

Anne Stewart and John Craig with their standard poodles, Ruby and Judd.

# PRIVATE LIVES

**Clever design and planting have given an Orakei couple privacy without hampering the flowing indoor-outdoor feel of their townhouse, says Suzanne Mahaffie.**

**A**fter eight months basking in the heat of the Arizona desert, John Craig and Anne Stewart knew they could not live without warmth and sunshine.

But on their return to Auckland they were unable to find a property which gave them the amount of sun they craved.

They decided to create their own oasis – despite the vagaries of Auckland's weather and the limitations of a tiny, 340 square metre site in suburban Orakei.

Said Anne: "It's a bit of a shock to look back at photos of what was here when we started. There were no trees at all – just a pile of clay."

However, with John's background as an ornithologist (he is now Professor of Environmental Management at Auckland University) and Anne's degree in botany, the two had formidable skills to bring to the task.

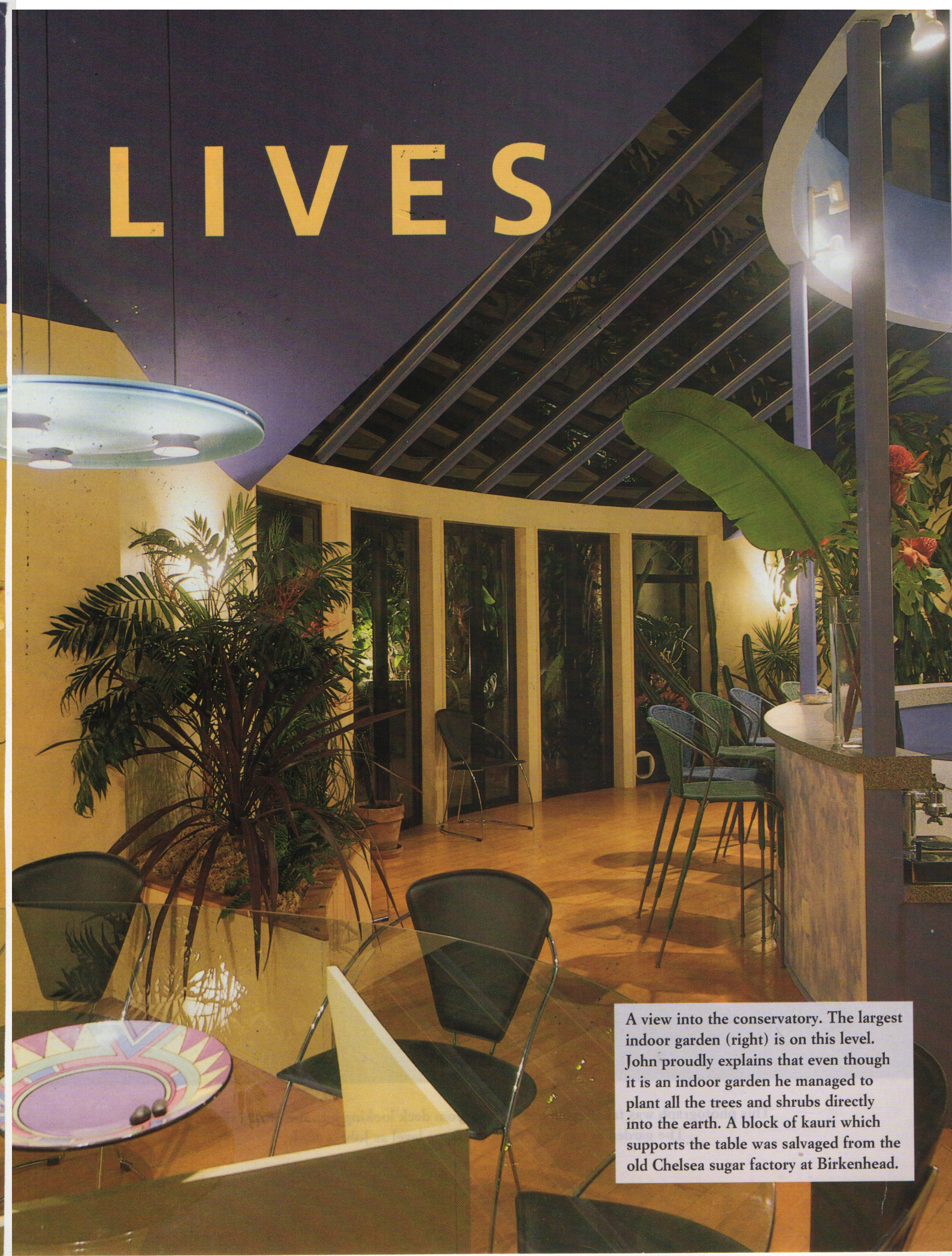
They also had definite ideas about what

they wanted, which made it a testing time for architects Neil and Linda Simmons. Everyone, however, was satisfied with the eventual result.

Privacy was a major issue, too. With neighbours only metres away John and Anne were nonetheless adamant they did not want curtains at any windows – including the bathroom – to interfere with the flow between inside and outside, and the overall feeling of openness. Said Anne: "My mother couldn't help herself. The first few times she came here she was very concerned we didn't have a shower curtain."

