



and new happily
t in the house, from
asured pre-loved
that self-confessed
e' Deborah has
up over the years to
fringing in the
bedroom that was
sed for a cheap price
n.

FRINGE BENEFITS Far from Wellington's central city (but enviably close to work), fashion designer Deborah Sweeney's renovated cottage provides a soothing getaway from her high-flying international career.

TEXT SHARON STEPHENSON PHOTOGRAPHY PAUL MCCREDIE





Deborah's eye for detail and ability to combine different styles and textures is part of what makes her a successful designer. Her husband Niels (opposite), an artist, does not have to look far for inspiration for his native bird drawings, thanks to a sensitive renovation of the house, which opens it up to a garden that is full of trees and birds.



Wellington's seaside suburb of Eastbourne is not the sort of place you would expect one of New Zealand's leading fashion designers to favour.

Certainly, it is the right side of charming: take white picket fences, gracious old villas and a quiet bay, put them in high-definition, and you have an idea of how chocolate-box cute it all is. But Deborah Sweeney has worked in New York for high-end clothing label Jill Stuart and spent years dressing a large chunk of the world's population as a designer for H&M and Topshop. She has worked with top models and photographers and rubbed coathangers with celebrities such as Liz Hurley and Courtney Love.

So isn't Eastbourne a little, well, restrained after that lifestyle? "Not at all," she says. "I love being surrounded by the bush, where the only sound comes from the tui and wood pigeons. It's so tranquil and private here, it allows me to leave work behind at the end of the day and enter this remote sanctuary."

Sitting in the garden of the house Deborah shares with husband Niels Meyer-Westfeld on a quiet Sunday morning, eating home-made muffins and with spring tip-toeing around the corner, it is hard to disagree with her. Nor is

she joking about the remoteness: the two-storey abode is accessible via a muddy, meandering path you almost need a GPS to navigate. I am glad I heeded her advice to wear flat shoes.

The couple found the 1940s home after searching for a year. They had been living near Wellington Airport and, after many weekend tramping expeditions, found themselves increasingly drawn to Eastbourne's bush-clad hills. Having moved her eponymous clothing label to the nearby industrial area of Seaview, Deborah was also keen to reduce her commute; now, if the traffic is kind, it takes her five minutes to get to work.

Fortunately, the home's previous owners had undertaken most of renovation's heavy lifting, calling in Wellington architects RobinsonCrimp to breathe life into a series of poky rooms. This included knocking out a number of internal walls to reconfigure the living and dining spaces, and installing bifold wraparound doors that take advantage of the sea views. One casualty was the loss of the second bedroom, so the owners added a second floor, which now houses a large master bedroom, en suite and dressing room.

One of the first things Deborah did after moving in three years ago was to install a floating fireplace and oodles of shelving to house her enviable collection of Crown Lynn pottery and vases culled from flea markets and retro emporiums all over the globe. Vintage is, in fact, the common denominator in





FASHION +
ARCHITECTURE



NATIVE BIRDS OF NEW ZEALAND.

One of Niels' current projects is a book on New Zealand native birds, so it is no surprise they are a recurring theme in this home.





The retro Danish lamp over the dining table (left) was lugged back from Europe, as were many of the collectable pieces of glassware and pottery, except for the stash of vintage Crown Lynn (top shelf, right) which Deborah picked up in New Zealand. This colourful quilt (above) caught Deborah's eye in a charity shop.



house. If you want to make Deborah shudder, mention a sterile, minimalist interior awash with stainless steel and modern furniture. "That's not me. I like pieces to come with a history, pieces that bring warmth and personality to a house," she says.

The couple have turned their home's neutral palette to their advantage, using it to display their growing collection of art, most of it depicting New Zealand birds that Niels, who trained at Central Saint Martin's College of Art and Design in London, is preparing for an upcoming Craig Potton book. In the living room, Deborah was keen to turn the oversized dining room into a more intimate space, but retain the natural light. And so she has by hanging a wall of artwork found in Berlin. Another set of pink-tinged artwork that frames the entrance to the dressing room was found on a trip to Tokyo, while a vintage Schickoff print was found at a market in London. In the kitchen, there is just the kitchen to revamp before their child arrives early next year.

It has been a circuitous route through the fashion world for Christchurch-born Deborah, who can't remember when her love affair with fashion started. "My mother always had a great eye for fashion and interiors. So, growing up, there were fashion magazines around and I guess I was drawn to the creative arts, particularly to fashion or music," she says. But music's loss was fashion's gain and

after a year working with Christchurch designer Rosaria Hall in the finishing department, Deborah headed to Wellington to study fashion design, where her contemporaries included New York-based Rebecca Taylor. While on a buying trip to the US, Deborah was seduced by the buzz of New York and within a year was flattening there with Rebecca.

Deborah admits the fashion gods smiled upon her because she ended up working for well-known designer Jill Stuart. But her love of travel got the better of her and, after a year, she blew her savings wandering the globe before taking on a design gig with a company in London that supplied high street stores. Redundancy was a blessing, forcing her to set up a stall at Spitalfields Market where she designed and sold headscarves, belts and handbags by day and took accessory design classes by night.

But Deborah could no longer resist the pull of home and in 2002 came back to New Zealand where she set up her eponymous label, which now sells in the US, Japan, Hong Kong, Australia and New Zealand.

Her sanctuary high in the Eastbourne hills provides the perfect balance between work and domestic life. "Its solitude makes it an ideal place to recharge the creative batteries, and it's an endless source of inspiration," she says. "I often find myself drawing upon it for ideas." •