



THIS PHOTO The dwelling's Zinalume exterior was chosen not only because it was economical, but also because of its relationship to the much older buildings on sheep stations in the region.



Lake lustre

Faced with the magnificent isolation of Lake Ohau, Hamish Wixon created an elegant corrugated iron getaway primed simply for admiring the view.

TEXT by Jeremy Hansen PHOTOGRAPHY by Stephen Goodenough





The well-travelled owners of this house at Lake Ohau reckon the location – about a 40km drive from Omarama – is as wild as anywhere they have been in the world. Luckily, the wildness is part of the attraction. “As a child I used to create rock huts with magnificent views on cliffs on a high-country sheep station in Central Otago,” one of the owners remembers. “I wanted this house to have the feeling of being on one of those rock escarpments.”

One of the owners – a former South Islander now living in Australia – bought the section some years ago after a lengthy search for an affordable property. One afternoon, she found herself admiring the view at Lake Ohau Lodge and saying how she would love to buy in the area. As luck would have it, she was told sections were for sale in the village on the hillside. Almost immediately, she purchased the section with the co-owner, an expat Australian.

The land around the lake is wonderfully bleak, testament to the fierceness of the winds and wild seasonal variations in temperature. The owners wanted an architect who understood the extremity of the conditions, and called on Hamish Wixon of Dunedin’s McCoy & Wixon after a recommendation from a friend.

“Ohau is a beautiful, natural environment,” says Wixon,

who remembers skiing holidays there as a child. “The site is exposed, but the views are fantastic.”

Obviously, one of the first requirements was that the home was built tough. The owners were emphatic they didn’t want the house to hide from the elements, so Wixon and Omarama-based builder Bill Adams constructed a home to withstand the conditions. The 550-square-metre site was lightly excavated to allow the house to hunker down a little and to create shelter for a rear courtyard. The Zinalume walls were braced with steel and windows were double-glazed throughout. Wixon says they insulated the place with “the biggest batts we could get”.

The owners wanted a house made of Zinalume because it would be economical, low-maintenance and appropriate to the location. On a visit to the site to choose building materials, they stayed at nearby Omarama Station, where the corrugated iron woolshed is over 140 years old and, thanks to the area’s low rainfall and humidity, still isn’t rusty. Wixon, too, remembered the area’s iron woolsheds from his childhood holidays.

From the start, the house was supposed to be simple – with two bedrooms, one bathroom, high ceilings and an open-plan living area adding up to a compact total of just over 110 square metres. From the street, it looks cosy and

ABOVE Furnishings in the lounge were deliberately kept minimal so as not to distract from the views. The panelling around the fireplace is jarrah veneer. The greywacke aggregate floor is heated and sealed with a mellow finish.

OPPOSITE, ABOVE The kitchen was fully installed as budget allowed, some time after completion of the house. It was designed by Fiona Havill of Kitchens by Design in Christchurch and features a free-standing Corian and jarrah veneer island, Corian bench, pull-out pantry and overhead cupboards also made of jarrah veneer.

OPPOSITE, BELOW The view across the deck to Ben Ohau. The table and chairs are by 4 Seasons from Hi Flo in Oamaru.



discreet, with the only openings in the Zinalume facade being double doors opening outwards to the rear courtyard and a row of electrically operated high windows that act as air vents in summer and allow panoramic views of the ranges from inside.

“We wanted it to look nondescript from the street,” the owners say. Even so, the dwelling’s silvery exterior and unapologetically sleek design raised eyebrows in the small community, which until then featured mostly timber homes, some with Swiss aspirations.

Inside the house, it’s all about the view, with full-length windows and large bi-fold doors drinking in as much as possible of those fabulously austere, ever-changing vistas. In fact, the views are so big that some visitors have found them a little overwhelming. “One friend, a writer, comes here and thinks there’s too much going on,” one of the owners says. “The shadows, the light, the extremity of the weather – it moves all the time. Even when it is so calm that the lake is like a millpond, you still get changes in light and shadow. The other extreme is when the winds blow and the lake becomes like the sea. You can hear the water lapping on the shore or the sound of the waves.”

