



# THE "FARAWAY TREE" HOUSE

Architect Carolyn Smith,  
Collective Architecture

When home owners Michelle and Rob decided to create a new home for their growing family and 4 resident cats they shared a dream to be close to nature, have space, peace and quiet. Not least to build an environment which would afford them the time to enjoy their home and family with limited maintenance.

Having sold their home the search for the ideal site lead them to Auckland's North Shore where they discovered a one hectare block completely covered in mature and re-generating native bush. The density of the protected bush and the sloping escarpment, they soon discovered, presented many constraints for both contractors and architect Carolyn Smith.

Rob chose the site and with the exception of wanting a DOC style study he was happy to leave the overseeing of design, planning and contract management to Michelle.



The walk way to the left provides a "bridge" linking the parking bay to the main entrance. In time the regenerating bush will add to the appearance of a floating platform.



Rob's DOC style office to the right could not be closer to the bush. The office opens onto a deck shared by the adjoining bedrooms.



For Michelle the search for ideas in magazines lead her to an article which captured her attention. The article featured the home of Hilary Scully (Co-Director of Collective Architecture). Many features of the home held an appeal, however, Michelle was particularly drawn to the company philosophy which suggested that "good architecture should be available and affordable to everyone who wants it". Her perception prior to this was that only the very wealthy could afford an architect and as a result of the article she was encouraged to call Collective Architecture.

Having talked through the project with Carolyn Smith (Co-Director of Collective Architecture) they arranged a site visit after which Michelle was reassured that

Carolyn was the right choice of architect as they shared the same appreciation of the site aspects offered. Having struggled down an over grown logging track and on seeing a huge Puriri tree on site Carolyn said "That looks like The Faraway tree" (Enid Blyton's fairytale book) which was exactly what Michelle had been reminded of when she and Rob first saw the site.

This was the beginning of an empathetic relationship between them which ultimately provided a very satisfying result for both client and architect.

Michelle provided a four page wish list, including site and budget restrictions, and a box full of magazines of design attributes she

liked saying "do what you like but here are a few ideas". For Carolyn this proved very helpful and together with considerable communication, provided the insight she needed.

The result says Michelle "was fantastic. We never changed one thing from the first drawings." Considering the restrictions imposed by the council and the need to protect numerous trees, Michelle applauds Carolyn's skill in designing around the huge native trees, some of which are within a metre of the building.

"The limitations on the site and the council requirements proved a nightmare for design, engineering and building. The arborist was called at every stage and all site



By day and night the effect is secluded and dramatic. Two walls of the lounge open directly onto the deck and outdoor living area.

works had to be completed without the use of heavy machinery."

Both Rob and Michelle hold those who worked on the project in very high regard, particularly Carolyn Smith (architect) and Greg Gunderson (building contractor). They have done a superb job.

Michelle summarises her building experience well. "Rob and I love this house and setting, and feel that we were lucky to find an architect that took the thoughts and ideas that we had for this land, but could not express, and turned them into this home. I think this was the key."

The close proximity to the bush, cost and maintenance were all contributing factors to the choice of corrugate Zincalume. The effective combination of plywood provided additional bracing to the upper building.



The warm rusty red has been brought inside to the entry and kitchen area creating a seamless flow between the exterior and interior. The dining area opens directly into the bush. The flooring enhances the outdoor feeling with superb polished Kiwila timber.



Both the upper level bathroom and "Rob's hideaway" reflect the truly tree house aspects to the home.



### Design Director Carolyn Smith

During the initial visit to meet the client (Michelle) and to view the site, we stood together gazing at the wonderful bush dotted with huge Puriri Trees and glades of Nikau (a bit like a fairyland) and I knew this would be a really special project.

Apart from an old logging track there was no sign of human occupation, just extremely dense bush on a steep unstable slope. The massive Puriri trees caught my imagination immediately and I was reminded of an old childhood favourite story "The Faraway Tree". The council arborist considered this site to consist of significant bush and very stringent conditions were applied with regard to the trees and their root systems. After initial advice from our geotech engineer and arborist and a detailed site survey, the constraints were clear. We were essentially not allowed to dig and retain any earth, and any

root over a diameter of 50mm which required cutting through required reporting to council for advice. The house had to be built on poles to minimise any disturbance to the roots and to allow water to pass naturally over the ground beneath the house itself. It was desirable that no significant tree was touched.

