

LOVE LETTER



When a resourceful Methven couple couldn't find the perfect home, they shipped over a kitset from Europe and built it themselves.

PHOTOGRAPHY KATE CLARIDGE **WRITTEN BY** HOLLY JEAN BROOKER



S When Sandra and Wade McMillan moved from Auckland to Methven for a mountain lifestyle, they began searching for a new home that was smarter for the environment, high-quality and affordable – and discovered this wasn't the most realistic combination in New Zealand.

Because Wade is a design engineer and pretty handy, they decided that he would build the family a home, as his father had done years before.

The couple moved into a rental in the township, which lies near Mt Hutt, to give them time to do some research and hunt down the perfect spot to build. It appeared in the form of an unusually large 4000sqm section a stone's throw from the local pub, and next to a reserve, with beautiful mature trees.

"It's hard to find land this size in the area," Wade says. "We had looked at it once but it was out of our price range. When the owner suddenly dropped the →



LIVING ROOM Sandra and son Edward relax in the lounge. Wade made the coffee table, as well as many other pieces in the home – the couple own a fabricated steelwork and design company, Catalyst Design.





KITCHEN Wade and Sandra designed the cabinetry, which was made by Wade's longtime friend Brad Spencer.

DINING (facing page) The light shades are from Methven business Loftmotif. The ex-café chairs were a Trade Me find, while the dining table is a repurposed kauri door.

price significantly after seven years on the market, we jumped on it with an offer. It's an ex-sheep paddock – flat, private, and everything is within walkable distance."

Then came the house design. During their research, the couple became attracted to the idea of a log home.

"We discovered companies in New Zealand that import beautiful log kitset homes from Europe, but they were pretty pricey, so we went on the journey of ordering direct from overseas," Wade says. "We discovered we could order direct from one of the leading Latvian log house manufacturers, Dores Homes, which offered exactly what we were after, made with European spruce. And Sandra is from Latvia, so it was a nice pairing for us".

On a family holiday to visit relatives in Latvia, Wade and Sandra visited the Dores Homes factory, and were impressed with the quality and efficiency of their work. The couple drafted the layout themselves, loosely based on an existing Dores design, and the company drew up →





MAIN BEDROOM A navy feature wall adds a splash of colour. The other walls are treated with an Austrian wall glaze, tinted slightly to give a whitewash effect.

‘I wake up and I grin. I just love living in it. It’s been cool to go on this journey as a family, and the kids have loved it too.’

the technical plan, which Sandra and Wade had checked by a New Zealand structural engineer in preparation for submission to council.

Sandra, a ski and snowboard instructor, says the process of finding a shipping company and filling out the compliance and Customs paperwork felt “a little daunting” but it turned out to be straightforward. Even getting it through local council permission processes was smooth.

“The council came on the journey with us from the very beginning and were so encouraging and supportive. The plans went through with flying colours and within three weeks we had a building permit. The house took three months to manufacture and three months to ship over in three containers. It was just three months

putting the house together, with Wade full-time, and help from his dad and mates on weekends.”

However, the timing wasn’t ideal. The couple had just settled on the plans when they discovered they were expecting their third child, with the house arriving at Lyttleton’s port a week after little Thea was born. It was a whirlwind time, but the process couldn’t have gone smoother.

The three shipping containers even had a bit of space left over after the house was packed, so before the shipment left Europe, the clever couple hunted for good prices for everything from triple-glazed windows, specialised timber paint, toilets and insulation to oak flooring, staircase materials and internal doors, to include in the delivery.



“We could buy everything at the higher spec for less cost than in New Zealand,” Wade said. “A pre-finished solid oak door in Latvia cost the same as installing a hollow MDF door in New Zealand.”

They documented the process on their Instagram page, and garnered much interest from followers looking at alternative sustainable build options.

“In New Zealand, there’s a negative impression of kitset homes, but in Europe it’s a very typical way of building with timber,” Wade says. “For me, as an engineer, building the house was so satisfying – everything just fits perfectly. To have hundreds of pieces of wood slot together with perfection, right down to the millimetre, made it a real pleasure to build and put together with my own hands.”

Sandra says the couple has been surprised about how perfect the home is for the climate. “It’s super warm in the winter, and cool in the summer, and it was great to know that there was minimal building





BATHROOM All the tapware and shower fittings in the house are Hansgrohe, bought in Europe for a third of the New Zealand price, and shipped back in Sandra's suitcase.

KIDS' ROOMS Elizabete and Thea (facing page) choose to share a room, for the company.

