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HIGHER LOVE

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High on a hill in Te Arai, just south of Northland’s Mangawhai, sits a home that has views as far as the eye can see. With the tinkle of a yet-to-be-explored waterfall dancing on the breeze and plenty of room to roam, if you ask Melanie and James Sax, heaven is this place on earth.

Then owners of two Auckland cafés, they were renting in the city while building, decorating and staging homes for James’s family’s 550-acre Te Arai Farm Estate when it got under their skin. The gated development, which includes Aotearoa’s largest truffle farm, “is just amazing,” says Melanie. “We were like, ‘We need to live here! Why don’t we move up?’”

Their “northern migration” signed and sealed, the couple collaborated with friend and architectural designer Fraser Horton to deliver a robust, family-friendly dream dwelling. Constructed by 3D Builders, it has a simple, boxy geometry, the strong lines of the flat roof juxtaposing the rolling hills. Large open-plan living spaces bring the



couple and their children (Ryder, Daisy and Amos) together, while smaller kids’ bedrooms encourage outdoor play. Bifold doors unzip key areas front and back for flow-through access to lawns, outdoor dining, an infinity pool and a conversation pit that offer adaptable living whatever the weather.

“We wanted to create a place built on love and peace for our family and others to enjoy, where the children can run free and we can be uplifted by the natural beauty of the land,” says James of the home aptly built on Aroha Road. “We like the design of the ’70s, so Fraser really chased that look for us.”

Forming a visual vernacular that unites inside and out, the material and colour palette is succinct: white, wood and concrete. With views like this often comes wind, so the exterior of the south side is protected by engineered concrete blocks. Leading decisively from the arrival courtyard to the entrance and out to the first glimpse of the framed view beyond, all 197 of the 430kg >

ABOVE & OPPOSITE The pool area is all about people, says James. “We wanted to have a place to party! Barbecue on, cold bevies, all kids in the pool and the mums relaxing in the fire pit.” The children love toasting marshmallows out here and the pool is a manageable size. Having it cantilevered out over the grass means part of it can safely remain unobstructed by a fence, and when the garden by Rochford Landscapes has grown up around it, it’ll blend in with the environment even more. **PREVIOUS PAGE** From left: Wyatt stool by Coco Republic, vase by Shiho Hayashi and container by Shuhei Narita from Astute Assembly, tonal cushions by Klay (round) and Città (rectangular), and chair custom-made in Bali.

THE PROJECT

Interior designer Melanie Sax and her property developer husband James built this four-bedroom home in Te Arai for themselves and their children Ryder (7), Daisy (5) and baby Amos.





DINING Sandblasted in-situ concrete blocks by Terrazzo & Stoneworks form the backbone of the home, continuing through from the exterior to define the living areas. The 3m stud height of the ceiling here creates a sense of lightness that’s tempered by the full-height drapes from Lahood that surround the room. Hidden in the timber that extends past the pendant lights bought in Bali is a recessed latch that opens the wall to reveal a self-contained guest wing/ home office.



ABOVE LEFT Calming colours team with texture to create an enhanced simplicity that complements the world outside. Pieces seen here include a bolster cushion by Sunday x You’re Welcome, a Bellevue lamp by &tradition from Dawson & Co, a rug by Nodi and a vase by Shiho Hayashi from Astute Assembly on a timber table bought in Bali. The fireplace by Escea is set in Tundra marble from Artedomus. **ABOVE RIGHT** Terrazzo & Stoneworks also created the home’s subtly marbled flooring, which is so hardy that Ryder can happily skateboard on it without Melanie and James batting an eyelid. The dining table and chairs were also custom-made in Bali.

blocks lend the house a weight that can sometimes be lacking in a new build. Siberian larch provides a textural and colour contrast. Having lived life in the fast lane for years, when the plans for the house were in motion, the family decamped to Bali for three months to reboot. It put interior designer Melanie in the right headspace to visualise the interior and work with Bali locals to design and have custom-made virtually everything she needed to style it. “I had a clear idea for a simple, calm and clean look achieved using quality materials that are timeless and wear well,” she says. “My thing was using texture rather than bold colour.” The family’s urban-to-rural transition has proved equally uncomplicated. James, who works in commercial property, commutes to Auckland three days a week, carpooling with mates he meets at the end of the road at 4.40am. “We get a coffee and chuck on a podcast, and everyone’s a bit silent till we get to State Highway 1 and we’ve got a bit of



caffeine in the blood, and then it’s like, ‘Oh hi, mate!’ — it’s great camaraderie. I’m in the office by 6am, then out of there at about 3.30pm. I get the best of both worlds —the balance of lifestyle and the hustle of the city. I’m more relaxed at home and more productive at work.” On the remaining weekdays, he heavers away in the home office/guest room — a wing with its own bathroom and kitchenette accessed through a secret panel in the wall beside the front door. For all its enviable breathing space, the house is only a few minutes from the township and beach. Extended family members visit often, close friends with kids of similar ages live right next door, and Melanie and James are steadily recruiting others to join them in this special spot. “Te Arai from sunrise to sunset is surreal — the vista is constantly changing,” says Melanie. “For us, life is so much easier. It’s the perfect mix of retreating, entertaining and adventure. It’s better than I could ever have imagined.”▲

“WE FEEL SO GRATEFUL THAT WE CAN LIVE WITH SO MUCH BEAUTY AROUND US, FROM THE SCENERY TO THE LOCAL COMMUNITY.”

