

close up

marshall cook — new zealand

Pacific nomad

| *Marshall Cook* is one of New Zealand's most significant architects with a body of work spanning 40 years and six countries. His critical *understanding of local climate* and construction produces work that is rich, layered and highly crafted. Andrea Stevens speaks to him about the permanent and the ephemeral in his houses and the *social dimension* of his architecture.



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I 02

I 01 Opposite
Marshall Cook at work
in his studio.

I 02

Wallace House
Looking up at the top
floor reveals architectural
references to the sheds
in neighbouring backyards.

Inspired by the buildings of his youth, and his work and travel around the Pacific Rim, Marshall Cook draws on two distinct architectural traditions to express a New Zealand identity. He contrasts the solidity and permanency of his European heritage with the lighter and more ephemeral qualities of timber architecture from Asia and the Pacific. He believes the dynamics between permanent and transient, solid and light, past and present, express aspects of the national psyche. "Many New Zealanders are culturally and intellectually nomadic," says Cook, "quick to pick up ideas, and quick to move on. We continually question whether we belong here."

The notion of temporary occupation and a light footprint, in a land where Maori teach custodianship rather than ownership, connects with Cook's ideas about the environment and our place in it. He has responded to these issues throughout his career by exploring the social and environmental aspects of housing, and by developing a modern vernacular that symbolically expresses his views. He enjoys working on low-cost housing and has been involved with several government social housing projects. Currently, he is most interested in developing urban models for residential architecture and sees a move towards shared occupancies and ownerships – of offices, apartments, cars, beach homes – and a subsequent greater use of facilities. "That is what really interests me about the future," he says.

Growing up in the small Art Deco town of Napier gave Cook a very early appreciation of modern architecture. His father was a cartographer and knew many of the local architects from the post-War period, when there





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I 03 *Opposite*
North Shore House
A central 'street' acts as main entry and circulation corridor.

I 04
Wallace House
The contrasts of solid and ephemeral can be seen in the play between concrete block and the open filigree timber and steel of the upper floors.

I 05 *Following*
Cook House
The internal 'street' in the Cook family home of 1989 was a place where all family members could connect.

I 06
Cook House
The ensuite bathroom in the first Cook House displays subtle Japanese influences.

I 07
Wood/Golder House
The careful selection of materials for this house knits it into an established neighbourhood.

I 08
Wood/Golder House
The main living space of the Wood/Golder House.

was a focus on ideas coming from the New World. "I grew up with this idea that architecture represented newness and progress," recalls Cook, "rather than looking back to historical gestures." During his university holidays, Cook worked for the influential architect John Scott, who drew inspiration from traditional Maori structures and simple farm buildings. "Scott's work was revolutionary. He influenced our generation rather than the previous one, so we all worked in concrete block and timber, and I still do."

He took a three-year break from his degree in Auckland to work for Bill Wilson and Ivan Juriss from Group Architects. This period exposed Cook to some of New Zealand's most innovative residential architecture, and an entirely different response to climate and lifestyle than he had experienced in the cooler climate of Hawke's Bay. The light timber buildings were unpretentious and open in planning, with indoor-outdoor flow and large areas of glass. This early exposure to New Zealand's modern movement is still evident in his work. The Wood/Golder House of 2002 has a string of children's bedrooms opening onto a north-facing playroom, then outdoors onto a wide patio. Skylights, timber joinery and exposed timber beams create a warm, honest house. Subtle Japanese qualities are evident in the elegant fenestration and post-and-beam detailing.

Cook set up his own practice in 1968, and the firm continues today as Cook Sargisson & Pirie. The practice has spent long periods working around the Pacific Rim – Colorado, Japan, Australia and Thailand. His exposure to traditional tropical architecture added a further dimension to Cook's work. He began layering the skin of his buildings, and incorporating what he calls 'eyelashes' to moderate light, rain and wind. Overhangs, pergolas, deep mullions and louvres are used in combination to filter and soften light, creating a transition between inside and out. These environments are both comfortable and energy efficient. "Our light is bright but soft, and our dark bush absorbs all the light and shadow. This comes out in our architecture. The colour, the light reflection and the glass ratios

close up



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| “I’ve always liked the idea that houses have an *anchor* – the permanent and the ephemeral, the *heavy and the light* working together. I believe we are part of the environment, but we are not really permanent.”

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MARSHALL

are different to other countries, and the way buildings sit in the landscape responds to that difference,” Cook explains. In almost all of his houses he incorporates solid concrete floors and masonry trombe walls to act as heat sinks.

The social dimensions of his architecture are incredibly well resolved, both internally and externally. “The biggest change I’ve seen is how you manage a contemporary family and the presence of all the members of the family at the important collecting times like eating. That always has priority in planning,” he says. In the first house he built for his family in Parnell of 1989, a central ‘street’ acts as main entry and circulation corridor with the two main living spaces opening on to it. As a gateway, family members and friends must always pass this central social space before moving on to private areas. It keeps everyone in touch with each other and allows for the subtle surveillance of children and adolescents. The practice’s most recent house, the North Shore House of 2008, features a similar space only much more sophisticated. Large movable walls enable whole sections of the house to be completely shut down and others opened up.

Cook’s new family home in Freemans Bay, completed in 2008, is a synthesis of his beliefs on urban housing and his tectonic approach to design. Set in an historic neighbourhood of timber colonial houses on small lots, the Cook House responds very carefully and sensitively to scale and materials. This has enabled a contemporary house in terms of form and detail, to integrate gracefully into its context. While existing houses are located on the street edge with empty backyards, the planning for the Cook House was in response to sun orientation and privacy. Two-storey volumes occupy the front and rear of the site, book-ending the conservatory-like





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Franklin Road House

The new Cook House displays subtle references to its historic neighbourhood through its use of scale.

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Franklin Road House

The light-filled kitchen and dining room flows seamlessly into a walled courtyard.



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central living space – a contrast of solid and light. Facing east, the space opens onto a private, walled courtyard. The wing located at the rear of the site has been detailed in timber to soften its presence and be in harmony with its neighbours. The wing addressing the street is altogether more urban – clad in brick tile, Carrara marble, glass and large motorised external timber louvres – and it creates a strong formal presence to the public realm. An innovative feature of the house is the flexibility it offers for family, extended family or working from home. The entry hall can be completely open or completely closed off from the living area, creating a separate apartment from the main house. The apartment itself can be further closed down with acoustic sliding walls, to form individual rooms or leave as a single open space.

“I’ve always liked the idea that houses have an anchor – the permanent and the ephemeral, the heavy and the light working together. I believe we are part of the environment, but we are not really permanent. So, in the last two years I have been trying to express that in architectural terms, as a social condition of New Zealanders,” says Cook. All of his houses deal with this in some way. In the Wallace House of 1998, the solid anchor appears as a large concrete block volume for garage and accommodation at ground and first floors. A three-storey glazed stair and circulation space links this to stacked ‘glasshouses’ – rich in references to the garden sheds found in neighbouring backyards.

Cook has developed an architectural synthesis from the cultural, social and environmental landscape of his country. His buildings are lovingly and carefully crafted, with an innate understanding of materials, texture and detail. Beautifully proportioned spaces and openings, human scale and warmth, and the play of light across surfaces combine to create buildings with great depth, richness and charm.

Cook Sargisson & Pirie, cooksargisson.co.nz