



## PROFILE

# Belinda GEORGE of Belinda George Architects

Architect Belinda George talks to *Houses* about running an architecture practice and designing your own house.

**Did you grow up in Auckland, Belinda?**  
Yes I did, in the sunny eastern suburbs.

**Did you go on to study at Auckland University?**

Yes I did. I was sort of craving to get out of Auckland and at that stage you could do your intermediate year at another university so I went down to Palmerston North and did it at Massey. I had lots of fun – it was really liberating. Then I came back and did my degree at Auckland (University). I took a year off, half-way through, and went overseas for a year with a friend of mine who was studying architecture also.

**Were you interested in architecture when you were a child?**

Yes, I think I was always interested in something to do with the arts but I also really loved animals. I guess part of the reason why I went to Massey was because I was sort of tossing round the idea of becoming a vet – so that was an option. But at that time – it probably still is – it was very difficult to get into Veterinary School and by that stage I was really enjoying art more than anything else so it was not too hard a choice.

**Did you go and stay back at home?**

Yes I did. Being as ancient as I am it wasn't nearly as hard then as I think students have it now. You were much more funded through university than the students are now who come out with these big loans – but it was easy to stay at home and much cheaper. I went flatting in about maybe my third year or something, but I spent the first couple of years living at home.

**Growing up, did you have much experience with houses that had been designed by architects?**

I don't really know that I can say it had an effect on me because we moved from this house when I was five but Vlad Cacala designed my childhood home. He was a 1950s Czechoslovakian architect and that was a great house – I still have memories of parts of that house. The next house we moved into – we were a big family and we needed more space – was a big old English home but Vlad lived down the road, so I was always aware of what he was doing. I guess I have sort of carried a love of that 1950s kind of architecture so I would say he was probably quite influential when I was young. I didn't really have any kind of building influence, as in physical building, which, when I went through Architecture School, a lot of men had. Boys had done a lot of building before they got there and so it was a steep learning curve in terms of that practical stuff. So, although I loved the art side of architecture and things like that, in terms of my practical knowledge I had nothing.

**Did you just see the building part of the course as a thing to be endured so you could work on your designs or did you develop some appreciation for it while you were still there?**

Yes I think so and in some ways I wished that I'd paid more attention because you don't really realise until you get out there and you're starting to draw working drawings and things like that when you think 'I have no idea how that goes together'. So that was something I was always quite jealous of I suppose. Towards

the end of my degree I did a bit of work for a builder ... I did make a conscious effort to try and do just some concrete work and things like that because I really felt that it was something that I was deficient in.

**So you went away for a year in the middle of your degree?**

Yes, I think I went away between my second and third.

**And you went overseas?**

I guess I'd been studying for three years and just felt like a break and so a friend of mine and I went over and lived in London for a while. It was really good for me because having to get jobs that were really mundane and just to sort of scrape together a living made me realise I really did want to finish my degree and hopefully get a job in something I really loved and felt passionate about and wouldn't feel I was just watching the clock tick. And also doing lots of travelling round Europe was really worthwhile.

**Did you see lots of different design styles and a different approach to architecture than we have here in New Zealand?**

Oh definitely. It was so enlightening; you'd walk into Le Corbusier's Ronchamp Chapel for the first time or something like that and you can't help but just feel a huge kind of emotional response to the space. You go and visit these things and feel the texture of the walls and feel the light falling on your face and all those sort of sensory things. In London not so much because I guess we'd go back there to work to earn money to go travelling again. ►



