

# BACK TO FRONT YARD



Paradise is an important part of New Zealand identity and it incites a fascination with the private backyard, which is played out from the do-it-yourself backyard deck to the most celebrated houses. While this fascination with the private backyard has come at the expense of the front yard, footpath, street and, ultimately, the city, there are several concerted efforts to reorient New Zealanders to the front of their house, opening up the possibility of some revisions to the idea of paradise, from a private landscape to a shared one.

## An old paradise

Paradise is a recurring theme in the stories New Zealanders tell themselves. Paradise is not only important to contemporary New Zealanders; it has been a part of who New Zealanders are for many generations. James Belich's well-regarded history of New Zealanders from 1860–2000 is called *Paradise Reforged*; the term 'quarter-acre pavlova paradise' appears in the *Dictionary of New Zealand English*; and the New Zealand pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2014, entitled 'Last, Loneliest, Loveliest, Exquisite Apart', taken from a line in Rudyard Kipling's *Song of the Cities*, written in 1891. Boatloads of would-be-Kiwis bought the idea that New Zealand was a remedy to the plight of some other place, normally England, Asia or the Pacific Islands (see 01). In the case of England, it was a remedy because unlike the experience of many there at the time, New Zealand was an abundant landscape: lots of food, space, privacy and freedom (see 02).

## Backyard

Like most of the 'new world', paradise for many New Zealanders is played out in their own backyard, normally the most immediate abundant landscape to the kitchen bench. The more abundant that landscape, the better. A secluded house surrounded by a rich natural landscape, where there is a feeling of an infinitely large backyard, is the ambition of many New Zealanders and the workplace for many New Zealand architects. The typology of the private house has been a successful

playground for New Zealand architects and many of them are both relatively secluded and surrounded by natural landscapes: they have great backyards.

Some of them are collected in a series of books by John Walsh, the latest in the series, *New New Zealand Houses, Home Work and Big House, Small House*. Of the 25 projects included in *Big House, Small House: New Homes By New Zealand Architects*, 21 of them could easily be described in this way. John Walsh acknowledges this in his introduction, where he says, "The houses in this book indicate, not by design but also not by coincidence, those parts of the country where the best architectural practices are active: Auckland, where almost half the country's architectural practices are based; the Bay of Islands, the Coromandel Peninsula, Wellington and its Kapiti Coast and Wairarapa hinterlands and Central Otago." (Walsh 2007, p14) This is not an exhaustive list of New Zealand's most spectacular landscapes, but it's a pretty good one.

## Deck

If the great backyard captures New Zealanders' loftiest ambitions, it is the deck where New Zealand architects flex their creative muscle. The deck has long been bread and butter for do-it-yourself carpenters wanting to extend their house into the backyard. The deck extends the house literally, but in the best cases it extends the formal possibilities too. There are many New Zealand houses where the deck is one of the main protagonists in a broader formal exploration. This is not the place for in-depth case studies, but the following are useful examples.

The Hut on Sleds (2012) by Crosson Clark Carnachan (see 03) is on the one hand a closed box on skids and a picture of beachside austerity, but when the box is open it is a delightfully elaborate backdrop for beachside indulgences centred on the deck. The Under Pohutukawa (2011) House by Herbst Architects (see 04 & 05) produces a delicate dialogue with the striking geometry of the surrounding trees at canopy level, but the geometry only makes sense in the context of the deck that

spreads out from the interior and across the ground underneath the intricately detailed framing. The deck allows that framing to dissolve the building envelope below it, both visually and spatially. The Kaipara Bridges House (2011) by Simon Twose (see 06 & 07) exploits the deck to explore a continuous material surface between inside and out, on horizontal and vertical surfaces. There are no ripped lengths of timber in this house and the rigorous dimensional control adds to the eerie stillness set up by the uncompromising horizontality of the main floor. On that main floor it is the long deck that is the most pronounced spatial figure. The Harte House (2009) by KebbellDaish (see 08 & 09) sits behind a triangular faceted plane that connects decking to a pathway through the bush and connects the house back to the hillside it sits on. Like many other New Zealand houses, these projects are sophisticated studies of the interface between architecture and landscape, with all relying heavily on elaborations of the deck, which pushes out into, or over, the great backyard.

