

UNDER COVER Jess and Joel Mowat's portico, with its valley outlook and outdoor fire/pizza oven, works as the perfect outdoor lounge for entertaining.



Split decisions

Leaving the city and heading north to embark on a new build was a happy leap of faith for a savvy young family

Text **Holly Jean Brooker**
Photography **Babiche Martens**



Meet & greet

Joel Mowat (director of Movewell Physio), **Jess Mowat** (mum/teacher), **Sailor**, four, **Xanthe**, three, and **Sullivan**, one.

For the former Auckland couple Jess and Joel Mowat, trading the big smoke for a big patch of land and a shipping container abode, was a leap towards a lifestyle they wanted to create for their whānau to reflect the relaxed natures of their own childhoods.

The coastal community at magical Mangawhai in Northland felt like the right fit for the active family who love the ocean, surfing and running, so they purchased a piece of land that was left vacant until they were ready to move north in 2017.

Living on the land

The savvy couple land-banked for three years before they moved north to build, initially purchasing a 60m² container house to live in on site. “We fell in love with the land and our wee portable home, and while we knew we wanted to have our family grow up here one day, we became unexpectedly pregnant and realised we were going to outgrow the container very quickly. We immediately started looking at designing a new build,” says Jess.

The design process

Focusing their home around a simple design was key for the Mowats and allows the beauty of nature to shine.

“We wanted to celebrate the native bush surrounds, it had to be family friendly and to be a whare that reflects who we are. The concepts of longevity and practicality were at the forefront of our minds when selecting materials and other design choices. The tension throughout for us (other than budget) was always between form and function. There were lots of things we’d seen that we really liked but if it wasn’t going to look good for long or wasn’t practical, it usually got rejected, which was really hard,” says Joel.

The couple engaged a local draughtsman, Stephen Orchard, to draw up their designs with their builder, Hayden Coates. This decision ensured that they didn’t miss any important details and stick to the budget, which helped guide their decision-making process.

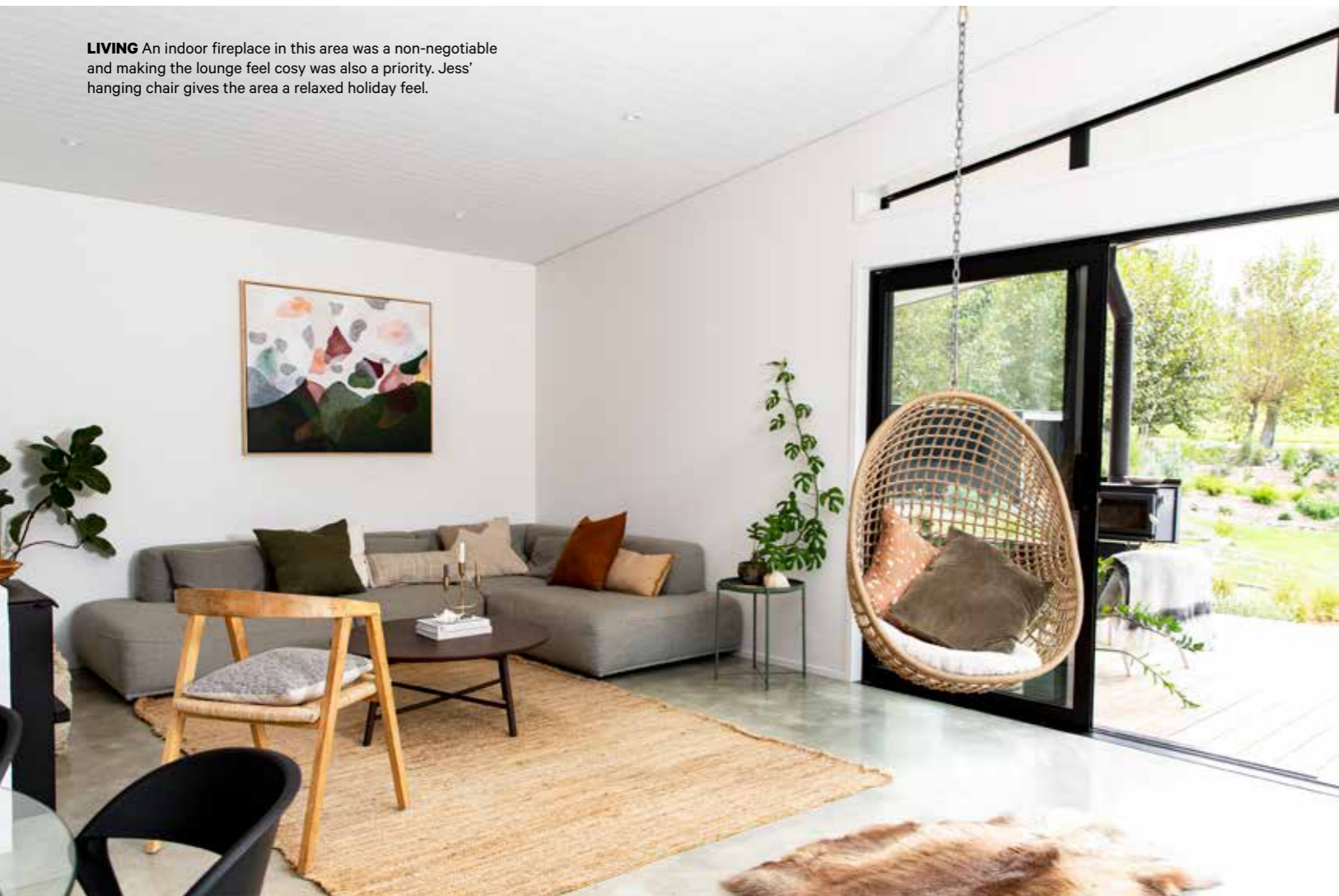
“To achieve a complete four-bedroom home with a garage within our budget, we decided on a classic design aesthetic with the ability to switch or change our style in simple ways like soft furnishings and artwork,” says Jess.

