

LITTLE HOUSE *on the plain*

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PHOTOS Charlotte Anderson



Interest in tiny homes has increased greatly over recent years and for a number of reasons, the most obvious being the lack of realistically priced houses available on the market – particularly for first home buyers.

However, what this very real fact has instilled into many prospective home owners' thinking is a more altruistic attitude towards 'a place to call home'. Instead of acquisition being the aim, there is an almost bespoke ingenuity: find something to enable living with very little and consequently make very little impact on the environment. Tiny homes offer the option to be off-the-grid,

self-sustaining and in many cases, portable. Given the influence of the internet on that generation which, in general, constitutes first home buyers, hundreds of websites have sprung up offering the dream of a small-scale, streamlined lifestyle, while providing practical information on planning, building, structural advice and affordability.



Which was just how Mike and Loren Pickering came to build their own tiny house just out of Napier.

About five years ago, Mike discovered tiny houses – mostly American – and took a liking to them. “I’d been watching videos from the States and we’d been looking for land for so long. One morning I had an epiphany.” He admits it took Loren some convincing, but both have a strong design background, which provided a good foundation.

Mike is a mechanical design engineer and Loren is a fashion designer. Though both Kiwis are from Wanganui, they actually met in London, where they were following their respective careers. Upon returning to New Zealand and getting married they decided Napier, where Mike’s extended family already lived, was their destination.

Loren commuted from Palmerston North during weekends while they looked for land. “Initially I spent a year researching the concept of tiny houses,” explains Mike candidly.

“Four or five years ago we worked out what we wanted. It wasn’t foreign to me as I’ve always liked architecture and the science of building plays to my strengths.”

A place with a background of hills became their dream and they found the ideal spot in Poraiti – at the end of a very long driveway, over multiple hills heading into a plain and with a view to die for across green pastures to the sea.

Work started three years ago – two and a half of that Mike was building and working part time. The techniques, materials and ideas were all hatched with the ethos of doing design differently.

“The good thing about building a tiny house is it’s easy to push the boundaries of design,” Mike comments. The house is 7.5 x 3 metres – 22 square metres in total.

“Although the option of a 2.5 metre width means it is easier to tow (the house is built on a trailer), we didn’t particularly need to move it, so we could go wider. And it can go on the back of a truck. The trailer is nearly the most important part of the house – it’s your foundation,” he goes on to explain.

The intense research didn’t stop with the design; it has also gone into materials used.

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“Our philosophy was to use reclaimed materials where possible – the big plus being it’s usually free. It still has a contemporary yet old-school feel and is eco-friendly.”

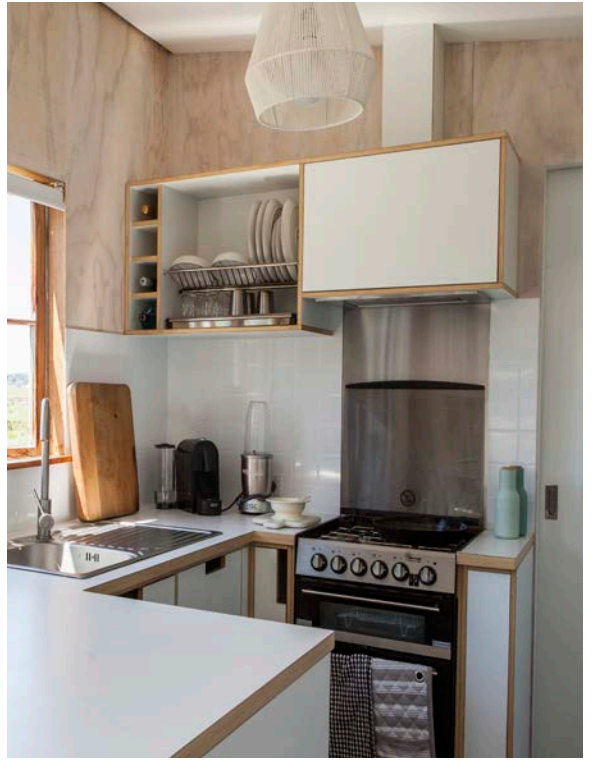
And although they have solar panels, the tiny house is connected to the mains via the caravan plug. They collect rainwater and also have a bore; the toilet is composting with a bucket system and also turns into grey water.