### Front yard

The interface between the house and city is the front yard and there have been a number of initiatives led by the New Zealand Institute of Architects (NZIA) and its members to promote a better understanding of this side of the house. While the Urban Design Forum, the establishment of urban design advisory panels and the Shaping Our Places campaign are not focused directly on housing, they all have implications for our collective sense of the front yard. It was once a meticulously clipped, highly fertilised, but seldom occupied moat and, in many cases, it is probably better just to step straight onto the footpath.

### Footpath

Unfortunately the collective pursuit of a private backyard has the nasty side effect of an unoccupied footpath in front of the house. New Zealanders' appetite for a decent backyard fuels constantly expanding cities with low densities and a thin layer of infrastructure. The footpath is not occupied because in most cases it is too far to get

anywhere meaningful on foot and certainly too far to walk to the nearest stunning landscape. Density has been a hard sell in most of New Zealand, despite reasonably obvious benefits of compact, pedestrian and cycle-friendly cities surrounded by natural landscapes. The population density in Auckland averages out at approximately 1,300 people per sqkm, with only a few areas in the city denser than 4,000 people per sqkm. Not that density is a goal in itself, but just to get a feel for capacity, compare this with one of the most densely populated cities in the world, Hong Kong, which averages around 6,650 people per sqkm across the whole metropolitan area with some parts of Kowloon as dense as 57,000 people per sqkm. This is a familiar story and, like architects all around the world, architects in New Zealand have been busy trying to make cities more compact with more efficient infrastructure. The so-called Green Frame (see 10), which has been established around the city centre in Christchurch, is one notable attempt to constrain at least part of the city and bring housing closer to the middle of the city, which has an average density of fewer than 300 people per sqkm.

### Street

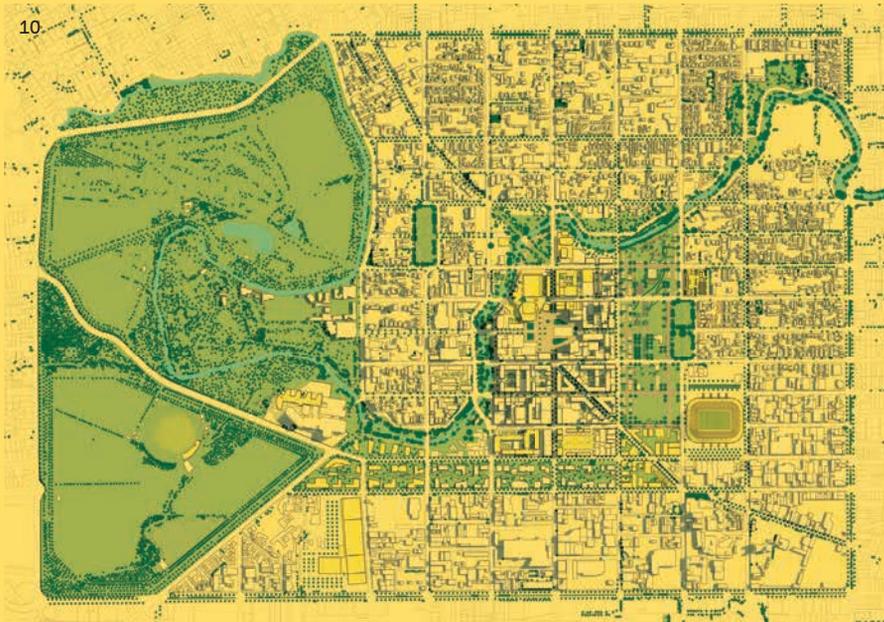
A team led by 2014 NZIA Gold Medallist Patrick Clifford, of Architectus, designed the Trinity Apartments (2005) in central Auckland, which makes dense living an attractive proposition. It takes the footpath and street as its front yard (see 11) and establishes a common courtyard and evaporating pool (see 12). The project is environmentally smart, visually and spatially elegant and a very good example of the kind of thing we know we ought to be doing on a regular basis. While there are a few of these very good residential developments across the country, including Athfield Architects' recently completed development of the Overseas Passenger Terminal in →



