

BIRCH PARK, WHITFORD, NEW ZEALAND

Petersen Kolumba™ bricks, charred timber and family are the heart of this home



Birch Park is all about family, cosy spaces and texture. Both inside and out. Nestled in Whitford, a rural beach suburb south-east of Auckland, there's a strong connection to the landscape, and it's absolutely spectacular.

A labour of love by developer Shane Nicholls and Tina, his wife, and a brilliant design by Matter Architects, Birch Park is a 700m² forever family home, with a difference.

It's built for the extended family in Australia, Chile and the UK, and as a memorial to Tina's late Mum and Dad. Because family, and the way it's represented throughout, is at the heart of this home: "It's a place for us to come together, for both of our families," Tina reflects.

Perched on a site that falls towards the sea, with sweeping rural valley views, Birch Park comfortably houses several generations of family in three multi-level interconnected pavilions. The pavilions are linked and separated by courtyards, as well as a walkway leading from the main building to the double-storey guesthouse.

The courtyards, combined with full height glazing and layering on the site maximise sight lines so no pavilion steals the views of another.

It's pure design genius.

Jonathan Smith, Director, Matter Architects, explains: "We wanted to sew the landscape into the structure, and we've done that with the use of multiple courtyards that connect spaces both with each other and with the site and wider surrounds."

Shane adds, "And it was never about the size of the house, it was about the feeling we created between the spaces."

And what a calming, peaceful and inviting home they've created.

Shane and Tina were closely involved in the design and material choice, and Shane co-managed the build. Their love of Japanese and Chilean architecture shines though, hence charred timber and the courtyards dotted throughout. Without doubt, material selection sets this remarkable home apart.



Charred Redwood timber and handmade Petersen Kolumba™ bricks (K51) dominate.

Jonathan explains, "Because of the scale, the materials were so important and as was that humanising of the materials, so we have the Petersen brick and charred cladding, which is so tactile and lovely."

Downstairs is for family and friends and the hero material is Petersen bricks, creating contrast and character inside and out.

Driving up to house, a lower plane wall of Petersen bricks on the south-western rear façade purposely obscures the view. This wall of bricks is almost continuous, apart from the timber door, but dissolves as you move inside. Here, the Petersen Kolumba™ bricks are reduced to small wing walls between the joinery, allowing breathtaking scenery to be seen from almost every room.

Cladding the lower façade of each pavilion in Petersen Kolumba™ bricks offers a human feel and scale, and reflects the way the lower levels are settled in to the land, just as Jonathan intended.

"One of the amazing opportunities throughout this project was working with Petersen bricks. The best thing about these bricks is their variation – each one is handmade. And the beauty of these bricks is that they create a real sense of character in their unique texture and irregular finish. In some you can see thumbprints – details that offer a real sense of grounding and narrative to the lower level," Jonathan says.

For Shane, the bricks were all about creating light and texture throughout, so he wanted them to be laid randomly, with no row the same, instructing the brickie to be as messy as he could. "We've got no wastage with these bricks – because we used the small ones, and by placing them every so often it breaks up that line, so it's not the same anywhere, it's nice and random .. that's the effect I went for, and I'm really happy with them," Shane remarks.

Upstairs it's more personal. A series of private spaces are divided into different wings. There's a bedroom with an adults-only living area; a second bedroom wing for the children housing three bedrooms, linked by a glazed hallway and separated by another lounge area; as well as the guest pavilion connected by a cloistered pathway traversing another courtyard and triple garage.





The private upper spaces are clad in burnt Redwood, charred onsite by Shane using shou sugi ban, an ancient Japanese technique, which Shane and Tina travelled to Japan to research. The result is a rich finish to the timber, which accentuates the grain and provides a protective, permanent coating, as well as warmth and texture to the palette.

The burnt wood upper and the brick base work brilliantly together:

“We contrasted the bricks with a beautiful redwood timber on the upper level ... and that just provided this incredible velvety texture and warm finish,” Jonathan remarks.

And this beautiful material combination doesn't end there.

“We brought a lot of the materiality from the outside and revealed that in the interiors as well, so you see a lot of the brick inside, and the timber is used in many of the ceilings and soffits and the spaces that are blurred in between,” Jonathan explains.

The handmade nature of Petersen K51 bricks resonates more intimately inside, and beautifully contrasts with the timber's velvety texture. These materials are paired with polished concrete floors, Italian marble and a steel staircase, all softened with natural linen drapes, pure wool carpets, paper lanterns and smoked oak timber floors and cabinetry.

Birch Park is remarkable. A sensational team effort and beautiful combination of materials and architecture has created an unforgettable forever home that Shane, Tina and their family will enjoy for years to come. As Jonathan says, “The house is very calm, and you do slow down when you're there. And, after this last year, potentially one of the positive changes from this time will be that we'll reflect as a country about the spaces we're creating in the home, and how multiple generations can coinhabit in the same place.”

Architect:	Matter Architects
Product:	Petersen Kolumba™ bricks (K51)
Developer/Builder:	Nicholls Group
Images:	Simon Devitt