

Design for a *lifetime*

Clever designers are planning houses that can be easily adapted should homeowners' needs change through age or accident. This clever beauty is a perfect fit for a Wellington couple.

Story Catherine Smith

All last summer, Phil Blundell produced meals for himself and his wife, Helen, from the vegetable garden beside the deck of their new house overlooking the Upper Hutt Valley. There's nothing unusual about anyone being a backyard greenie, except that Phil has been in a wheelchair since a helicopter accident 25 years ago. Being able to enjoy the simple pleasure of gardening was one of the requirements the couple put in their three-page brief to architect Davor Mikulcic when they began planning their new home.

"Not just functional, but also exciting, was our first specification," explains Phil. They already knew a lot about what was needed – not only from years of living in a 1950s bungalow adapted for Phil's wheelchair, but also from his travels. His career (looking after non-military goods and services for the Defence Department) took him around the world and during that time he saw some of the best products and systems: a shower in Europe and a layout in Singapore, for example.

The Blundells also knew that adapting another old house would be unlikely to fulfil their dreams and so, after their three sons had left home, they decided to create a living space they could enjoy for the rest of their lives.

"We built so we could live here as long as possible. Home is always home", says Phil. He says it is never too soon to allow for eventualities. He is about to switch from a manual to a motorised chair earlier than expected, but their house can cope. "Any one of us can have a fall, or an injury, or just deteriorate with old age, so write down every need and then prioritise," Phil advises.

Their house conforms to specifications detailed in a new mode of building practice called Lifetime Design (see box overleaf). When the Blundells showed four architects the spectacular building platform on the hill, Davor Mikulcic was the only one enthusiastic not only about making the most of the site, but also about meeting their catalogue of

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WHAT IS *Lifetime Design?*

The **Lifetime Design Foundation** is a not-for-profit offshoot of CCS Disability Action. It promotes the design tools and a voluntary Lifemark “tick” programme to make houses ideal for people with mobility or sight problems. Lifetime Design homes are going up all over the country. Backers include Housing New Zealand and the Ministries of Health and of Social Development, the Master Builders Federation, the Architects Board and the Green Building Council, plus building companies such as GJ Gardner Homes of Rodney, and Generation Developments of Waikato/Bay of Plenty.

Most add-ons are just good design, subtle enough to pass un-noticed until they’re needed but making homes adaptable as people’s needs change. The main additional cost – estimated at less than 1% of total budget – is drainage that allows level door access for wheelchairs while still keeping surface water outside the house.

The country’s first Lifetime Design show home was recently opened by Generation Developments in Hamilton.

I’m building a house. Where can I find advice?

Go to www.lifetimedesign.org.nz to take a virtual walk through actual Lifetime Design homes, download the free checklist (which warns of a few pitfalls to watch out for) and find a builder, architect or designer who works with Lifemark principles.

What design elements are part of Lifetime Design?

- Entries to the house have no steps, are at least 1.2-metres wide, and are stable and slip-resistant enough to ride over in a chair or walker.
- Hallways are at least 1.2 metres wide; doors, 86 centimetres wide.
- Light switches are only one metre above the floor; plugs, 50 centimetres.
- Floors are slip-resistant.
- Toilet and bathroom are on the same level, without stairs. The bathroom should have room for a wet area shower (continuous with the floor, no lip). It should also have strengthened walls by the shower, bath and toilet to support hand-rails.



Phil and Helen Blundell love their view out over Upper Hutt Valley’s green hills.

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needs. A Bosnian refugee, he was aware of the tenets of lifetime design, but was not a specialist. The builder and cabinet maker the Blundells selected weren’t experts in the concept either, but all embraced the idea.

The Blundells haven’t done exact sums for the Lifetime Design elements included in their new home, as they also added energy-saving and sustainable features at the same time. Theirs was one of the first new homes part-funded by the Accident Compensation Corporation (usually the corporation adapts existing houses). In this case, the ACC covered 8% of the costs. This covered such additions as safety rails and level-access showers as well as extra space to allow more room for Phil’s chair, plus easy-opening doors and drawers, and even a garage door-opener: features that allow Phil to drive, work and live independently.

The house uses passive solar heating (the sun warms insulated concrete floors and walls), boosted by solar panels for the gas hot water tank that supplies under-floor heating. Warmth is important, as Phil’s restricted movement means he feels the cold.

The three-bedroom, three-bathroom house is beautiful



Spacious floors and wide doorways make wheelchair access easy and Phil can roll down a ramp (centre right, above) to get to his vegetable-planting strip. Helen likes using the open laundry area, too.

as well as practical. High ceilings in some areas capture sun and views; lower ones define more intimate spaces. A stone-flecked concrete floor makes the building feel solidly set on its hillside location and wide spaces that are easy for Phil to roll through create open sight-lines through the house.

Helen says that she, too, benefits from its good planning. She swears her favourite design feature is the laundry: tucked behind three sliding doors, in a sunny, wide corridor, it gives her a huge run of linen cupboards, plenty of bench space and easy access to the clothesline. "Washing is not a chore any more. I don't feel excommunicated," she says.

The big kitchen means Helen and the boys can work together for family gatherings, making the house a magnet for their expanding family.

Dark stained Titan Board exterior cladding, with long-run steel and cedar trim, also helps blend the house into its native bush garden. Decking opens from all rooms: modern sliding doors do not require huge strength to open and close, even in Wellington winds. There's a chair-accessible spa pool on the sheltered side of the house. And a ramp

leads to raised garden beds where Phil grows his vegetables.

The top deck terminates in a pond for visual appeal. And the wide view – 270 degrees across valley, bush and the distant Rimutakas – is important, avoiding any sense of being trapped or housebound.

Phil admits to cooking "only if I'm desperate", but the kitchen is designed to accommodate him. The meticulous kitchen joiner created mock-up cardboard versions of the layout for Phil to test drive before final installation.

Under-bench drawers, pull-out pantry and cabinets top-hinged at eye level put everything within easy reach. Dish drawers, a low-set microwave and a side-opening oven door are all good ideas for people with mobility problems. You just need to specify them, points out Phil. The bathroom fittings aren't special either, but, again, the plumber checked to ensure they posed no problems.

"We have been in this house two years now and it has achieved what we wanted," says Phil. "We can look down on where we used to live, we can see the weather and the seasons. The architect thought of everything and added more than we thought of. We can be here for the rest of our lives."



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