

# A Kiwi-Japanese house

by David Killick

Although the house has three main floors, it is actually built on about six levels. Partly, this is because of the sloping hill site; partly, it expresses Japanese design ideas.

A curving cedar wall combines with Hinuera stone and manufactured stone in Bob Burnett and Shizuka Yasui's new Christchurch home.

Japanese architect Shizuka Yasui and Kiwi architectural designer Bob Burnett's new Christchurch home, on the Port Hills, is a mix of design from both countries.

"It's a Japanese-Kiwi house," says Shizuka. "Or a Kiwi-Japanese house."

"It's pretty different – it stands out," says Bob. "There's heaps of ideas packed into it."

So what is a Kiwi house? Comfort, open-plan living areas and connection with the outdoor environment spring to mind.

And a Japanese house? Tranquillity, harmony, natural materials and clever use of space are key elements.

The new house functions as both home and office, and as a show home for design concepts and new products.



Take your shoes off. The genkan is a traditional Japanese-style entrance area where visitors exchange outdoor footwear for soft slippers.



Above: Materials were chosen to be functional yet harmonious. Extra-height doors were specially made.

Although the house has three main floors, it is actually built on about six levels. Partly, this is because of the sloping hill site; partly, it expresses Japanese design ideas.

For example, the genkan, or entrance foyer, is stepped down from the main living area. This defines the space,

while the step also serves as a seat when taking off and putting on your shoes, explains Shizuka. Materials combine a natural look with energy efficiency. Construction is a mix of concrete block and timber frame.

Cladding consists of dark-brown James Hardie Axon panels, Hinuera

# Standing tall in a men's world

Even basic homes have more technology and gadgets: for example, the kitchen or bathroom are computer-automated and may talk to you to tell when things are ready, like the bath filling and reaching the correct temperature and right amount of water.

Japanese architect Shizuka Yasui lives and works in Christchurch. With her Kiwi architectural designer husband, Bob Burnett,\* she has just completed building her own home.

## How did you meet?

I met Bob in 1999 at the Design & Arts College in Christchurch when I was studying ArchiCAD, a 3D CAD (computer-aided design) program for architects. Before that time, in Japan I had only been using 2D CAD.

## Why did you come to New Zealand?

I wanted a change and to get a new job in another firm. First, though, I wanted to do my OE. I decided to come to New Zealand for a working holiday.

## What architectural training did you do in Japan?

I went to Nihon University and I specialised in residential home design. After I finished university, I started work and became a registered architect to level two. Japan has three levels of architect, with one being the highest. After another three years I sat another exam and became a level-one registered architect. Level-one architects can design all types of buildings and do more complex work than levels two and three.

## What are the main differences between Japanese and New Zealand architectural homes?

Firstly, size. New Zealand homes are much larger, due mainly to the cost



Above: Architectural designer Bob Burnett and architect Shizuka Yasui in their new home with collies Momo and Yuki.

of land in Japan as a result of there being about forty times the number of people there with an only slightly larger land area.

Secondly, Japanese homes are built to much more exacting standards, and due to the frequent earthquakes are structurally engineered to be much stronger.

Well-designed Japanese homes make clever use of space and the best designs

make spaces look and feel larger than they actually are. In New Zealand this is less of a priority.

In some cases Japanese home designs are so finely detailed and technically refined that you could compare them to the auto industry. Even basic homes have more technology and gadgets: for example, the kitchen or bathroom are computer-automated and may talk to you to tell when things are ready,

like the bath filling and reaching the correct temperature and right amount of water. It is convenient, but perhaps not essential in New Zealand.

**What do you like about each country?**

In Japan there is lots of choice for everything, food, clothing, furniture, architecture. There are a lot of activities and interesting things to do. It is convenient and quite fun, but people are more work-focused and driven, possibly at the expense of private life and enjoyment.

In New Zealand it is more relaxed, and I was surprised to find everybody finishes work at 5pm. In Japan overtime is normal and expected.

Fewer people has its advantages and disadvantages. I like the Kiwi attitude and life-work balance. The New Zealand way of life lacks some of the convenience, choice of commodities and technology of Japan, but perhaps has greater vitality and richness of enjoyment of life. This you cannot buy. I like this and it keeps me here.

**Is it easier being a female architect in New Zealand or Japan?**

Of course, it is easier in New Zealand. Basically, in Japan, if you are a woman, the boss expects you will leave the job at some stage (maybe to marry or have a child). Architecture in Japan is still male-dominated. It is here also, but to a lesser degree.

In New Zealand many architects are self-employed; this is much less the case in Japan. I feel I was very lucky to meet my business and life partner, who is in the same field, and this obviously helped me establish myself as an architect in New Zealand, doing what I love.

*\*Shizuka Yasui and Bob Burnett are partners of Bob Burnett Architecture, [www.bbarc.com](http://www.bbarc.com).*





Above: The kitchen defines one end of the open-plan living and dining area.

Left: The home combines elements of both Kiwi and Japanese design. The bathroom features pebble flooring and a Japanese bonsai garden.

Stone, cedar – which forms a curving wall facing the street – and manufactured Classic stone, from Timaru, which is used both inside and out. The latest Ultraline gib boards also provide excellent bracing and finish, says Bob.

The concrete floor pad is insulated. A solar water-heating system pumps water through pipes embedded in the pad for winter space heating.

Windows are double-glazed Low-E glass for maximum insulation. Ceramic tiles near the windows store the sun's heat. Other flooring is polished bamboo, by Takeichiban of Christchurch.

Japanese-style doors are unusually tall, combining cedar and frosted glass in a lattice pattern. They were custom-made by Independent Doors. The effect is one of elegance and visual balance. The decor is restful and neutral, mostly light olive, creams, greys and natural timber.

Another Japanese feature is the shoji door, separating the main living area from another sitting area – a peaceful spot where Shizuka enjoys relaxing and getting pampered in a massage chair. However, unlike in Japan, the door is aluminium and glass, not paper. It is 3.5m wide and 2.8m high, and retracts into the wall cavity.

The fireplace, set into the stone wall, is a focal point. It features a huge slab of macrocarpa. The glass-fronted gas fire, made by Japanese company Rinnai, is ultra efficient, says Bob. Passive solar design, combined with the solar heating, the gas fire, as well as a couple of heat pumps, ensure the couple will stay warm and cosy at minimal cost even during the depths of winter.

The hi-tech entertainment system includes built-in speakers, a screen that slides down from the ceiling at a touch of button and a ceiling-mounted LCD projector.

Lighting is rather special, too. Halogen lights in the ceiling can be shifted to various points in the room – ideal if you want to shift the dining table, for instance. Other lights include fluoros and LED strips.

Having laboured long and hard on creating their ideal house, Bob and Shizuka are looking forward to welcoming visitors and, hopefully, having time to relax and enjoy it, too. 