



# INTO THE WOODS

For a decade this family has been *putting down roots* in a *tree-lined* Waikato setting

WORDS DENISE IRVINE / PHOTOGRAPHS JACKIE MEIRING

**THESE PAGES** The Bark House is Kate and John Clarkson's family home on the outskirts of Hamilton; the boldly angled black pavilions flow along the edges of the clearing with tall, exotic trees as a backdrop; structured hedging of star jasmine and camellias appears very simple, but Kate says it's deceptively labour-intensive.



**THESE PAGES** (clockwise from top left) A glass-walled bridge at the front entrance links the living and sleeping pavilions; the flagstone steps that lead up to the house were inspired by the entrance to the Japanese Garden at Hamilton Gardens. The extended line of the roof and solid steel beams create an enclosed verandah in the living pavilion; a Bill Culbert light installation by the kitchen island is a favourite family gathering spot.

**A** MAGICAL CLEARING IN THE woods has been central to untold works of fiction. Kate and John Clarkson and their children have been living such stories for a decade.

Their contemporary home sits lightly in a grove of slender-trunked trees, looking out onto a green clearing where the Clarksons can watch the seasons unfold. Spring is John's favourite: "The oaks take on a wonderful luminous lime colour." Kate loves summer, when the house opens up to the outdoors.

The Clarksons' home is at Tamahere, on the outskirts of Hamilton. They built it when twins Grace and Edward were six years old and Richie was four.

"It's been a good place to grow kids," says Kate. "It's pastoral and serene, there's space for us to have animals and for the children to be noisy country kids."

Nowadays, Grace, Edward and Richie are teenagers and the house serves them just as well as it did when they were younger. Richie is a BMXer and has his own track, tucked behind a camellia hedge. Earlier this year, the clearing provided the perfect venue for an outdoor movie party for Grace and Edward's 16th birthdays.

A guest room off the garage has been tweaked to become a den with a big-screen TV; this was popular with the children and their friends, as was the later addition of the swimming pool. >







**THESE PAGES** (clockwise from above) Kate in the kitchen; the cabinets are in the same timber cladding as the exterior. John plays guitar in the living area with Mizzy, an eight-year-old Hungarian vizsla. Daughter Grace on the bridge; art in the foreground includes (clockwise from top left) works by Gavin Hurley, Michael Harrison, Richard Thomson, Richard Killeen and Seung Yul Oh.

There was a big clear space amid the planting that seemed the obvious site for the house but the architects suggested the opposite: build in the trees and look out to the clearing. The outcome, an elegant, boldly angled black-and-silver structure stretched along a slim footprint, prompted Kate declare: "This is it, I'm not moving any time soon." Simple building materials of rough bandsawn timber irregularly spaced battens, bold steel beams and wooden floor are in harmony with the surroundings. "It feels like a flash back doesn't feel like a grown-up home." >

Kate says they've never lived anywhere like this before. John is a medical specialist and his training had prompted a number of family moves in New Zealand and overseas. The tally was 10 houses in 10 years, all but one of them being rentals. After a period in John's home town of Hamilton, Kate decided she liked the place and wanted to raise her family there. So they found a slice of land, planted 20 years earlier with pin oaks, English oaks, black walnuts and Tasmanian blackwoods, and enlisted their friends Nicola and Lance Herbst, an award-winning Auckland architect team, to design them a home.



**THIS PAGE** (from top) Grace's bedroom is a favourite haunt of Burmese cat Lara; Grace chose the English wallpaper patterned with flowers and birds; the chair belonged to her grandmother Mary. Kate and John's lofty bedroom feels like being in a tree house; the John Reynolds painting is a favourite of Kate's.

**OPPOSITE** (from top) Looking into the master bedroom en suite; the artwork by Pip Culbert is of a deconstructed shirt. Kate always wanted a bath with a view.



Kate's background is in visual arts. She is a graduate of Canterbury University's School of Fine Arts, has undertaken various curatorial and management roles, and currently freelances on projects that interest her. She enjoyed working with Lance and Nicola on the house: "It was like working with artists, like curating an exhibition."

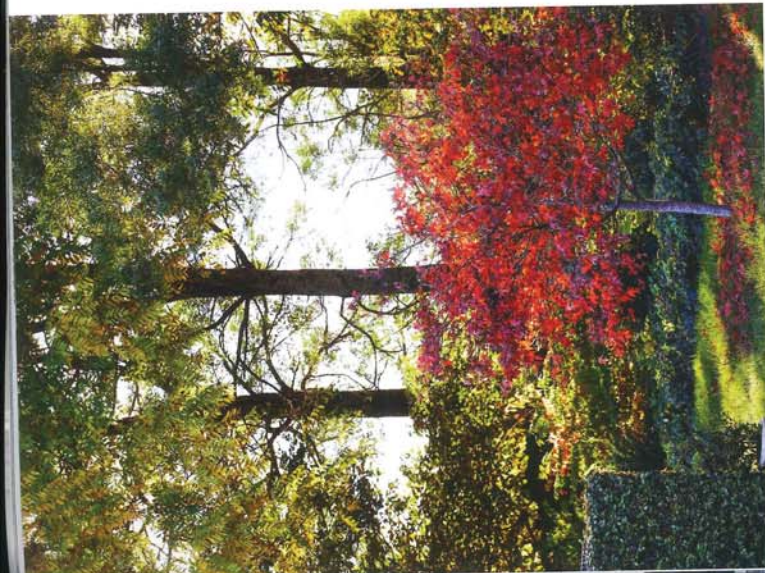
The architects named the Clarksons' place the Bark House. There are two box-shaped pavilions – one for living, one for sleeping – connected by a glass-walled indoor bridge that is also the entrance to the house.