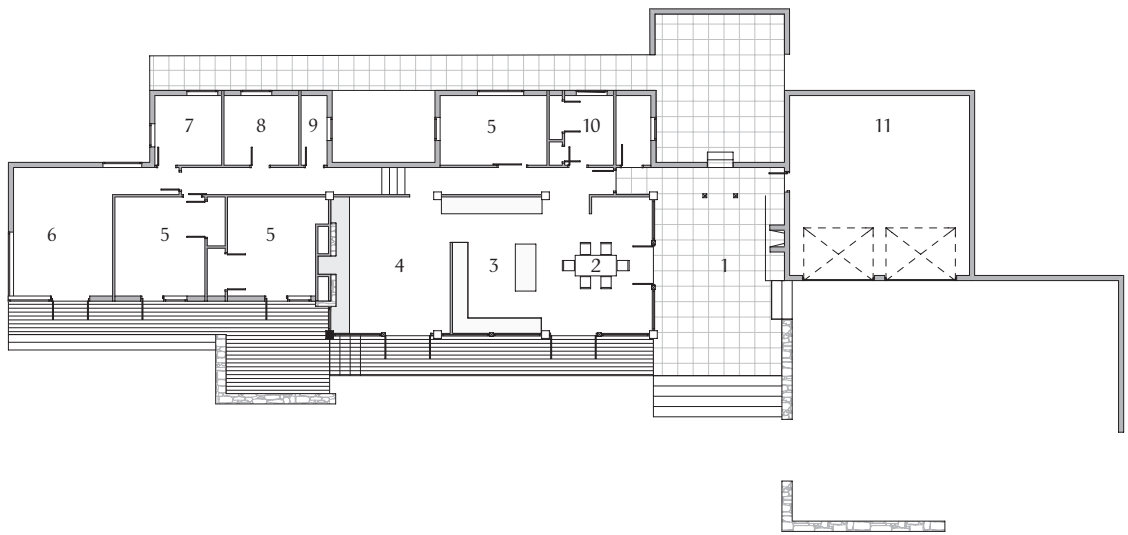
02 The Mahurangi West Road house's front elevation.

# 1996 MAHURANGI WEST ROAD HOUSE

• MAHURANGI •

A rural home using raw materials of pre-cast concrete panels and macrocarpa milled on the property. The simple plan consists of a living pavilion which is light and open and a sleeping 'bunker'. It was designed to be sympathetic to the surroundings by excavating into the hillside. This was the first house that the practice designed some 17 years ago now.

Belinda George



Floor plan

- 1 Courtyard
- 2 Dining
- 3 Kitchen
- 4 Living room
- 5 Bedroom
- 6 Main bedroom
- 7 Ensuite
- 8 Bathroom
- 9 WC
- 10 Laundry
- 11 Garage



03 The view out over the pool.



04 The kitchen.

While you were studying were you influenced by any particular peers or tutors or anyone who was at the school at the time?

I think, in terms of influences, I would have to say that I feel very fortunate that I had really wonderful tutors and lots of good friends, supportive friends. It was a really great time to be at Architecture School. There was a great deal of freedom but I would probably say in terms of my philosophy of architecture it would be a lot more formed by things that happened after Architecture School – once you're actually doing it. You know things are forming in your mind, but you have so many influences and you're so liable to just pick things up and run with them. Once I was out there doing it, I feel that the people who were around during that time influenced me more than perhaps while at Architecture School because I was quite eclectic.

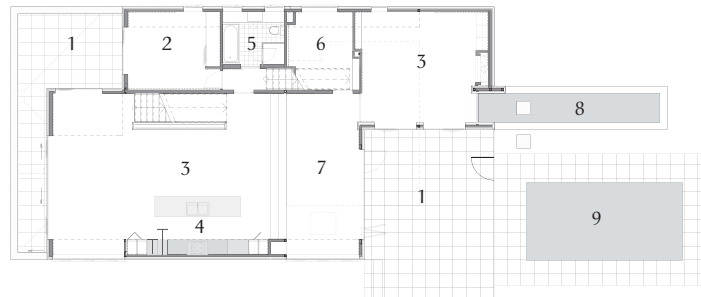
When you finished university did you go straight to work for an architect?