01-02. Jock Phillips, 'History of immigration – British immigration and the New Zealand Company', Te Ara – The Encyclopedia of New Zealand, updated 15-Nov-12

03. Crosson Clarke Carnachan's Hut on Sleds, 2012. Image courtesy Simon Devitt  
04-05. Herbst Architects' Under Pohutukawa, 2012. Image courtesy Patrick Reynolds

06-07. Simon Twose's Kaipara Bridges House, 2012. Image courtesy Patrick Reynolds  
08-09. KebbellDaish Architects' Great Barrier House, 2009. Image courtesy Simon Wilson.



however big the dog box. Compact cities in paradise could be measured for success by the degree to which they provide those places to be alone. This is probably an important aspect to the development of housing types, but it is also a little bit sad when it is not balanced by something more convivial.

### A new paradise

Even if privacy is important, the notion of abundance still seems fundamental to any idea of paradise in the future, although perhaps it is less about a private abundance and more about a shared one. The increasing scarcity of resources makes that idea both more difficult and more important. There is design research being done at Victoria University of Wellington and in practice, which explores ways in which the idea of paradise might be rejuvenated by designing for collective abundance. The idea of donating one's private backyard to a more abundant urban park could give more people, more space. Community gardens could replace the private vegetable patch and be more productive. Of course there are many models of medium density from around the world that could be adapted, but there are also many new building types that will need to emerge. As with any shared facilities there are political, cultural and economic hurdles that need overcoming. On the other hand, political, cultural and economic hurdles, which are apparently unrelated, might get addressed by rethinking housing.

It is not clear what may come from the kind of design research that takes the playful and ambitious studies of architecture and landscape at the domestic scale and extends them to urban and regional scales. New kinds of connections may be established, not only between architecture and parks, but between cities and their hinterlands. These kinds of connections will be critical to a shared backyard, which must be as resilient as the idea of paradise. **ar**



→ Wellington (see 13), unfortunately there are nowhere near enough yet.

Hobsonville Point is a much larger development that is also trying to wean New Zealanders off the land, but with private front and backyards generally intact. Being developed by a subsidiary company of Housing New Zealand, the site was once a defence base located on a small peninsula that juts out into the Waitemata Harbour in Auckland. Another of New Zealand's celebrated architects, Christopher Kelly of Architecture Workshop, has recently designed a series of small-scale detached homes for the Hobsonville Land Company's Small Home Test Lab. The Master Plan by Isthmus requires 20 percent of the new dwellings to be supplied at under \$485,000 and Kelly's projects, some as small as 40sqm single bedroom houses on 111sqm sections, were developed as demonstrations for volume house builders and the public.



There has been significant public interest in the Hobsonville experiments and there are strong signs of cultural change, but apart from some three-storey medium density housing blocks being developed along the main roads, the whole development suffers from nostalgia and a resistance to seriously engage the street with the house. The backyards are shrinking in some small pockets, but New Zealand is still a long way from widespread compact urbanity.



### Dog box

For New Zealanders, the 'dog box' is where one might end up as a result of some domestic misconduct. Aside from any canine company, it's a place to spend some time alone for everybody's benefit. Perhaps the miniature backyard and its appended deck is valued for the privacy it offers more than any sense of abundance and, for many people, paradise would surely be a place to be alone,

10. The Blueprint Plan, 2012. Available from <https://ccdu.govt.nz/the-plan/the-blueprint-plan> [accessed June 25, 2014]  
 11-12. Architectus' Trinity Apartments, 2005. Image courtesy Simon Devitt  
 13. Athfield Architects's Overseas Passenger Terminal Apartments. Image courtesy Paul McCredie.