

HOUSES

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PROJECT

08

Hataitai HOUSE by John Mills Architects

A house in Wellington's Hataitai puts its back to the hill to enjoy a steep site with superb views.

Words by Peter Wood
Photography by Paul McCredie

• WELLINGTON •



The superb sea views enjoyed from the living area.

Sliding doors open the corner of the living area to the views of the harbour.

The street elevation of this tall Hataitai house.




Visit the web site of John Mills Architects and one of the first images you will be greeted by is a colourful, wobbly watercolour house plan. It is a joyous little sketch - almost frivolous - and yet just as concerned with building a home as any technical specification. It is, I think, emblematic of an architect incapable of forgetting that while houses are complicated containers, it's the messy business in the box that really counts.

This house, in Wellington's harbour edge suburb of Hataitai, is a good example. The pragmatics of the brief might have caused a lesser designer to avoid eye contact while retreating to the nearest fire escape. But in a city of hills where easy building plots arrive with the frequency of Halley's Comet, you take what you can get. A 250m² house on a 280m² site? Madness, and yet here it is.

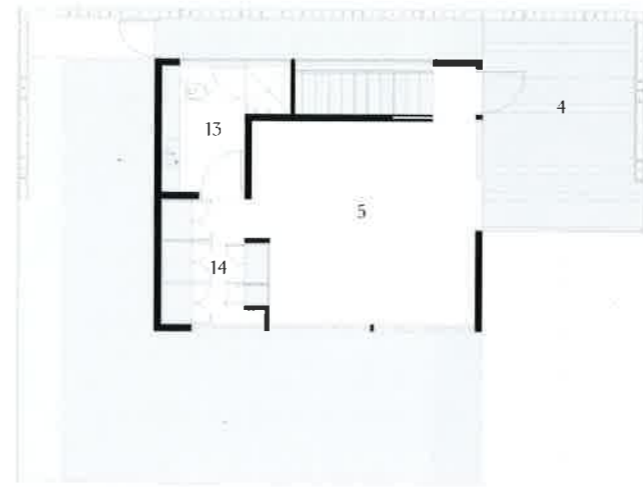
In his typically cheerful manner Mills describes the work of a Wellington architect as 'the art of vertical living'. This is certainly the case here. Balanced at the bottom of a perilously steep subdivided section, it looks like a thoroughly urbane individual lounging at the beach. The casual shuffling of the floors belies the significant earthworks required to anchor occupation on the edge, and like an iPad the shoji inspired garage door hides its terrifying engineering behind an innocent pale screen. And engineering there is. Concrete insures against seismic concerns and provides the mass to keep the house both warm in winter and cool in summer. Indeed, it is so thermally efficient that the computer system monitoring the in-slab heating is yet to be convinced that it should be turned on.

I know that sounds a little like HAL in Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey, and so it might have been if the 'messy' had not been carefully included. By that I don't mean the kind of messiness hidden behind a 'Get The Hell Out' sign on a teenager's bedroom door, but a gentler, thoughtful disordering that colours daily life in a positive way. The stair is a case in point. It meanders upward the way a drunk might climb a tree so that each floor is presented uniquely.

Similarly, messing with material surfaces is a feature. The hard concrete walls are softened with a warm pumice-based plaster while the non-structural walls are picked out in colour swatches. The plywood ceiling has been 'blonded' and underfoot the complexity of the slab aggregate is on display as a polished surface. Outside a dark board and baton skin belies the industrial bones underneath. But, of course, when one arrives home at the end of the day none of this is quite so apparent.

Sitting against the dramatic panorama provided by Wellington Harbour it is tempting to assume that the benefits of vertical living are sun and view. They're not to be taken for granted, certainly, but when curtains are drawn we need a bit more. We need our houses to be a little bit messy in order to challenge our complacencies, and to ensure that our lives remain joyous, and our calves firm. 

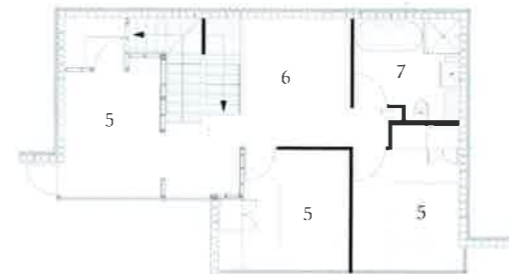




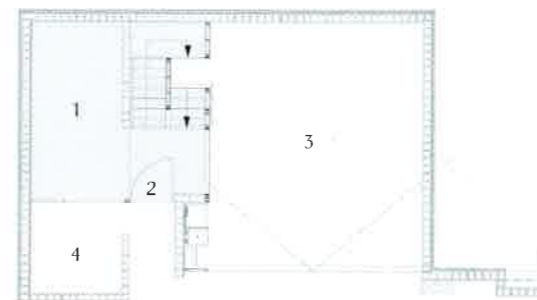
Third floor plan



Second floor plan



First floor plan



Ground floor plan



04 Looking from the lounge to the kitchen and television room beyond.

05 The dining area and staircase beyond.

06 The house sits tucked into the steep site.

- 1 Office
- 2 Entry
- 3 Garage
- 4 Courtyard
- 5 Bedroom
- 6 Children's lounge
- 7 Bathroom
- 8 Television space
- 9 Kitchen
- 10 Living
- 11 Dining
- 12 Roof deck
- 13 Ensuite
- 14 Wardrobe





Practice

John Mills Architects

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Wellington
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Practice profile

John Mills Architects is a small firm that works on residential, commercial and renovation projects.

Project team

James Warren; John Mills

Consultants

Engineer: Clendon Burns and Park

Builder

Redican Allwood

Products

Roofing: Ardex Butynol

External walls: Rockcote plaster; cement board

Internal walls: Concrete block; plaster; Gib®

Ceilings: Exposed stahlton structure; stained plywood

Windows and doors: APL aluminum joinery; low E glass

Flooring: Polished concrete; carpet

Kitchen: Timber veneer; stained plywood

Time schedule

Design and planning: 6 months

Construction: 12 months

Project areas

Site size: 280m²

Building area: 245m²

07 The staircase has a splash of teal against the natural colour palette.