I scooted off overseas again with my friend Amanda. We were going to go to Philadelphia. For some reason we had tickets; I don't know why we pinpointed there. I think we'd just gone on the map – but we never made it. We stopped in Los Angeles on the way there and we ended up just staying there because we really liked it, and Amanda got a job with a woman architect over there. So she was like 'come on, you have to get a job now'. I'd done my thesis, or part of my thesis was on the architecture firm Morphosis, and so I thought 'OK, they're based in California' – so I walked in there and they took me on as an intern. That was incredibly fortuitous for me. I would recommend that process for anyone just starting out because you're completely thrown in the deep end. It was a really interesting practice and the project that I worked on ►

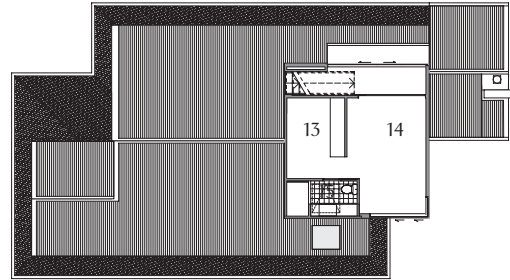


This was an extensive renovation carried out on a house in the heritage zone of Birkenhead which has very strict controls over forms and materials to be used. The existing house levels remained but just about everything else changed. A third level was added to accommodate a main bedroom which has great views to Rangitoto Island. The strength of the plan lies in leading the eye from the front door, up the main stairs and out to the garden beyond with the help of a reflection pond. All the spaces emanate from this central axis. [Belinda George](#)

Ground-floor plan



First-floor plan



Second-floor plan



- 1 Terrace
- 2 Bedroom
- 3 Living room
- 4 Kitchen
- 5 Bathroom
- 6 Study
- 7 Dining room
- 8 Reflection pool
- 9 Pool
- 10 Laundry
- 11 Storage
- 12 Garage
- 13 Changing room
- 14 Master bedroom
- 15 Ensuite

2010  
**HINEMOA  
STREET  
HOUSE**  
• BIRKENHEAD •

This was an extensive renovation carried out on a house in the heritage zone of Birkenhead which has very strict controls over forms and materials to be used. The existing house levels remained but just about everything else changed. A third level was added to accommodate a main bedroom which has great views to Rangitoto Island. The strength of the plan lies in leading the eye from the front door, up the main stairs and out to the garden beyond with the help of a reflection pond. All the spaces emanate from this central axis. [Belinda George](#)

was in Japan. I worked in a team and it was very intense. It was probably for six months – you can only really survive for six months on an intern wage – but it was a really invaluable time for me. After that I travelled a bit more and came back and worked for Noel Lane and Richard Priest who were Lane Priest Architects at the time.

**What year was it that you graduated?**  
I started in 1983, I graduated 1990.

**What was happening in New Zealand architecture around that time? Was it a good time to be looking for jobs?**  
I think it was quite a buoyant time. I was really lucky. Nicholas Stevens was working for Noel at that stage and he sort of put my name forward and I started working for Richard initially and then shifted to Noel soon after that and then when their partnership split up I worked for Noel. Noel and Richard were very supportive of me and both of them were very influential and very giving. It was also was very much that time when you did get thrown in the deep end. It was sink or swim. I was very fortunate they had other staff members who were helping the new people as well, so I wasn't completely thrown to the lions – and it was a good environment to work in because you did have the opportunity to do design work as well. I was always worried about wanting to do something that would be reflective of the people I worked for.

**What sorts of things would you ordinarily work on as a graduate?**  
You did a lot of model-making work when you're first in there but then you're thrown straight into the working drawings and that sort of thing. I think perhaps going into a smaller practice like that is quite different to going into the big practices where you might be doing more repetitive stuff and probably learning the process more solidly. Every day was different, that was for sure. I also worked in Zimbabwe for a while. I went back to London after I'd been working in California and then got headhunted and worked for an English practice that was out in Zimbabwe. That was really interesting and I feel like architecture has allowed me to do all these really interesting jobs and have these different experiences. But out there as well I was very much thrown into the deep end.

