ground so it needed massive piling retaining. I was building right over a public drain and I had protected pohutukawa trees dotted right up. It wasn't actually a site until I could prove to the council that I could move the trees and create one. So there was a bit of risk, but my partner was very trusting, because it was quite expensive. Yes, that one was very challenging.

Then things happen on the job. We actually didn't have as much money as we probably needed to do it so you're always trying to haul it in, and then my mum got sick and died during that process, so I was looking after her. It's sort of always a combination of things. Every project has its set of challenges but that was particularly challenging, but it's a nice place to live in.

**What are the good things happening in residential architecture in New Zealand at the moment?**

I think New Zealand architects are coming into their own stride. Lots of architects are currently producing nice work in residential and also public architecture. Ones that have come through like me, and worked overseas for quite high profile firms, have now come back and are doing their own thing. They're a confident breed and they can recognise that we don't need to look to Europe for examples to model work on, that in actual fact we have a different set of criteria here, we have a different climate, and that some of those restraints can provide inspiration for our own architecture of this place.

I went to the Auckland Art Gallery opening and that was just fantastic to see all these people interested in the opening of an addition to a public building. It's beautifully done, beautifully detailed and very sensitively done relating to the park, and people were talking about that. They weren't architects; they were just enjoying it. That for me was a real sign that not just

New Zealand architects but also the public are much more interested in good design and recognise that good design affects them - good design can make your day better.

It was the same with Wynyard Park. Over 50,000 people - and it was a cold winter day - wanted to experience the opening of an urban space. How fantastic. They were all just buzzing because it was the place to be.

With housing I think what I am seeing is the development of what we've always been taught and have designed inherently into our houses - it's that element of passive solar designs. For us it's a duty. Every new building has to be as energy efficient and as sensitive to its environment as it can be. That's almost created its own style or developing styles around those things.

I think it is being done with a lovely sense of confidence and detailing with timber that is creating a sense of style that perhaps the Europeans are looking towards for ideas. There's a sort of a freshness about New Zealand and Australian residential architecture. ►



06 Looking across the deck to the open plan lounge and dining space and master bedroom above of the Johnstone Street house.




**Do you think that Australian architecture shares some of those qualities of New Zealand architecture - being very much of place?**

I think so. Also I think our relaxed lifestyle has permeated the needs and requirements of our houses. When you think about the houses I've lived in in France and England - they were very enclosed and dark. When you're inside you're inside, when you're outside you're outside. With our houses increasingly the edge between inside and outside is becoming this incredibly important zone.

We've almost created a new space, an outdoor room, but with more shelter than perhaps in Europe where it doesn't rain so much and you can sit out all summer and drink retsina. New Zealand houses have this lovely thing happening at the edge, and I think that's part of who we are, particularly New Zealanders, because we are edge dwellers in our landscape and I think that is reflected in the way we are living and wanting to live in our houses.

**Do you have a favourite New Zealand house?**

Two houses come to mind. One of them is Ian Athfield's own house in Wellington. I love that. When I went down to Nelson to do the masterclass he was one of the tutors. He's a fantastic architect and a wonderful person that we are lucky to have as a role model. Over the years I have heard so many stories about his house, I think it's hilarious that it's grown and evolved like a little Greek hill town. People have hated that house so much that they have shot at it, and the council at one point wanted to stop him. But now it's protected, I just think it's so ironic. I think it's a great house.

The other house that I have always loved is Ron Sang's house that he did in Titirangi for Brian Brake. Some houses just come together in that seemingly effortless way and they just sit with the landscape and are just beautiful and I think that is one that will always stick in my mind. I would be very proud if I could ever design a house like that. 

## Architecture Smith + Scully

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## Selected awards

**2006:** NZIA Resene Local Award for Mt Maunganui house

**2004:** Retail Design Best Award for Air Tahiti Nui Auckland office fit-out

**2002:** Kitchen and Bathroom Awards Best New Home Kitchen

**2001:** NZIA Resene Local Award for Kingsland house

## Selected publications

*Houses*, Summer 2011, Omaha Holiday House

*Houses*, Spring 2011, Point Chevalier House

*Houses*, Winter 2010, Watson Smith House

*Houses*, Autumn 2010, Smith Bathroom

*Houses NZ*, Issue 4, Mt

Maunganui Coastal Home

*Your Home & Garden* February

2005, Greenhithe Bush House

*Your Home & Garden*, August

2003, Wood Bay House

*Your Home & Garden*, April

2002, New House Wainui Ave

*Your Home & Garden*, January

2002, Kingsland House

*Architecture NZ*, Nov/Dec

2001, Point Chevalier &

Kingsland Houses

*Trends Design*, Volume 14,

Multi-unit development, 1997

*Trends Design*, Volume 13,

Optometrist fit-out, 1996

*NZ Home & Building*, June/July

1993, Women in Architecture

## Projects

St Andrews Road House 2011

Wright Road House 2010

Johnstone Street House 2009

## Photography

**Portrait:** Fiona Tomlinson

**St Andrews Road and**

**Johnstone Street houses:**

Architecture Smith + Scully

**Wright Road house:** Patrick Reynolds



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