“We decided on a classic design aesthetic with the ability to switch or change our style in simple ways.”

JESS MOWAT



LIVING An indoor fireplace in this area was a non-negotiable and making the lounge feel cosy was also a priority. Jess' hanging chair gives the area a relaxed holiday feel.



The build begins

Anyone who has endured the challenges of a new build will know it's no walk in the park. But the Mowats took it in their stride, along with the arrival of a new baby and another pregnancy following quite soon after. To say they don't do things by halves is an understatement.

"Having two babies during the build probably intensified an already full-on experience. I think I got

decision fatigue by the end," recalls Jess. "I remember the builder asking me about the placement of the toilet roll holder but by that point I was like, just put it wherever. The amount of research required and conversation around every single decision is immense. I found that fun at the beginning but it did get tiring when I had other priorities."

Jess admits the site visits and the bigger design choices were pretty exhilarating. "It was like Christmas over and over again – seeing the progress was exciting."

The Mowats used bagged brick on the exterior and also on the interior entrance/lounge wall. The split level of the home was a great decision, giving the feeling that the bedroom wing is more separate, with the high stud (2.7m) in the bedrooms creating the feeling of extra space.

The full-length windows throughout the home maximise the native bush views while the concrete floors are practical and add a contemporary feel. "We love them for their imperfectness and the way they hold heat and are so easy to clean with three messy kids around," says Jess. The use of timber accents throughout the home adds texture and brings the outdoors in to soften the space.

Practical choices

Living in the container home with glass on both sides was a great experience for the Mowats who came to realise they wanted their new lounge to feel snug and private.





They opted against the typical use of extensive windows on the southern side of the house.

“We wanted to capture the height of the ridge line, as we are at the bottom of a valley, by including headlight windows above our sliders, which we love. An indoor fireplace was a non-negotiable for us as well, with Jess’ hanging egg chair perfectly positioned,” says Joel.

A modern style for the kitchen made sense for the young family. The handleless cabinetry adds to this seamless look, with the soft feel of Acrymatte by Sage doors adding a beautiful touch. Joel extended the height of the cabinetry for drama, and they added an office nook for future homework spots for the kids. The 5mm stainless steel benchtop that’s 3.9m long with a matching negative detail is a practical choice with an interesting touch. “We love the industrial look here. Joel and eight of his mates installed it but it nearly killed them. It’s very heavy,” says Jess. They included two large pantries for extra storage and to keep the benchtops clean.

