

Concrete is cool, there is no doubt about it! Just take a flick through many of the international and local design mags – architects adore it and increasingly its raw, minimalist aesthetic is being sought not only for structural strength but for feature floors and furniture – from fireplaces to kitchen benches.

Wellington architect Darren Matthews is an enthusiast for concrete and in this stunning new home he designed, he's created a showcase for the material and for modern modular design and construction.



The aesthetics of concrete – the modern modular medium

In a country which has traditionally favoured lightweight timber construction for its housing, the use of concrete masonry has often been associated with the solid country style homes. Ironically many large Mediterranean style homes have been built of timber and simply covered in a thin stucco or acrylic plaster on rigid board. Knock on a wall and it sounds hollow. Today many discerning and environmentally sensitive consumers are seeking the solid authenticity of concrete and its inherent thermal benefits.

Increasingly also, concrete is the material of choice for the design-aware who seek a gutsy, honest and no fuss material to create contemporary but durable homes

“This home embodies a modern yet timeless aesthetic,” says architect Darren Matthews of DC3 Design.

“I like concrete and it was great to have the opportunity to really show what you can do with it,” he says.

Matthews was commissioned to design the house by Firths who wanted a new show home in the Wellington area. He worked with builder Chris Foothead of Foothead Construction. Although Foothead is actually the owner of the home and is leasing the house back to Firths for a period, he did not assume the role of client and he and Matthews worked

in a conventional architect/builder relationship treating Firth as the client.

Matthews' brief was to design a home that demonstrates the features and benefits of masonry and concrete construction. Having built four concrete masonry homes previously and having worked with Matthews previously, including on Matthews' own home, Foothead was keen to pursue the project and able to trust the design aesthetic of the architect.

The house also had to have the 'wow factor'. In the absence of specific clients, with their multifarious needs, likes and dislikes, Matthews' approach to the design was to create a family home that he would like to live in – “I was really designing for myself,” he laughs.

Situated on a corner site in a new subdivision at Churton Park, one of Wellington's northern suburbs, the house had the opportunity to create a commanding presence. Dramatically different from its neighbours it does just that.

“My idea was firstly to create a welcoming entrance set back off the road. That in itself is quite different from other houses in the street which are all just plonked on the front of their sections. I wanted people to be able to walk up the path and arrive in a gallery space that greeted them with a little bit of grandeur. Although this is not a huge house we



Above: interior detail

Left and opposite: under construction

wanted to use a double height space at the entrance to make a statement.”

Of course, visitors to the house have already had their curiosity piqued with the large ‘shop front’ window at the front of the house – a feature Matthews found worked well in his own home overlooking the sea. “The window seems to make people want to come in and see what it’s like inside and then to stand there and look out.”

As with most contemporary homes, the house is designed around open plan living. The kitchen sits centrally connecting family and more formal living areas. Living is on the ground floor with a wonderful flow from indoors to the courtyard garden which creates an outdoor room extending the living area right to the edge of the property. Bedrooms are upstairs.

And from the moment of arrival, guests are aware of the materials of the house’s making.

Rough cast concrete paths lead through the courtyard garden to the front entrance, which is clad both outside and on the floor inside in soft golden Hinuera stone. To the left, in the double height gallery space, exposed blockwork walls and a cantilevered concrete floor reveal the house’s construction. To the right, gleaming polished concrete floors pull visitors into the family living and dining area. A handsome raised solid in situ concrete fireplace creates a strong feature – and upstairs reveals the depth of the walls and allows for built-in shelving.

Walls are predominantly plastered masonry, and where timber and concrete meet, a shadow line creates negative detailing and a clean contemporary line quite different to traditional architraves.

Concrete is also used extensively in the hard landscaping with concrete paving materials, retaining walls and planters. Yet the architect has been careful to avoid monotony with such extensive use of concrete and hard surfaces. Judicious use of timber and glass create balance and avoid any sense of hardness. “I was seeking to contrast material weights with a mix of concrete, timber and glass,” Matthews says.



The modular approach to design and construction

Both architect and builder stress that the key to masonry construction is practical and efficient planning. It does require a different kind of thinking to timber construction. The modular units, with blocks generally available in modules of 200 and 400mm, direct design considerations. But from an architectural point of view, a modular approach is not really any more difficult says Matthews.

“The major thing to think about is the services. You really need to future-proof houses and anticipate future needs for television, telephone and computer outlets in every room. So that has to be thought about quite carefully. When using fully grouted masonry construction, clients can’t easily put wires in at a later date if their needs change,” he says.

From the builder’s point of view, however, masonry construction is quite different to timber construction. And in a house like this, there is a lot less carpentry required.

The major carpentry tasks are the roof (and here even part of the roof is concrete), some internal walls and the fitting of windows and joinery. That means the builder generally needs more than one job going at a time if carpenters are to be kept busy.

“The builder’s job is more project management,” says Foothead. “You have more sub-contractors to co-ordinate. And people like electricians and plumbers tend to be on site earlier to ensure all their services are in place before concrete is poured.

And in a job like this, where there is exposed blockwork, quality blocklaying is essential. Getting a blocklayer who really appreciates quality is critical to the success of the job,” he says.

The construction process also proceeds in a different pattern – it’s less lineal and the order in which things happen is less obvious. “You might be putting in windows downstairs while the plasterer is working upstairs,” says Foothead.

Fitting other elements, such as louvres which also come in standard modules can also be tricky. However, many do come with a closure unit at the top which allows any lack of fit between the two modular systems to be bridged.

Despite the different mindset required, modular construction offers many advantages with units easy to handle and readily able to be taken to even the most challenging building sites.

This house certainly shows off its advantages. Cool but never cold, it shows concrete as the material of choice for contemporary and durable style. **C**