There is no black water and they use biodegradable products, with the grey water running under the built-up beds of the veggie gardens. The bucket is changed weekly and goes into the compost heap, hence giving back to the earth.

The magic of their home is that everything was customised on the computer in 3D before they cut anything, ensuring there was very little margin for error. The house has a definite Scandinavian influence and is Loren’s inspiration.

The exterior found-wood walls are stained (Resene) and the decking is Rimu – “a bargain at \$40”.







The roof is corrugated colour steel with reused free timber cladding which is screwed and stained. The lightness of the interior is emphasised by the use of lightweight, whitewashed Radiata ply (“We can only go to 3½ tons of weight for towing,” Mike mentions) with the floors stained using low or VOC free organic compounds. The kitchen was modelled around the gas oven with its small rangehood – a marine model with a gas califont; plus a small built-in Samsung fridge, which is energy efficient and accommodating.

The only internal division is the sliding door into the bathroom, all custom-designed on the computer. “It was a bit like a puzzle,” Mike confesses, “with all the parts fitting together to make the whole. The height of the benches, smaller cupboards and drawers (all soft-close and many of which are subtly placed) means that no area is without a use.”

With lots of windows – about 30% of the wall space – the feeling is one of freshness and a deceptive openness. Obviously, double glazing is essential – and Mike did it

all himself. “All important was the air flow, both hot and cold, so the house is designed with the bathroom having two windows either side for that very reason, and a heat recovery system, which is the trend for houses like this. There’s a lot of moisture coming and going because of the bathroom and kitchen, so it was essential to exchange the fresh air from outside and lose the stale air from inside. We used a German mechanical system, which is just small enough for a tiny space.”

Mike spent a lot of time, “fossicking around Trade Me. Always on the lookout. And to some extent some things found have dictated the design – we just worked around the materials.”

But as Loren comments, they also spent where it was important. The blinds are unobtrusive and all white, virtually invisible when rolled up. They shield the sun while still allowing light through. The walls are structurally insulated with 100ml of polyurethane panels

– double the minimum code. LED strip lighting is low voltage and provides a luminous glow. “We splashed out where it was needed. The designer light in the kitchen for instance,” explains Loren. “There are certain things where secondhand is fine and others where you just need to make a statement.”

Both are great cooks and gardeners. Mike built the raised beds and they are very conscious of the environment with consideration of the effects their lifestyle can have. The arrival of baby Hazel, although not necessarily factored in to the equation of a tiny home, has proved that living in 22 square metres is still possible, “though we may have added another room, and still might,” laughs Loren. “Also, we do tend to eat early as Hazel sleeps at 6.30, so we’re conscious of not making a noise.”

The big farm shed next door also has its benefits, not only as a refuge while Hazel sleeps but it also houses Loren’s workroom with her sewing machines plus the essential laundry. Loren, who ran her own business as a fashion designer, still keeps her hand in. Hazel’s wardrobe is an indication!

Both Loren and Mike admit they started the tiny house project mainly because of their financial status. Their ecological and environmental beliefs and education as designers provided a solid background, making building something for themselves a natural. “We are quite good at hard-to-do,” laughs Mike. So much so that it is now their business. “With our structural and mechanical design backgrounds we taught each other and learnt a lot in the

process. It has allowed us to spend valuable time together. Fortunately, we have a marriage where we really enjoy each other’s company,” comments Loren.

The Smart Trailer, designed by Mike, is part of the whole concept, and they agree it is one of the most strategic areas of the business. “It has to meet stringent requirements. There are variations: one built with a view to moving around, another as a platform on which to put the tiny house but only move occasionally,” Mike explains in detail.

The Pickerings’ road to building their tiny house may have encountered a few rocky passages en route, but both endorse the fact that it has not only given them a home but has the bonus of being a solid foundation as a family unit.



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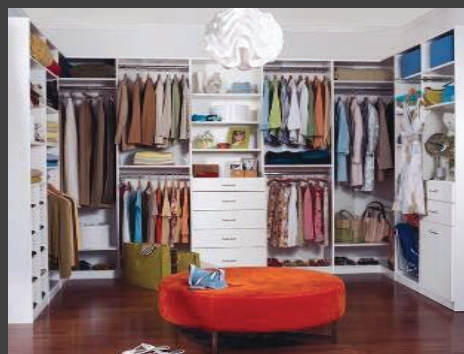


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