Clever design and planting have provided complete seclusion. In fact the rate of growth of both natives and exotic plants has been remarkable. Some trees have already been cut out or pruned severely – despite the fact there was no usable soil at all at the start of the project. Truckloads of topsoil and heavy mulching have borne spectacular results.

**Photographs: Patrick Reynolds**



A view into the conservatory. The largest indoor garden (right) is on this level. John proudly explains that even though it is an indoor garden he managed to plant all the trees and shrubs directly into the earth. A block of kauri which supports the table was salvaged from the old Chelsea sugar factory at Birkenhead.





This photograph was taken from the lounge-room deck looking into the dining room.  
The garden at top right is on the same level as John's study.

Night-time in the tiny townhouse brings its own pleasures, with the lush garden fully lit. Said John: "At night the house seems almost wall-less. It's wonderful to lie in bed and see only the garden and stars. We like to turn all the inside lights off, and all the outside ones on. The garden looks magical."

Reminders of the Arizona sabbatical feature in the central living area, with three-metre cacti towering above the indoor gardens. Tragedy almost struck when the largest specimen toppled down into the kitchen after a stray cat took to watering it. Said Anne: "We heard this almighty crash in the night and came running out." Fortunately, tender care has restored it to good health.

Scaffolding and a brave heart were needed to reach the pitch of the ceiling above the kitchen, which was painted in tones of deep midnight blue in remembrance of desert nights.

Anne and John cheerfully admit their home has been built around their personalities and needs with little thought to what the market or future owners may demand. Said Anne: "It is a one-bedroom, two-study townhouse. We specifically wanted it that way."

John's office has an internal window open to the kitchen and dining area because he enjoys some noise and human contact while he's working. Anne, who is director of the Master of Business Administration and Diploma in Management at the Graduate School of Business, likes to shut her door. "We can escape from each other if we want to," she says.

And adds: "We've realised that not everyone appreciates the same things we do. We are a bit off the edge, high-risk takers. We are thrilled with the way the house has evolved."

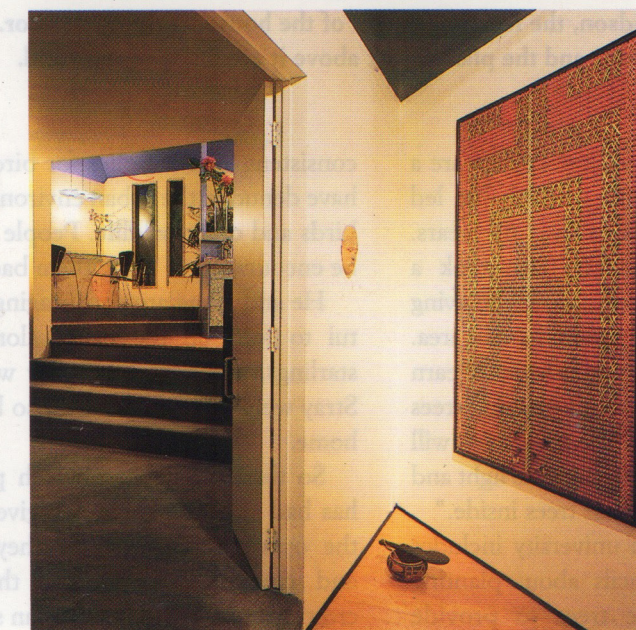
With eight levels from garage to guest sleeping loft, built in a spiral around a central circular wall, their 220 square metre home is an impressive use of vertical space. As well as providing intimacy, each room has an outdoor deck which means the house can be stretched for entertaining. More than 50 friends were catered for comfortably at a recent family celebration.



"We spend more time here than in any other part of the house," said Anne. She sponged the cupboard doors on a base colour of Resene Tradewinds. John laid the tawa floor.



The Turkish rug on the back of one of a pair of sofas which look out to the lower garden was given to John by his children.



This is part of the entranceway. Resting on the Hopi Indian bowl which the couple brought back from Arizona is a wahaika (short club) made by John. The tukutuku panel on the wall was a commission by the couple for weaver Hinemoa Harrison and tells the story of their life together. The death mask on the opposite wall was made by a carver at Auckland University's marae.





The window of the en suite off the main bedroom looks on to pohutukawa roots on the fourth highest level of the steep property.

Harley Davidson, the feline occupant of the house, at the front door. Both the door and the planter box above it are made of redwood.

Trees, native plants and wildlife are a passion for the couple – which has led to some dramatic steps over the years. When the builders left John took a concrete saw to a set of steps in the living room and cut out his indoor garden area. One of the rules architects have to learn to break, he said, is about planting trees close to your home. “The fear is this will block the light, but our house is light and warm – and we have our trees inside.”

John’s job at the university includes advising local councils about planting corridors of native trees to provide

consistent food supplies for birds. “We have denuded the urban environment of birds and other wildlife. People have to be encouraged to bring them back.”

He and Anne are encouraging a local tui to feed on the patio, along with starlings, silver-eyes and grey warblers. Stray weta and spiders are also brought home.

So their insistence on lush planting has had two-fold value. It’s given them the openness and privacy they desire and created a haven for the wild creatures who share their urban space. □

Anne painted Resene Chardonnay on the walls of the dining area and Resene Deep Komaru on the ceiling. The cappuccino maker is well used – John is renowned for his spectacular coffees.