2011

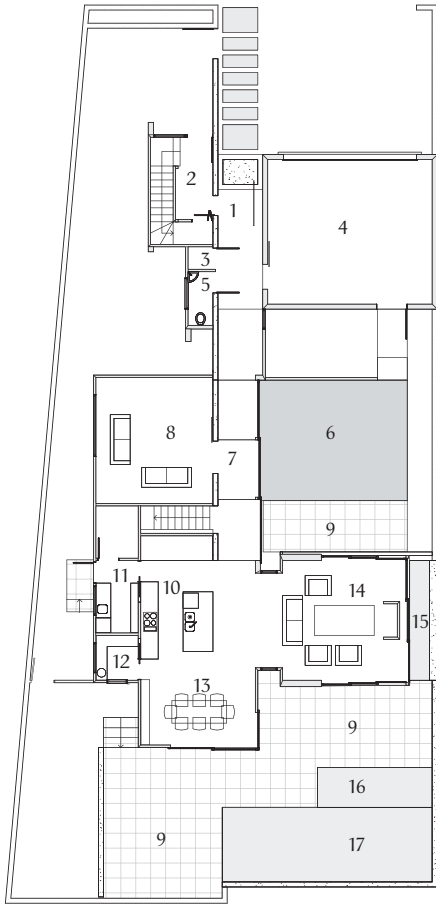
# ARTHUR STREET HOUSE

• AUCKLAND •

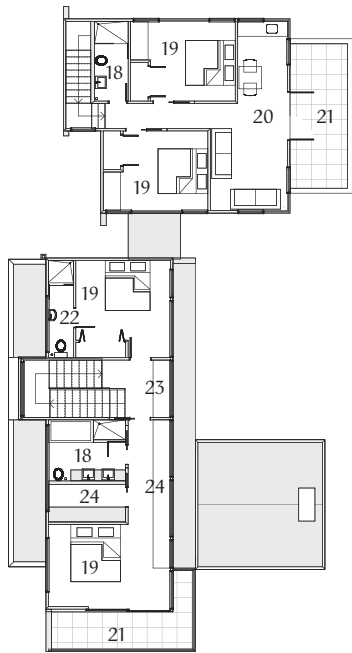
The brief was to create a home which allowed the clients to live alongside their grown children but have their own sense of privacy. Therefore a separate two-bedroom ‘flat’ was created over the garage on the street side. The main living areas are on the ground floor, opening onto a swimming pool with the main bedroom above, capturing the sea and city views. We were interested in using the actions of ‘folding’ and ‘wrapping’ with this house both to enclose and open up spaces.

Belinda George

- |                |                   |
|----------------|-------------------|
| 1 Entry        | 13 Dining         |
| 2 Stair lobby  | 14 Living         |
| 3 Coat         | 15 Waterfall pool |
| 4 Garage       | 16 Wade pool      |
| 5 Powder room  | 17 Main pool      |
| 6 Living court | 18 Bathroom       |
| 7 Gallery      | 19 Bedroom        |
| 8 TV room      | 20 Studio         |
| 9 Terrace      | 21 Balcony        |
| 10 Kitchen     | 22 Ensuite        |
| 11 Laundry     | 23 Study          |
| 12 Scullery    | 24 Dressing       |



Ground-floor plan



First-floor plan



**You started your practice in 1996?**  
I left California, and then I was in England and then Zimbabwe – so I came home after that and then started to work for Noel and Richard and I worked for them for about three or four years, I think, and then my husband and I moved, went and lived in New York City for a while. I worked there for an architect called David Howell who’s a really good close friend of ours and then discovered I was pregnant, figured out we couldn’t really afford to live on Manhattan on one salary. So I thought ‘OK, it’s about time to head home’, so that’s when I set up my practice. I was three months pregnant.

**So you set up as soon as you got back. You thought – ‘right, I’ll just get started?’**  
Yes – as a lot of architects do. My parents wanted a house. So that was the first house I designed.

**Did they have any say in how the house was going to be?**  
Oh they did, definitely. I think my dad is a sort of wannabe architect and he’s still saying it looks like a bloody factory.

**Do they still live there?**  
Yes they do. It’s actually a holiday house for them, so they don’t live there full time. But, yes, they still use it a lot and enjoy it.

