

james fenton architect

Northland Studio

Wellington



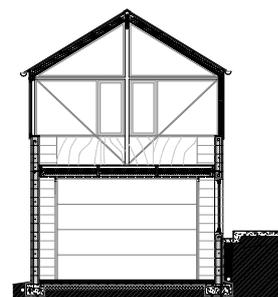
Some buildings are blessed with a happy disposition, and this is one of those cherry types. It makes pedestrians pause on the footpath, its architect says, and stop for a chat. No doubt it helps that James Fenton is a sociable sort, but what is it about this little building, a two-level-studio-plus-garage, that is so engaging?

For a start, it is, as architects like to say, resolved. That is, there are no awkward proportions, or clumsy details, or incompatible materials or colours. It's confident and forthright - it meets the street, but doesn't bully the neighbours - and is quite gregarious in a matter-of-fact kind way. The studio shines like a lantern at night, and the garage door opens to reveal a stuffed space which makes room for two items that every garage ideally should house: a dart board and an old red sports car. While the building is definitive in its positioning, it is also generous in its siting. The wide concrete stairs running up the side of the building may not be there for posterity, but they're certainly there, some passers-by seem to think, posteriors.

There's another factor in the building's appeal. You can't deny the attraction of a well-turned gable. As far as our domestic architecture goes, there's something Platonic about this form; it seems to exist as a cartoon in our consciousness, so that if you ask a child to draw a house it's most likely to be drawn with a pointy hat. The gable on this building was requested by the architect's wife, and surely it's no coincidence that she is an art historian, but there's also no end of inspiration in the neighbourhood. It's isosceles city, up in Northland. Once you start to look, you see gable roofs everywhere: on the family's house behind the studio, on the Anglican church next door, on the houses up and down the hills, and even, amusingly, on the public toilet across the road, a building so diminutive that if any vice were to be pursued within its walls it could only be solitary in nature.

Just as the building's exterior expresses a nice reworking of a familiar form, so it's interior realises a commonly held ambition. Who hasn't dreamed of a safe haven away from family life's importunate demands? 'I've always wanted to have a studio,' Fenton says, and by that he means his own place and, after decades working with other partners, his own practice. In his studio, with its kitchen and shower neatly tucked in the rear, we're in the territory of the shed or man-cave or, as the architect says, pointing to the framed print of an old Burton Brothers' photograph of a raupo hut, the encampment. There's nothing extemporaneous about the studio, though; calm and centred in the midst of Northland's bewildering and disorienting topography, it's a lovely space in which to work and think.

John Walsh in *Big House Small House - New homes by New Zealand Architects*





All photos by Patrick Reynolds