The north-facing double-height living pavilion is the heart of the home, encompassing the kitchen, eating and seating areas. John says this was another idea from the architects: to create a generous space where the family can be together, otherwise everyone disappears to various corners of the building.

Glass sliding doors frame the views; there's almost a feeling of being on an outdoor verandah yet snugly enclosed by glass and the extended roof line. The living room also has a bank of south-facing clerestory windows that provide gentle light and glimpses of the treetops. >





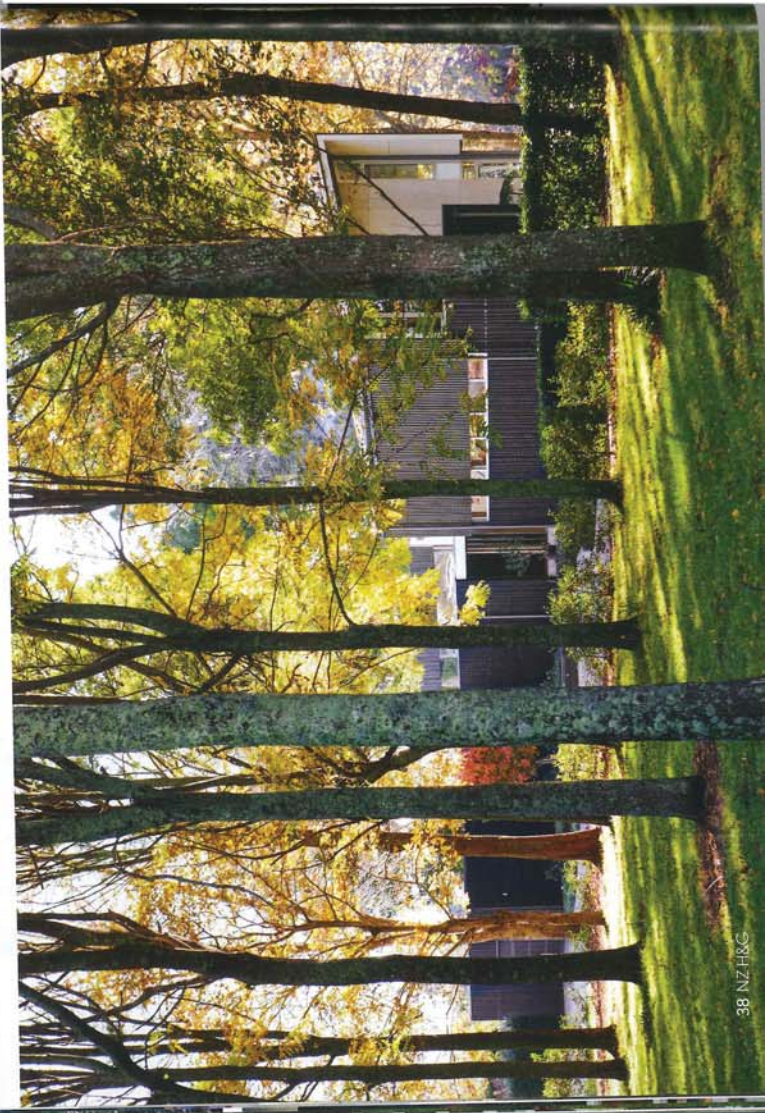


**THIS PAGE** (from top) A Japanese maple - Kate planted maples throughout the garden for seasonal colour and as a way of bringing tree foliage down to a more human scale from the forest canopy above. The first sight of the house as you enter the property's tree-lined driveway. **OPPOSITE** A potted maple that can be viewed from the entrance, through the glass bridge towards the garden beyond.

There are comfy couches and chairs, a fireplace, and a possum throw that serendipitously matches the colour of Burmese cats Lara and Podge. Contemporary art hangs throughout the house. Among the pieces in the living area are a black and white acrylic by Aboriginal artist Dorothy Napangardi, a black and white photograph from Fiona Pardington's *Hei Tiki* series, and a bleach-bottle light installation by Bill Culbert.

The children's bedrooms and shared study space are across the bridge in the sleeping pavilion, and Kate and John's spacious loft-style quarters are upstairs amid the trees.

No matter where you are in the house, there are vistas to the green outdoors and the ready-made forest that drew the Clarksons here a decade ago. Kate says they'll still be enjoying it when the kids have grown up and left home. ■



## Q&A

**WE HAD TO HAVE:** Walls for art.

**TIPS FOR OTHER HOME BUILDERS:** Make sure you have an architect and a builder you trust; remember there is no such thing as a perfect house; and, finally, enjoy the creative process.

**THE FAMILY'S FAVOURITE GATHERING PLACE:** Around a fire, inside or out.

**THE GARDEN IS A PLEASURE BECAUSE:** It's so peaceful. After gardening I always feel restored, calm and that I've had a complete workout.

**OLDEST DECISION:** In retrospect I guess it was to build an architectural house, because it's unlike any around us. But honestly at the time it just seemed a very natural thing to do. The architects were friends, we admired their work and we didn't think much beyond that.

*Kate Clarkson*