**Handy for them that you’re always on call to make any amendments...**  
Yes, but sometimes it’s not such a good thing.

**That was around 15 years ago. How do your clients find you these days?**  
I have no idea really.

**So they’re not all people who are known to you through other clients?**  
Quite a lot through word of mouth and yes, it is varied. My sister runs an agency called Design Selection as well, not that she ... that sounds like insider trading.

**She refers people on to you?**  
Not at all the time – because she knows me very well, and the people who wouldn’t get on with me. So I’ve had quite a few very successful referrals from her – and I think that comes down to the fact that she does know me well and knows who will appreciate

what I’m trying to achieve. It was actually from working in the States that we saw how well agencies can work because David Howell – who I worked for there – got all his work through an agency and it was quite a common thing. So when we came back here my sister was kind of looking for a business to start and I said ‘hey what about this for an idea?’ I think it’s still not nearly as common here as it is over there. In all the experiences that I’ve had with her referrals, it’s been a really positive thing because of having someone in between. I also get clients from the website, people just go to your website and see whether they like your work for a start.

**Do you ever meet with potential clients and it doesn’t work out?**  
I can only think of that happening one time. I guess the big thing for me is I’m always trying to listen very carefully to the clients – because sometimes it’s not actually directly the things that they say to you but it might be interactions between the people involved, all these sorts of subtle things. I think when you meet someone face to face you can very quickly tell whether or not it’s going to work; so either one or ►



07 The Arthur Street house.  
08 The living room with fireplace at the Arthur Street house.





09 The new kitchen in this 1960s Freemans Bay townhouse.

10 Looking at the house and into the new space from the courtyard.

other side makes a dignified exit ... I am getting better at that as well. I think as you get more experienced, you get to be a lot more selective about the jobs that you take on because you understand your capabilities and can see where you can create something that you're going to be happy with at the end of the day. For me it always comes down to trying to create a sort of collaborative platform so that your clients are part of the process, that they're not just these people who pay the bills. They're actually really involved and their voice is heard and their touch on the project is felt and seen in some way, shape or form.

**Is that a difficult thing to achieve? How does the process work?**  
I just sit down with them and have a chat about what they want and try to find out whether or not that's something I can deliver. So it's a two-way street – it's got to work on both sides.

**Do most clients have a reasonable understanding of what their expectations are compared to their budget?**  
It is different for every single client. Some people will give you their realistic budget but in actual fact they've got quite a lot more up their sleeve because they've been told architects spend double the budget or whatever, and then some people will have false ideas of what they actually can afford. I think you can somehow work within every budget to create something that is a jewel in that project – even if it is just one thing. If you don't do something that surprises or makes them wake up every morning and think 'I love living in this house', then you haven't really done your job properly, (I think). So when I'm critically looking at the projects I think 'have I achieved that? Have I given them something extra that they couldn't have necessarily thought of themselves?' It took me a while to realise that, even though

I do say to people 'I'm not a quantity surveyor, I can't give you exact figures', I think that we have some responsibility. You can tell people that but they're not necessarily hearing it. They still need guidance – so by the end of the preliminary design stage I'll go to a builder or a quantity surveyor, just to make sure that what I'm putting in front of them is not way outside their budget.

**Do you work with the same builders and quantity surveyors routinely?**  
Yes I do.

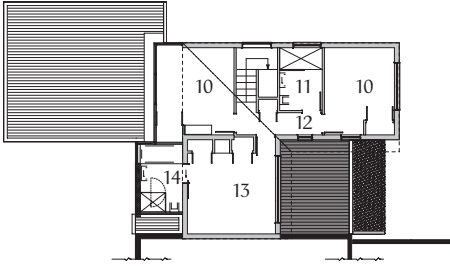
**Is it an important part of running a practice to have good relationships with various contractors?**  
It is important. I think it is also really important to have someone to ask 'I want to do this, how do I achieve that? How is this going to work?' So it's a two-way thing with the builders who I use repetitively – they



