

SMALL HOUSE, **BIG IMPACT**

ARCHITECTURALLY DESIGNED AND SELF-BUILT ON A TINY SITE, THIS PINT-SIZED HOUSE SHOWS WHAT CAN BE ACHIEVED WITH A LITTLE THOUGHT AND A LOT OF EFFORT



WE LOVE THE RICH
CONTRAST OF TIMBER
AGAINST THE NATURAL
ENVIRONMENT



WORDS // JOHN WILLIAMS

After two-and-a-half years living and working in Melbourne, Sam and Tania Blatch returned home to the small fishing village of Moeraki on the north Otago coast to take over the running of the local pub, the Moeraki Tavern, from Tania's parents.

Soon after returning, the couple decided to investigate the possibility of adding value to the tavern, both in terms of functionality and potential resale, by building owner's accommodation on site. The tavern and its car park sit on the level area of the site at the foot of a hill, just a few metres from the shoreline, so there was no room to develop the land further. Above it, however, a small parcel of land offered the opportunity they were looking for, given the right design.

Luckily, Tania's brother, Regan Johnston, is an architect. Even luckier, one of his specialities is designing small houses. "We'd seen a bach he'd done down at Taieri Mouth,

south of Dunedin, and we liked the simplicity of that, so we asked him to design us something along similar lines," says Sam. "We wanted three bedrooms and good views, but left the aesthetics up to Regan. I also wanted the house to be made mainly from timber, inside and out, so I could take on as much of the work as possible," he adds.

Sam is a carpenter by trade and, to cut costs, he planned to work on building the house between shifts down at the pub. "Apart from the earthworks and craning in the aluminium windows and joinery, I figured all I'd needed was the help of a few casual labourers, a plumber and an electrician. I could do the rest myself," he says.

Everything was falling into place. Regan drew up the concept plans and Sam began the consenting process with the local council. And that's when they ran into a problem.

"Moeraki has known land stability issues, which put the build price up, so we decided to

DETAILS
HOUSE MOERAKI HOUSE
LOCATION MOERAKI

ABOVE The house gives little away as you approach the front entrance
OPPOSITE There was only a small footprint of land to build on, which determined the size and shape of the home's floor plan



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ABOVE A large picture window in the lounge had to be braced by steel cables

LEFT The mezzanine floor above the kitchen has a built-in desk space along its leading edge

scratch it,” says Sam. This derailed the project for a full two years. “But then we thought about it again and came to the conclusion that it would make more sense to build the house, as it would make the tavern a more functional and attractive package if we came to selling the property. So we brought it back to life and had Regan undertake the full construction drawings.”

So how did they resolve the instability issues? “Provisions were made that allow the house to be re-levelled on its piles, should the land move in the future,” says Regan. “We didn’t use a standard pile configuration — instead we sunk a series of piles around the perimeter of the house and floated it, via long beams, on these piles. If the house ever needs levelling, you simply jack it up to the desired level, drill new holes through a metal connection bracket into each pile, then bolt the house back on.”

With the potential instability problem solved, Regan could now complete the construction drawings and work could get underway. Because Sam was taking on the



The ground-floor master bedroom opens straight out onto the deck

PROJECT TEAM

Architect Regan Johnston

lion's share of the work himself, he scheduled the build to be carried out during the off-season at the tavern.

"We started in August, with a five-month build schedule," says Sam. "The Christmas deadline was immovable, because after Christmas it gets kind of crazy down here."

Sam had never project-managed and built a full house for himself before, but that didn't faze him. "One of the main challenges I had to deal with was juggling my commitment to running the tavern with the building of the house," he says. "There were 16-hour days for months on end, dashing up and down the hill to work on the house between shifts at the pub — and Tania was pregnant with our second child at the time."

Thankfully, there were no major hiccups during the build, and Sam said he enjoyed being back on the tools again. "There were a couple of close calls the day we craned in the two 600kg front windows," remembers Sam. "We had to pull back a couple of times because of the wind. That was a bit of a nervous day."

The budget went well, too. Because Regan had detailed such a simple house from the

outset, it was a relatively cheap build. The large picture window at the front of the house, for example, uses post-tensioned steel cables to brace the structure. The alternative would have required a steel portal up the wall and across the roof — a far more expensive solution.

"Because Sam was building the house himself, we chose to use proprietary fixtures, fittings and modules, which saved money and limited the use of some of the expensive sub-trades," explains Regan. "There was no need for a tiler, for example, because we chose an all-in-one shower unit, which Sam just dropped into place."

Energy efficiency was also considered by the architect. The finished house is heavily insulated and orientated in the right direction — away from the cold southerly winds — and there are lots of windows to the north-east to take advantage of solar gain in the winter. Operable windows at lower level and skylights in the roof provide natural ventilation in the summer, all of which are double-glazed.

So the house came in pretty much on budget. What about Sam's Christmas Eve? "We moved in on Christmas Eve," smiles Sam. "The last week was pretty stressful and I had some early-morning finishes putting final touches to the house — it was like an episode of *The Block!*"

Sam can be justifiably proud of what he has achieved here in Moeraki. There aren't many people who can walk into their home and say, "I built this." 🏡

SERVICES

Landscape contractor Rob Lark, Central Oak Landscapes (0413 052 377)

Concrete contractor Bellamy Concrete (bellamyconcrete.com.au)

Decorative steel contractor Vincenzo Botte, By Vincenzo (0420 338 000)

Structural and hydraulic engineer Bruce Lewis, Peninsula Consulting Engineers (0424 253 818)

Geotech engineer Ben White, White Geotechnical Group (0417 968 395)

FIXTURES & FITTINGS

Bathroom fittings Mahak Attique, Candana (candana.com.au)

Kitchen appliances Lucy Pollicina, Winning Appliances (winningappliances.com.au)

Timber flooring Australian Architectural Hardwoods (02 6562 2788)

Lighting Glenn Stokes, LA Lounge (0415 446 227)

Joinery Greg Coure, Timberline Joinery (0414 597 510)

Carpet Adam Lawson, Max Lawson's Carpet (02 9905 7733)

Stone Bobby Choroomi, Granite and Marbleworks (0418 271 559)

Tiles Chloe Bollinger, Living Tiles (02 9818 0000)

Door hardware Brett Papworth, Style Finish (02 9957 6344)

LEGEND

- 1 ENTRY
- 2 ENTRY LOBBY
- 3 LAUNDRY
- 4 BATHROOM
- 5 BEDROOM
- 6 KITCHEN
- 7 DINING ROOM
- 8 LIVING ROOM
- 9 DECK
- 10 MEZZANINE
- 11 VOID



GROUND FLOOR PLAN



FIRST FLOOR PLAN

ED'S FAVE THE PARED-BACK INTERIOR, WHICH LETS THE HOUSE STEAL THE SPOTLIGHT



Colour Palette

Like a cabin, this house is all about timber and bush. Nature reigns supreme through vast windows, bringing in the ocean and the trees. White ceilings and grey floors provide contrast to the cladding and black furnishings tie in with the thick black architraves that frame the view



The Moeraki Tavern is just a short stroll down the hill from the house