



ALL FOR ONE

When it came to building their dream home, the Mussa family members all had their say...

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Nick and Miriam Mussa have called Point Chevalier home for nigh on 30 years. Nick remembers the day the couple first came to the seaside suburb with its "good reputation". They looked at a property for sale on the waterfront; a house with the potential to be added on, and a back yard that any kids could play in. It was on the market for \$27,000. "We were \$3,000 short and the bank wouldn't lend us the rest," he says wryly. And so, for the decades that their sons Moshin and Danyal grew up, they lived instead in a cheaper ex-State house, its solid bones and no-nonsense lines a renovator's nirvana.

And there they would have stayed happily for the rest of their days if it wasn't, perhaps, for the newfangled ideas that Moshin,

now a student of architecture, brought into their lives. "We wanted a change. Building our own place began to appeal," says Nick. With their state house snapped up in a red-hot market, the Mussas had only three weeks to secure somewhere to live – and a piece of land to underpin their dream.

As the deadline drew near, hope waned until a real-estate agent told them of a back section that just might suit. It had a double garage on it with a unit on top. And what's more, the house in front was also for sale. It seemed a heaven-sent solution.

But Miriam didn't have a chance to see the interior of the brick bungalow before it was purchased. As a former rental property, it had had 10-15 people living in it, so was in something of a mess.



Left: tall slot windows provide architectural interest. Zincalume, concrete block and Titan board combine to create a modern mood. **This photo:** The stairwell's Bollywood pink adds a sense of fun to the interior. Plywood steps lead to the upper level where the two adult children have their bedrooms.



Above: Miriam Mussa chose an aubergine shade for the kitchen cabinetry, which tucks beneath a dropped ceiling.
Below: Tauouanga pottery adds detail on the fireplace mantel.
Above, right: Stack-bonded concrete blocks make a strong design statement in the double-height living area.
Below, right: Wasim Mohammed and a macrocarpa table.



"When I saw it, I just went home and cried," she remembers. Nevertheless there was light at the end of the tunnel. The 364-square-metre section was waiting for Nick (a builder) and Moshin (designer and builder's labourer) to put their mark on it. They called in Hilary Scully, director of Architecture Smith + Scully. The brief was for a small house – 150 square metres – that was interesting and made the most of the tight suburban site.

The Mussas were very pragmatic about their needs. With one eye on the future and another on the purse strings, they asked for a compact floorplan where they could live downstairs and their grown-up boys have space on an upper level.

Site restrictions, including its size, narrow shape and the height-to-boundary requirements meant a tight building envelope was necessary. Hilary worked within these parameters to create a design that feels spacious, airy and thoroughly modern.

At the front entrance visitors are welcomed by a clever juxtaposition of three cost-effective materials. A Zincalume box wraps around the upstairs rooms, while a midnight-blue Titan board facade provides drama. The front door is set into a stacked block wall; down its side, slot windows are at once alluring and sculptural, and provide privacy from the neighbours. "They remind me a bit of the giraffe houses at the zoo," smiles Hilary.

"I really liked the Zincalume," says Moshin. "I like that it refers to our rural heritage of a big tin shed. I was happy Mum and Dad were keen to use it, too."

While the material palette was generally chosen by Architecture Smith + Scully, the contemporary colour scheme is a result of real collaboration between the Mussa family.

"The whole process made us work together closely. We



Keeping building costs down

- You pay for every square metre of your home, so decide at the start how much space you really need.
- Don't trade good basic construction for the glitz and glamour of accessories. They can come later.
- Choose cost-effective materials such as plywood, Titan board and Zincalume. Use more expensive materials (such as the honed concrete blocks) sparingly to make a statement.
- Avoid unnecessary legal costs by keeping lines of communication open and well documented.





Clockwise from above left: Moshin Musa is an architectural student who enjoyed the opportunity to express his ideas at Mum and Dad's place; (from left to right) Wasim, Mohamed, Nihal and Samir Khan; Masculinity is freely expressed in the colour scheme and clean lines of the bathroom. **Opposite:** Bi-fold doors allow easy access to the north-facing deck, an ideal sunbested spot for the Musa family to entertain.

