

DESIGNED TO LAST

GREAT SCOTT

In late Sixties' Hastings bold clients engaged a singular architect. The result is one of the great New Zealand post-war houses: John Scott's Martin House.







PREVIOUS PAGES, LEFT: Front (northwest) elevation of the Martin House. PREVIOUS PAGES, RIGHT: Window detail, living / dining wing. ABOVE: Full front elevation. From the left: children's wing; covered walkway; dining / kitchen wing; parents' bedroom; roof and chimney above the sitting room.

EVEN BEFORE HIS DEATH IN 1992 at the age of 68 John Scott was passing into legend. The architect had designed one of the most acclaimed buildings of the post-war era, Futuna Chapel (1961) at Karori in Wellington, as well as several other distinctive churches and institutional buildings, and a series of singular houses, many in his native Hawkes Bay. Impressive as Scott's work was (and posthumously, his reputation grows ever larger), his renown also has much to do with the way he worked, and the way he lived. "Brilliant, mercurial, usually barefoot, he worked all hours of the day and night and followed his own schedule," writes Scott's biographer Russell Walden in *The Dictionary of National Biography*. "He was no manager, nor did he make much money. However, his attitude to his profession was one of complete integrity."

The problem with reputation is that it can cloud appreciation. You think you know about someone or something, but you really don't; you think you've seen something, but you haven't. You've just taken it for

granted. With some buildings, what architects are wont to say is right: you just have to be there. The house John Scott designed in the late '60s for the potters Bruce and the late Estelle Martin has been published in magazines and books over the years, but in actuality it is still a surprise. The house, located near Bridge Pa on the outskirts of Hastings, can only be glimpsed from the country road that passes by its 10-acre site – over the years the Martins planted their once-barren property with numerous trees, now matured. No driveway leads to the house; visitors have to take their cars on a slow slalom across the lawn.

And, then there it is, and you can only think: So, this is what Architecture is all about. The house sits on a small rise, its white blockwork fresh, the lines of its half-gabled roofs sharp and clean against a blue Hawkes Bay sky. The mini-cloister of a central walkway holds the two wings of the house in perfect balance. Unlike so many contemporary designers' houses, which induce agitation with their CAD-enabled gimmicks, nausea with their bloated scale, and ennui

with their faddist orthodoxy, the Martin House is at once uplifting and calming. Its forms are graceful, its scale is human, its materials are simple and honest – and, God, it's good to see some sloping roofs.

The Martins' decision to commission a house from John Scott was motivated by boldness and typical consideration. They didn't really know the architect, Bruce Martin says, although they knew one of his cousins, and they liked Futuna Chapel. Friends of the Martins had engaged well-known Hawkes Bay architect Len Hoogerbrug to design them a house, and the Martins might have followed suit, except they "didn't want to compete". The Martins had heard about John Scott's *modus operandi* – "he could be stubborn" – but it didn't concern them that he could be "difficult". Artists themselves, they were aware, Bruce Martin says, that worthwhile projects are not always straightforward. "Things don't always turn out the way you plan them."

But the design of the Martin House in 1968-69 and its construction over the course of the following year, went smoothly. "We were told that

if you wanted John to do anything you had to keep pushing him, and we'd heard all sorts of tales about him taking five or six years to design a house," Bruce Martin says. "We got ours in eighteen months." The clients' confidence in their architect seems to have been reciprocated: "John left a lot of decisions to us. He consulted us and made sure we were happy."

There was little in the way of a brief. "We told John we didn't want carpets, wallpaper, or vertical blinds", says Bruce Martin. The Martins would have preferred bricks not blocks, but blocks were cheaper; they would have preferred that on the exterior the blocks remained unpainted, but they required a seal against the weather (the exterior remains the same: painted blocks and Hardie's asbestos sheeting). At the time of the house's design and construction the Martins' three sons were in their teenage years. The design separated the children's quarters from the parents. Now, when kids have so much stuff to cram into their rooms, the bedrooms seem cell-like, but, Bruce Martin says, "John used



to say, "They're only for sleeping in." And anyway, the children had their own living room to play in.

It's not just the children's bedrooms that seem small. You realise how expectations of space have changed over the past 40 years. In many of the rooms in the Martin House the cliché "small but beautifully formed" comes to mind. "Lots of people say the house looks like a chicken coop," says Bruce Martin. How excessive we've become ... The rooms, with their post and beam construction and ply walls, their built-in rimu cupboards and shelves, warm blockwork (the local pumice in the block mix gives a softness to its texture), red floor tiles, and well-placed, tall windows (especially the double-hung window in the dining room), are comfortable, pleasurable spaces to inhabit. They're sufficient; they feel right.

John Scott seems to have thought so, too. Bruce Martin recalls coming home one day to find "John sitting in the living room, just enjoying it". The architect went on to design another house for the Martins, a two-

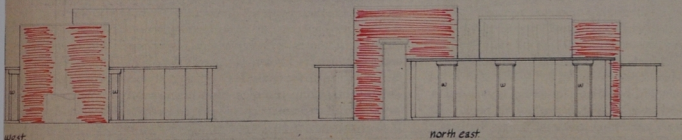
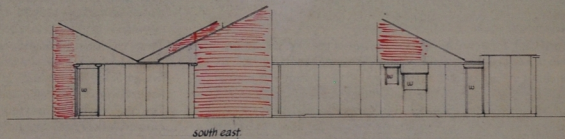
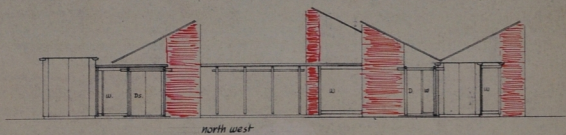
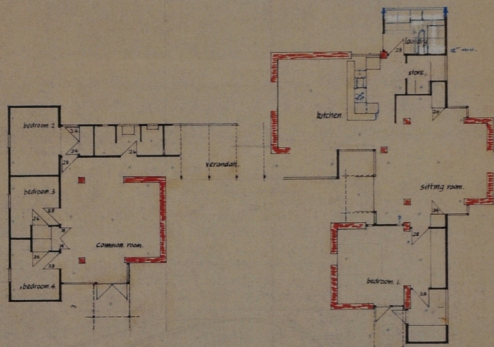
story corrugated-iron bach in Hokitika. "John detailed everything, he designed it very quickly, and we built it ourselves," says Bruce Martin.

The Martin family have been exemplary custodians of their house, and of a detached studio building designed with the same care and flair, and made from the same materials. In this sibling building Bruce and Estelle Martin worked together, as Kamaka Pottery, for 30 years, preparing and then displaying the ceramic art they fired in their handbuilt, *anagama* wood-fired kiln. After Estelle's death in 2001, Bruce Martin no longer practiced his craft, but he still exhibits and sells work from the studio. He is undiminished in his enthusiasm for "a perfect home and workshop, and kiln and garden", for the "the integrity of the whole". On the Martin House project ideal clients met a great architect. The New Zealand Historic Places Trust agrees; just recently it registered the Martin property as a Category 1 Historic Place. At least one of John Scott's buildings will get the protection his reputation deserves. **JOHN WALSH**

FACING PAGE, LEFT:

Looking back to the house from the workshop / gallery, designed by John Scott as a companion building to the house. FACING PAGE, RIGHT: Looking from the sitting room to the parents' room with its ensuite bathroom. All photographs by Simon Devitt.

THIS PAGE: Original plan and elevations of the Martin House, drawn by John Scott.



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