KITCHEN The smooth-as-silk yet easy-to-maintain Corian benchtop contrasts with the grooved cabinetry by Sharp & Page and the island’s textural bagged bricks — the latter a cost-effective solution that echoes an exterior wall in the outdoor dining area beyond, where there’s also a raised vege bed and a trampoline sunk into the ground.



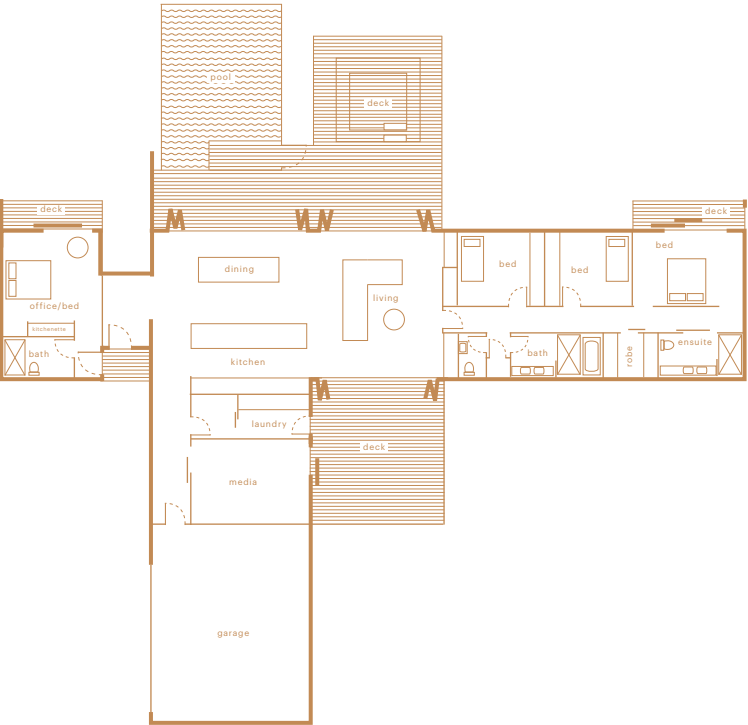
ABOVE LEFT & BELOW RIGHT Melanie had several sofas made in Bali. “Everyone thought I was crazy getting a white couch for a country house with three kids, but I think you’ve just gotta go with it,” she says of this one. “The kids know they can do whatever they want with the playroom couch, but you don’t jump on Mummy’s white couch that she’s wanted for a long time!” The bar stools were a local find from Williams Road. **ABOVE RIGHT** An integrated rangehood and fridge by Fisher & Paykel create a streamlined effect in the kitchen, punctuated by a cooktop and ovens by Smeg.





ABOVE RIGHT & BELOW LEFT
The master bedroom is divided by a part wall, behind which sits an ensuite with a mirror from OneWorld Collection and a floating vanity the whole family helped Terrazzo & Stoneworks to make, heading down to Te Arai Beach to select shells to mix into the concrete. Next to the bed beautified by cushions from Penney & Bennett, stacked timber 'pebbles' made in Bali form a bedside table and are also used for all sorts by the kids; they like to separate them to stand on while brushing their teeth. **OPPOSITE** Less expensive but no less appealing than the couple's first-choice cedar (which they opted to use only for the battens on the garage), the Siberian larch timber that features inside and out is a hard-wearing hardwood. Outside, the couple softened the look with whitewash.





ABOVE LEFT Being rural, it was important to have a well-functioning laundry with outdoor access that stops mud being trekked inside. A stacked washer and dryer by Whirlpool make good use of the available space. **ABOVE RIGHT** The couple kept the kids’ bedrooms small and simple to encourage them to play outside. Melanie doesn’t like clutter, so was set on having good storage throughout the house. An entire wall of Ryder and Daisy’s room is devoted to this with a built-in wardrobe and drawers, and Amos’s sleep space is its mirror image. These fun bunks are by Magic of Wood.

EXTERIOR Between the gas brazier made from a planter, the oversized umbrella from Shade7 that can be swung out over the pool and the comfortable squabs by Hanox Upholstery, the family can really maximise their time out here. Daisy likes to use the pine deck as a stage on which to perform for the cows, which come right up to the house. “Saves on lawn mowing,” quips James.