Like all new builds, some decisions look great on paper but didn’t work in the execution. “The kitchen splashback was going to be large floor tiles to minimise grout, but once the kitchen was installed, I didn’t like it,” says Jess. The couple bought more tiles and settled on the current ones from Tile Space to create the handmade imperfect look they love.

An open field

The site the couple built on was essentially a paddock, with no landscaping. They engaged landscape architect and friend Robin Shafer to develop a concept for the large piece of land. This included forming two large mounds of soil, transforming it into an interesting native plantation.



“The amount of research required and conversation around every single decision is immense. I found that fun at the beginning.”

JESS MOWAT



BATHROOM The vanity top is made of engineered stone off-cuts and is paired with dark tiles. **NURSERY** Sullivan’s light and airy bedroom. The prints were bought in a market in France.



MAIN BEDROOM This room is Jess’ favourite place. Their builder Hayden made the built-in headboard. **LAUNDRY** An external shower with a door to the laundry ensures not too much sand is trekked into the house after a trip to the beach. **DISPLAY CASE** The wooden shoe lasts were found in France.



PICTURE PERFECTION Beautifully framed, the comfortable and spacious window seat, with its view to a kānuka grove, is where the children like to have books read to them early in the morning or before bed.

They hired a digger to shape the land themselves, sowing lawn, planting an orchard and hedging around the deck and section for privacy. Their handiwork extended to creating a kids' playhouse, a Gabon basket retaining wall and building a bridge over the local stream, a favourite spot for the family to explore. "There are several eels and kōura (including their 'pet' eel, Courgette) and the kids like doing leaf boat races, or walking over logs that cross the stream."

For the beach lifestyle in Mangawhai, building an outdoor shower was a no-brainer, along with the external door to the laundry, allowing the kids to rinse off all that sand and ditch the wet togs and towels before entering the main house.

A winning team

For Joel, the team dynamic was essential to a successful project. "Working with a good team right from the start made a huge difference. Seeing images of what we'd love meant we had to get creative about achieving a similar look on a much lower budget. I enjoyed the process of achieving my vision for the brick cladding. It wasn't straightforward and the brickies struggled to break out of the norm where the bricks are usually aligned but we got there in the end."

Jess agrees that team spirit is so important, even more so as a couple. "We realised during this build that we are actually a great team. Joel's a total visionary and I'm not as much, so we had to learn to communicate well and I learnt to trust him as he had great ideas. We learnt a lot about each other, I think."

"We both knew what we wanted. Jess had a clear sense of style, was creative and was adaptive in the decision-making process," says Joel.

Favourite places

The main bedroom with its window seat is Jess' haven, she says. "I love hiding from my children there. We often read books there in the early morning or before bed. It's the closest part of the house to the bush and is kind of nestled in a grove of huge kānuka." Their builder custom-made the built-in headboard and the window seat out of Siberian larch, which is what was used in some of the external cladding.

For the vanity countertops in the main bathroom, they sourced engineered stone off-cuts and got the carcasses custom-made through BathCo, partnered with darker tiles and brushed nickel tapware for a luxe look. The full-length window makes for a pretty special shower experience.

For Joel it's the portico, an outdoor room that provides extended living for the young family and their guests when entertaining. "We spend a lot of time out there. The outdoor fire has a pizza oven inside so we regularly make pizzas or toast marshmallows. It's like an outdoor lounge, which is awesome, as we love being outside. I also find the lounge really special, it's cosy with the fireplace and the bush outlook is restful."

Happy ever after

Two years, two kids and a lot of hard work later, the home was finished in 2019 and the family absolutely love it. "We feel extremely blessed and grateful to be able to live here and for our kids to experience this as their norm. We treasure how peaceful it is, as it's our hearts' desire to provide a home for our family that is a haven, a safe place. We don't feel the need to be too precious about the house. We don't know how long we'll stay here, but for now we are just enjoying it," says Jess. ●