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Nelson, in the north-west corner of New Zealand's South Island, has a heck of a lot going for it – three national parks, sweeping sandy beaches, boutique wineries, restaurants, arts and crafts stalls and a thriving cafe culture.

It's also officially the sunniest region in New Zealand – which is what attracted Helen Richards to the place. Helen, 34, is a British-born architect who is spearheading next-generation housing that utilises solar energy to maintain a consistent temperature all year round.

After moving to New Zealand in 2000, her conviction that this was the way forward led her to form Powered Living Ltd, the first design-and-build company to integrate design flair and conventional construction techniques with specialist knowledge on energy efficiency. Two years later, she put all this to the test when she designed her own energy-efficient home, which she finally moved into in March 2004.

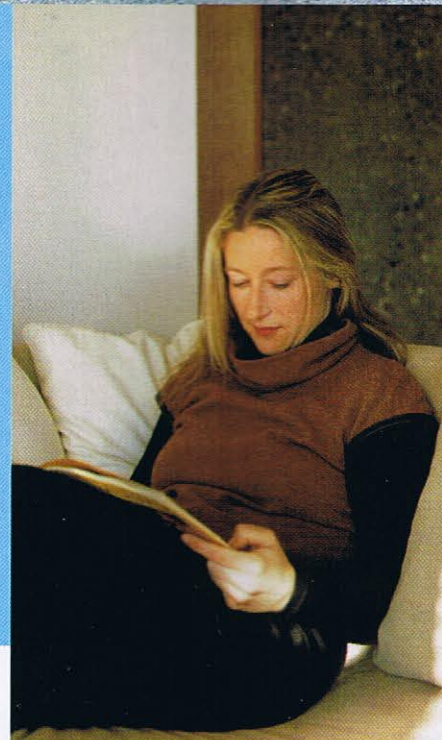
"Conventional buildings use a huge amount of energy," Helen explains. "In fact, buildings across the world are responsible for 50 per cent of CO2 emissions. This house is designed to capture and use energy from the sun to maintain a constant internal temperature of 17-20°C (63-68°F) all year round. This is not only energy efficient, but it saves money, too."

Helen's interest in energy consumption began when she was a student at Kingston University in London. Later, working as an architect in the City of London, she tried to push aside her environmental concerns and get on with the job. "But I was very frustrated – I felt my work lacked meaning. I was designing house extensions that looked attractive, but were soulless," she recalls.

Her partner at the time felt the same, so in 2000 they took a year out to travel – and ended up in



Clockwise from above
An unassuming front door gives no clue as to the inspired layout and energy-efficient features inside; a terrazzo wall panel in the 'snug' (situated off the main living area) stores and disperses radiant energy from the sun via the curved wall of windows to the front of the house; the open-plan kitchen and dining area is a sociable setting for entertaining – the concrete flooring, coloured and polished to create a natural stone effect, is not only sleek and lovely but also crucial to the energy-efficient design; Helen relaxes with a bit of light reading



The house remains cool in the summer and warm in the winter



the town of Nelson in New Zealand. Here, Helen came up with a design for an adaptable, one-to-two-storey timber-framed house incorporating energy-efficient passive solar heating that was suitable for a building company to construct.

“Passive solar heating is unusual in a ‘normal’ house,” says Helen, “so getting everything right took a lot of work. I involved Roger Walker, an architect who had a similar idea for this type of house in the 1970s.” Helen had the design patented – and Roger is now her business associate.

Helen found a site on a hill in the residential suburbs of Nelson that not only captured that all-important solar energy, but also had fabulous views out across the Tasman Bay. While she didn't get any encouragement from Nelson's planning officials, they didn't make it harder for her either. In New Zealand, planners take a more laid-back approach to housing, which makes it easier for people like Helen to push the boundaries and create ecologically sustainable homes.



Helen called her design the 'Powered Living' house – basically it's a box situated on an east-west elongation with plenty of windows oriented within 30° of true north. The windows collect radiant energy from the sun – more in winter, less in summer – which is then stored as heat via a suitably sited concrete central wall and a concrete floor slab. Radiant heat is then released as required and as temperatures are regulated, the house stays cool in summer and warm in winter – without any other means of heating, although Helen does have a few conventional radiators "in the unlikely event that there's no sun for a week or more." A solar panel in the roof heats the hot water, with a top-up electric coil to maintain the temperature in cloudy conditions.

"The basic design is simple and cheap to build," says Helen. "My house is simply a bigger, more expensive version, with a curve on the front and a few internal changes, like the sunken lounge. What is crucial is where the glass is in relation to the sun, and where the concrete is in relation to the glass."