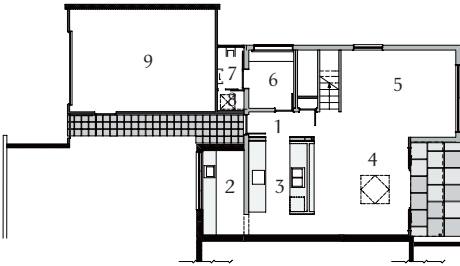
2011  
**WELLINGTON STREET HOUSE**  
• AUCKLAND •

This is a renovation to a 1960s concrete-block townhouse in Freemans Bay. As a family of four would be moving into this townhouse it needed to expand. Therefore it was pushed out in several directions and a garage added. It was very important not to interfere with the rhythm and scale that these townhouses create on the streetscape.  
*Belinda George*

- 1 Entry
- 2 Scullery
- 3 Kitchen
- 4 Dining
- 5 Living
- 6 Study
- 7 WC
- 8 Laundry
- 9 Garage
- 10 Bedroom
- 11 Bathroom
- 12 Hallway
- 13 Main bedroom



**First-floor plan**



**Ground-floor plan**

always know they're going to be on my tender list but they also get calls from me. I'm really fortunate because my husband is a furniture maker whose speciality is figuring out how to build things that other people don't really necessarily know how to do and still make it good. So he's got a really good aesthetic eye and he's just very clever and that's been a huge assistance to me many a time.

**Do you ever officially collaborate on your projects?**  
Definitely. It doesn't always work out and it's definitely not something that I push because you can't be seen to have any particular leaning towards one contractor. But a lot of other architects use him in the same sort of ways and make him a preferred contractor as they know that they can tell him how they want it to look – and then magically it will end up being that, rather than having to document the design too much. We're just

about to embark on building our own house, if we can ever decide on the details – and I really value his input. I would have to say that he's been a pretty powerful influence on my career as well.

**Have you ever designed anything for yourself or your family before?**  
No.

**So this will be the first time?**  
This is the first time, it's really hard.

**Do you have a site?**  
Yes.

**Do you think it would be used as a project to push some boundaries or do you think it will follow a similar course to the process that you use with your clients?**  
I think the reason why it is so hard is that I feel that I do want to perhaps follow a slightly

different path and I guess when you've got no limits – except the budget of course, one very big limit – it's very tricky. My family has been so supportive in everything I've put in front of them. The kids particularly because we're living in a very tiny, tiny 60m<sup>2</sup> house and my son is living in a caravan and we're gypsies at the moment. They're like 'why can't we start building now? That looks great!' It's quite interesting the things that they do come up with. They're not always practical things, they're just quite intuitive things – that's what I love about kids. But I think they would like to be able to bring friends home for the night and they can't at the moment, so they just want us to get started.

**Do your clients give you timeframes for each project?**  
We have to in the NZIA because I use their contracts, agreement forms and things and ►

you have to state timeframes, though they can be approximate. It's quite good because you can look back and you're halfway through a month or something and think 'Oh I said I was going to have that done by the end of the month.' It can be frightening but it's also quite a good thing as things can just bumble along.

**Do you work on a range of projects at one time or are you only ever working on one?**

I work on a range of projects – basically because all projects stop and start and are in different phases at different times. You might put something into the Council and not get it back for two months.

**Do you have an office separate of your home?**

No I did, but we've moved out of town. We've moved up north and I didn't like commuting. I did it for six months and decided no this is not for me. And as I got further into my practice I just become more interested in environmental and eco-design stuff and I thought 'I'm not walking the walk'. So I have an office at the moment that is not in our house because it's absolutely tiny. It's just up the road from where we're living and that's working really well. I come into town probably two days a week, though, for various meetings and things, and I have contract staff who work here in their own offices and that's working really well for me too. I'm happy and they're happy.