Owner profile

Nick Musa (building manager and part-time builder); **Miriam Musa** (childminder) and **Moshin Musa** (student of architecture).

Q What do you do on weekends?

Nick: I love to relax with a beer, but usually I'm pottering about here tidying bits up. At times I go fishing by chartering a boat on the Waitemata harbour.

Miriam: We have a holiday home in Tairua. Sometimes we go there and leave Moshin here to get up to his own devices.

Q Has the design and build process taught you anything?

Nick: The council processes are a lot more arduous than I would



have expected. There are fees for everything and then, right at the last minute, they hit you with a Reserves Contribution. It's based on 30 square metres of the value of the land. We paid \$10,000!

Q Which is your favourite part of the home?

Miriam: I love to sit on the sofa at night and watch the moon pass through the overhead windows.

Moshin: My own little upstairs area on the mezzanine level is a real working retreat. And I love a particular corner on the ceiling where the glass meets the plywood.





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spent lots of time throwing ideas and views around. We looked at magazines, went shopping for products and even attended home shows," says Nick.

Acting almost as adjudicator and a voice of experience, Hilary was responsible for the major design decisions such as siting the house for the sun and the use of honed stack-bonded concrete blocks to form its spine.

"When I first suggested concrete floors and walls to Mum and Dad they were a bit shocked," says Moshin.

"It's a cultural thing," admits Miriam. "Indians just aren't used to houses like that."

Miriam suffers from arthritis and worried she would freeze in such a minimalist landscape. Yet the exact opposite has happened.

The blocks are correctly positioned for passive solar gain. The way they retain the warmth, combined with underfloor heating, has meant the fireplace remained switched off all winter.

The block wall makes a strong statement in the main living area, but was not without its problems. "It was like a giant jigsaw puzzle," says Nick. The wall soars through the six-metre space, but stops just short of the top. "I wanted the plywood ceiling to fly past it," explains Hilary. "It sets up some interesting height relationships."

Sliding doors and windows cut into a wall in the north end of the room lead to a deck. They allow light to flood in and provide glimpses of tree-top views from the living room sofas.

The aspergine kitchen (Miriam's colour choice) hunkers beneath a low 2.4 metre ceiling – an intimate enclave where she prepares

the curries her boys hanker after. Moshin was instrumental in its design. "I wanted to keep it really simple, for it to act almost as a piece of furniture," he explains.

The dropped ceiling and island bench creates a natural separation of spaces, important in Indian culture. "Some Indian ladies don't like to sit in the same area as the gentlemen. At first we thought we might need a dividing wall, but this works just as well," says Miriam.

At Christmas 40 or 50 people gathered here and the home absorbed them well.

Downstairs, the master bedroom and en suite can be readily shut off from the fray. While, up a set of plywood stairs housed in Bollywood pink, the boys' zone comes into play. A drawing board and computer desk fills the mezzanine level and has proved ideal for Moshin's study. Strong black tiles in the masculine bathroom are offset with stylish white fittings.

With Nick and Moshin helping to finish off the interiors of the home, the budget has remained accessible. At \$1800-\$2000 per square metre, including furnishings, this house proves that good design can come at a reasonable cost. Nick and Miriam are pleased with their achievements and look forward to relaxing on the weekends once the landscaping is all finished. And Moshin? Well, he's itching to do it all again soon.

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How to use concrete blocks

- Honed concrete blocks are more common these days and many companies now make them on site. However, it's worth checking first so your building plans aren't delayed.
- Think very carefully about where you will put your power points, wiring for the home entertainment system and lighting, as you can't readily change this afterwards.
- The added steel reinforcing it takes to stack the blocks adds to the cost of the project significantly.
- More building inspections will be required – in fact, one after every fourth block layer – which also adds to the expense.
- Place blocks carefully so that they benefit from passive solar heating.

Clockwise from left: At night, carefully placed lighting brings drama to the stairwell. Zincalume sparkles against a blue sky. Slot windows are cut into its facade. Samir Khan and Miriam Musa.

Opposite: The upstairs bedrooms conifer over the lower level. The house had to meet strict height-to-boundary requirements.