The open-plan layout has an L-shaped hall at its



Solar power is not only energy-efficient, it can save money, too



centre with openings and sliding doors into the main living area on one side (kitchen and dining areas and sunken lounge), and an office, bathroom and master bedroom with en-suite shower room on the other side. There are also two rooms at either end of the hall, one a guest bedroom with full height windows/patio doors and its own small deck, the other, a small wedge-shaped sitting room linked to the lounge. Outside, decked balconies echo the curved front exterior so Helen can maximise the sun and make the most of the views.

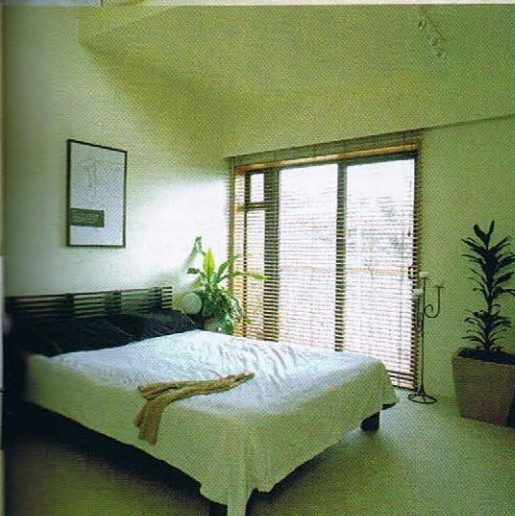
Apart from the house's unique energy-efficient design, inside it's the concrete walls and floors that steal the show. If you thought this was a boring industrial material then think again. The panels in the hall and sitting room are *terrazzo* (multicoloured stone chips set into concrete and polished when dry).

The concrete floor throughout the kitchen, dining and living area is a warm honey colour, polished to give it a reflective sheen and scored to create the appearance of flagstones. Elsewhere, thick slabs of grey concrete form a two-sided counter top and divider in the kitchen and basin stands in bath/shower rooms.

In the sunken lounge, wood panelling, together with wooden slatted blinds and lots of leafy plants provide a softer focus to polished concrete surfaces and matt-finish neutral decor. The kitchen is a cool and contemporary work zone with grey

Clockwise from above

The split-level polished concrete floor in the bathroom looks like natural limestone and extends around a sunken bath – thick slabs of concrete also make an unusual basin worktop and frame above the built-in storage cupboards; like the rest of the house, Helen's bedroom is decorated in neutral tones – and is the only room with a carpet; stainless steel appliances and worktops give the kitchen a cool and contemporary look; changes in floor level help define different spaces in the open-plan living space – an L-shaped sofa unit fits snugly into the sunken seating area, while maintaining contact with the kitchen





Above Decked balconies follow the contours of the partially curved exterior of the house, allowing Helen to make the most of the sun, and enjoy the view across town to the bay beyond

steel-effect base units on three sides. It's a layout that lets Helen cook and still be in contact with people in the dining or living area. The furniture is modern and minimalist – a taupe-coloured suede-effect modular corner seating unit and matching cubes that serve as seats or tables, plus another smaller suede-effect day bed and chair in the adjoining sitting room.

Equally eye-catching is the aluminium-framed opaque glass partition which partially separates her office from the central hallway. Lit from inside, it is stunning at night and is a feature in its own right.

When Helen moved in, the first thing she did was throw a party to celebrate the launch of what she unsentimentally labelled 'House One'. "Having something tangible to show people is a huge benefit for any design prototype," she says.

Although she's not looking too far ahead, Helen sees her future here with her current partner Dougal, an outdoors instructor. "New Zealand is an amazingly beautiful country," she reflects, "a place where you can make nature a big part of your life." Never has the phrase 'a place in the sun' been more strictly appropriate... ☀

For more details, visit www.poweredliving.co.nz or e-mail info@poweredliving.co.nz

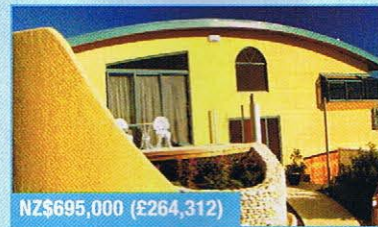
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Solar flair

This imaginatively designed, environmentally-friendly building in the town of Nelson, New Zealand, is the creation of British-born architect Helen Richards. Run off solar energy, it's a place not only in the sun, but actually powered by it...

Words by Beverley B'low, Pictures by Douglas Gibb