**They are working on specific projects with you – is that how it works?**

I've actually got a guy who does all my work so we work really closely. I might catch up with him once a week or once every two weeks but we're in constant communication over the phone and by email. For my practice I very much feel what I want to give my clients is a personalised sort of approach. If they come to me for their house, they'll get me – I'll be designing their house. So at the moment I keep the jobs to a manageable size. Just so I feel like I can give that personal attention that my clients come to me for.

**Do you think that there's a lot of interesting or unique work happening in New Zealand?**

Yes I do. I think there are always gems popping up that make you go 'wow, that's just beautiful'. I think there are always things going on that make you proud to be a New Zealand architect. It is a good place to practise architecture. I do think we sometimes forget about the freedom that we have and grumble

about Council restrictions or things like that but really, having worked in London and America, you do realise we have a wonderful kind of freedom here. It's just got a little bit harder in recent times.

**In the time that you've been practising, what sort of changes – if any – has there been in people's approaches to the way that they want to live in their houses?**

I think that it really hasn't changed hugely because everyone is so different. If I look at the people I'm working for now, their motivations are all so different to one another and that is the great thing about architecture.

I guess I approach each project afresh as well, and I try to not have preconceived notions about what the outcome is going to be.

**Do you have clients say to you 'I want a house a bit like that other one you did?'**

You do actually. Sometimes after magazine articles come out you get a rash of phone calls saying 'I want one of those...'

**Do you discourage your clients from taking that approach?**

I don't really mind what people come to me with. I'm not like 'you have to give me five pictures'. I'm more interested in the little things that go on in between the conversations and sometimes it can be something that you might hear in passing, or it might be a hobby that the person has that they're passionate about. Everyone is completely different.


Of course every architect will go on to a site and will sort out all the basic requirements of orientation, sun, wind, protection, privacy – all those basic things that need to be addressed from an environmental point of view. After that it's like a process of archaeology in some ways. It's just peeling back layers of the personalities of the people involved. I suppose that's what I've enjoyed about residential architecture – there are always people involved – whereas I guess I didn't latch on so much to commercial architecture because it's a bit more anonymous.

I love watching people and seeing their responses to things. They're endlessly fascinating as far as I'm concerned and they do let you into their private lives. I feel incredibly privileged in lots of ways that people will but they have to, actually; it's quite important.

**Do you meet whole families or do you always have a representative person who seems to be in charge of each project?**

Again – everyone is different. I might work with the husband or the wife – and it's not always families as well. It might be a couple or an individual but there are always relationships within those groups of people that are interesting and need to be considered.

**My last question, Belinda, is: do you have a favourite New Zealand house?**

I went out to Bethell's Beach once and I walked up on that hill that's between Bethell's and O'Neill's and there was an Andrew Patterson house which has got a curved front to it (I don't know what it's called), and it was just stunning – so simple. Apparently the wooden panels all open up and there is a house behind the curved façade. I always think he couldn't have got it more right for that environment, for that harsh, wind-battered, rough, rugged coastline, to create something with a rounded front to it that could be completely shut up and just become like some sort of battlement or something. I think he captured something that I'll probably try my whole career to achieve. I'd have to say that that's a building which has really stuck with me. 

**Belinda George Architects Ltd**

PO Box 68 792

Auckland 1145

[www.belindageorge.co.nz](http://www.belindageorge.co.nz)

**Selected publications**

*Fashion Quarterly*, Summer 1999

*Home and Building*, Oct/Nov 1998

*Home & Building Magazine*,

*Kitchen Design Book*

*Home and Entertaining*, June/July 2002

*Urbis*, Spring 2004

*Urbis Landscapes*, Nov 2004

*Inside Out*, Nov/Dec 2006

*Home*, April/May 2008

*Home*, June/July 2008

*Houses*, Winter 2010

*Houses*, Spring 2011

**Projects**

Mahurangi West Road, 1996

Hinemoa Street, 2010

Arthur Street, 2011

Wellington Street, 2011

**Photography**

**Portrait:** Maia White

**Mahurangi West Road; Arthur Street –**

photographed by Becky Nunes.

**Hinemoa Street; Wellington Street –**

photographed by Jackie Meiring.