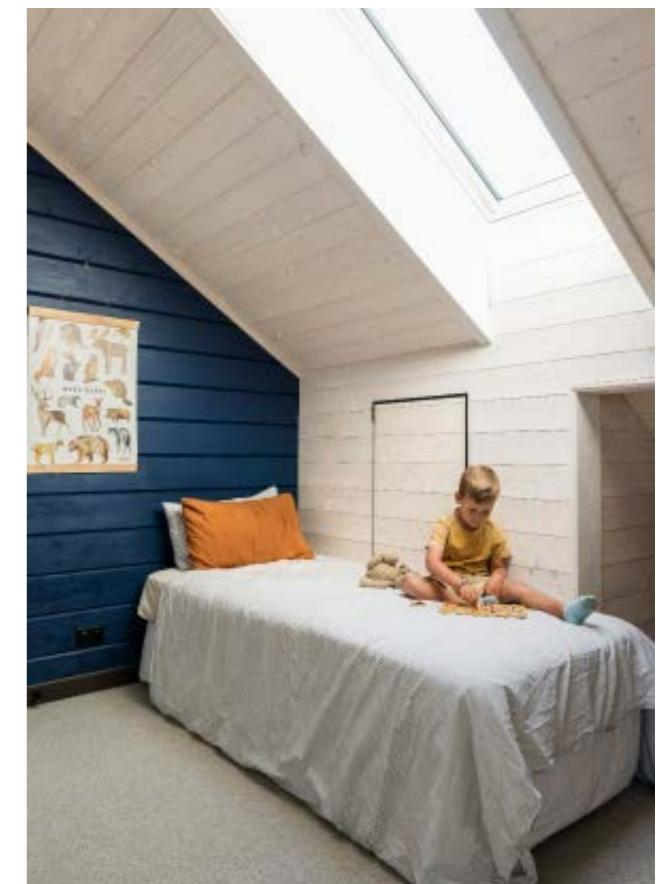
waste created and that the timber is untreated".

The wrapping that the building supplies came in generated most of the waste. But because the timber was untreated, all of the offcuts were able to be used in their log burner.

The couple finished the interior fit-out after they moved in, with Sandra painting the inside after the children went to bed at night. "Having had a newborn during the build, it felt like another area I could contribute to."

The solid timber interior is painted white throughout, to lighten the home, with forest green and navy used in some spaces. Oak timber flooring and exposed beams added to the mountaineous style.

The interior style and landscaping was largely Sandra's domain but, she says with a laugh, "Wade was very opinionated. When we were dating, he was looking at kitchen stuff that we should get and in what colours and I remember feeling a bit annoyed – that →





OUTDOOR LIVING
Wade and Sandra enjoy the stunning results of their hard work, while the kids particularly appreciate the swing their dad made from a decommissioned chairlift from the Mt Hutt ski field.



was my domain! So we've had to learn to meet in the middle – I have to run stuff by him.”

Wade, who works from home and travels to Auckland every fortnight, has a home office/workshop, which will one day be used as a rumpus room. They plan to order another building that will incorporate a garage, workshop, and office.

At 186sqm the house is spacious, warm, and ticks the “quality” box, while the private section gives the kids plenty of room to run around on – and even includes a ski hill the couple built for winters, when the snow arrives.

“I wake up and I grin,” Wade says. “Sure, there are things I might have done differently, but I just love living in it. It’s been cool to go on this journey as a family, and the kids have loved it too. With

our story, we want to encourage other Kiwis to look outside the standard building practices and build smarter for themselves and the environment.”

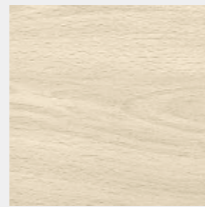
With the hard work done, the couple have decided to head to Latvia for an eight-month sabbatical, which will give them a well-deserved break and allow them to reconnect with family after long years separated by Covid. The home is up for holiday rental on Airbnb, and already has many bookings for the winter months.

For Sandra, having the home built with Latvian timber has been a surprisingly nice, grounding connection. “For me to live so far away from my family home in Latvia but to dwell within a home made with the trees of my home country, it’s pretty special. We often say the house is like Wade’s love letter for me.” 🇱🇻



STAIRCASE Like the house itself, the staircase was shipped over from Latvia. A gallery displays art, family photos and other mementos. Most of the frames are thrift shop finds.

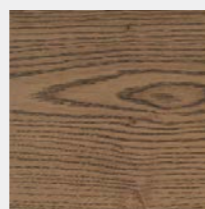
FINISHING TOUCH



Resene Colorwood Whitewash from Resene ColorShop.



Sticks mosaic tiles in ivory from The Tile Depot.

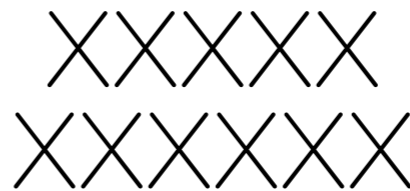


Quattro oak plank flooring in fume from Living Wood.



Troika loop-pile wool carpet in sochi from Bremworth.

Swipe the style



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Simple kitchen fixes

- For the kitchen, the couple used a cabinetmaker in Invercargill, and chose cabinetry made with black Polaris HPL, a birch plywood laminate that happens to come from Latvia, where Sandra is from.
- The 6mm stainless steel benchtop wasn't Sandra's first choice, but Wade was adamant on this. She's come to love it – it's sturdy, easy to clean, and she says you don't need to be precious with it.