With such dense bush and a site sloping away from the sun my initial concerns were to design a house that would feel light and airy and avoid the potential darkness and dampness typical of south facing bush houses. The resulting design focuses on a long and relatively narrow L-shaped plan which opens up and lifts its roof up to the sunlight for maximum natural light and sunshine. It also aims to highlight the intimacy with the bush that Michelle and Rob loved so much, a bit like the directness and immediacy of a tree-hut. With the wonderful privacy this site offered there was an opportunity for spaces like bathrooms to be more open to the natural surroundings so full length glazing and louvered windows

were used to maximum effect. I think feeling close to nature gives one a sense of freedom and connection that we as humans need like the experience of a solar shower slung from a tree whilst camping). Another advantage of a dense bush site is the fact that there is less wind and so the house opens up with wide sliding doors as much as possible to the north facing decks for much loved indoor/outdoor flow. The house opens more directly to the bush on the eastern slopes for more intimacy with the trees and for good cross-ventilation. The plan weaves its way to form an L-shape sitting between and avoiding touching several significant trees including a very old Kowhai tree at the entry.

In order to enter the house at a suitable part of the house, a raised timber board-walk was created to link the garage with the main house. In time the board-walk will float amongst the ferns and palms as they regenerate and fill all the gaps.

Another concern with a dense bush site, particularly not being on town water supply, is the maintenance of the building in the future. Materials were chosen to clad the house that are economic and require minimal maintenance. The bulk of the house is clad with zincalume, and then to link the two wings and to visually contrast with the zincalume, the central two-levelled block is clad with plywood and battens stained a rusty red.

The use of colour is an important feature of the house and indeed on most Collective Architecture projects it is used to enhance the character or mood of a space or group of spaces. In this scheme, the warm rusty red has been brought inside to the entry and kitchen area creating a seamless flow between the exterior and interior. All the spaces are linked together with a neutral light mushroom which provides a calming continuity and ties together the counterpoint of feature colours. The bathroom colours are a bit more

playful in particular the lower level bathroom which is primarily used by the two children. Both were given two colour schemes to choose from based on their bedroom colours: lilac, pink, pale lime green and white. Upstairs in the master ensuite the colours are more restful and sophisticated in warm coffee brown and off-white. Of course the luscious greens of the bush are ever present and a contributing colour to the general ambience of the whole home.

In summary, this house responds to the multi-layered possibilities of its site, the council restrictions, and the contemporary aesthetic aspirations of the occupants. It is a good example of a really good relationship, clear communication and an underlying trust with the client throughout the entire process. Hopefully it has managed to bring out something unique and special about this beautiful place and its particular program. We are very happy with the result.



The basic "L" shape has been skillfully designed around protected trees. The trees which had to be preserved are shown as red dots and are within a meter of the building.

The use of horizontally fixed, unpainted Zinalume is practical and provides a unique quality in reflected light and colour.



Typically, planning rules and regulations provide a very prescriptive set of design criteria that can potentially, and usually more easily, produce a very limited range of forms of house in response. When given the opportunity the skills of an Architect, and an informed and enthusiastic client can 'beat the odds' and add real value by producing inspiring and more life-enhancing environments.

Carolyn Smith



The philosophy which underlines their work at Collective Architecture is to be of value to their clients by providing high quality, appropriate and thoughtful design with attention to personal service.

Architects:  
Carolyn Smith, Helena Mayo  
Collective Architecture:  
Soon to be renamed  
Architecture Smith+Scully  
Telephone: 09 845 6249  
e-mail: collect.arch@clear.net.nz

Geo-tech Engineer:  
KGA - Rodney Hutchinson

Structural Engineer:  
Dave Shilton Engineers

Surveyors: Dimension Surveyors  
Paul Connolly

Arborist: Arborlab Tree Consultancy  
Carl Bergesser

Building contractor:  
Greg Gunderson Builders  
Telephone: 0274 439 856

Zinalume cladding and roofing:  
Roofing Industries  
Telephone: 09 414 4585

Fixing contractor:  
Pacific Roofing Ltd

Photography: Chris Lambert  
Photography  
Telephone: 09 623 2050

real estate features. In 2003 Carolyn was on the New Zealand Institute of Architects jury for the 2003 regional awards. They have won awards for their houses and for their kitchen and bathroom designs.

(The directors: Carolyn Smith and Hilary Scully came from an extensive background of residential and retail projects both in New Zealand and the UK before forming Collective Architecture. Soon to be renamed as Architecture Smith+Scully to better reflect the personality and personal nature of their business. Hilary and Carolyn have also designed and built their own houses with moderate budgets so they are well aware of the costs and stresses involved in the building process.



Carolyn Smith

Hilary Scully

### Collective Architecture Profile

Established in 1996, Collective Architecture specialise in residential architecture. Over the years their work has been featured in many architectural and lifestyle magazines, on TVNZ's 'Homefront' program, in newspaper articles and