Adaptability was paramount in such variable conditions, so the small home features living options for all seasons

and weathers – the possibility of sitting out on the front deck on calm days, in the sheltered rear courtyard when the breezes get too stiff, or inside in front of the fireplace when it gets freezing outside. In summer, temperatures in Ohau can reach a very dry 35 degrees, so Wixon designed deep eaves on the front of the house, setting the bedroom glazing back to provide interior shade from the intense summer sun. In the winter when the sun is lower, light pours in, and can be adjusted with huge sun filter blinds. A greywacke aggregate floor made from local stone with a mellow finish is heated underfoot, but also retains solar heat from the sunlight.

The living area was deliberately kept minimal. Interior elements were added progressively as budget allowed. Initially the kitchen was temporary, with a plywood bench and no cupboards before Fiona Havill of Christchurch’s Simply Kitchens was commissioned to create the kitchen design. In the lounge area, spaces for the television and for wood storage are built into the wall. These jarrah veneer panels continue above the fireplace, adding textural warmth to the lounge.

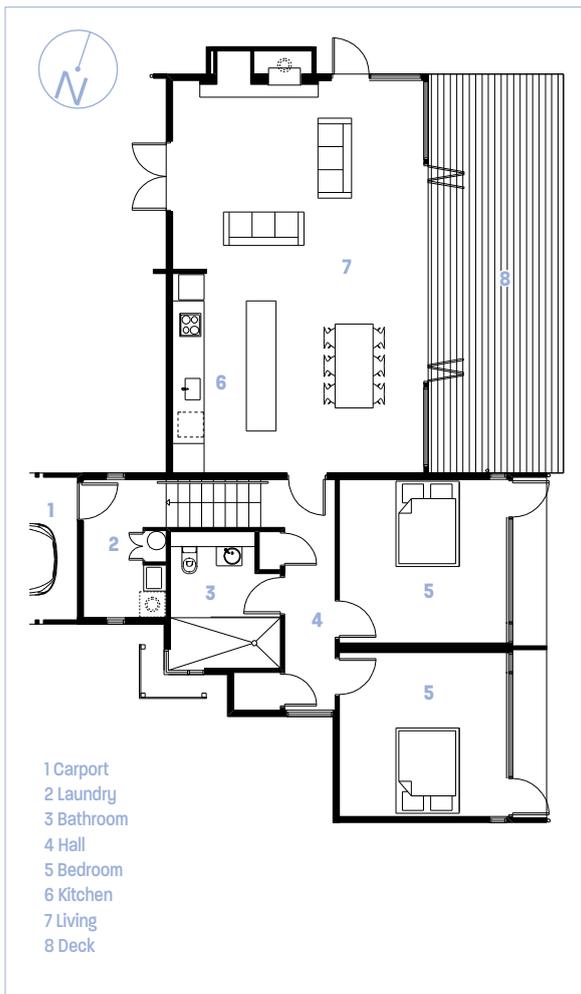
Outside, the idea was to keep things as natural as possible. Wanaka landscape architect Anne Steven was asked to design a landscape of large greywacke boulders,

ABOVE Looking up from the front deck towards the Southern Alps at the northern end of Lake Ohau.

OPPOSITE, ABOVE Wanaka landscape designer Anne Steven chose local tussocks, beech trees and flowering shrubs to suit the hostile climate.

OPPOSITE, BELOW Wixon set the double-glazed bedroom windows back from the eaves to create a greater feeling of shelter, a sense of privacy for each bedrooms, and also to provide shade from the intense summer sun. The bed is made of solid jarrah by Ken Willis in Washdyke.





local tussocks and beech trees so the house could sit in natural surroundings. Auckland lighting designer Peter Stoneham from Virtualight designed outdoor lighting to create shadows along the Zinacalume wall visible from the open-plan living area through an internal glass door. He also uplit individual beech trees near the rear courtyard.

In this cosy, hunkered-down space, the sense of isolation is palpable. The small lakeside village has no shops or eateries, and the 18km drive to the main highway means few sightseers venture to Lake Ohau. Wixon describes the neighbourhood, a small clutch of houses by the lake, as being “beautifully remote”.

And yet, despite the isolation, the bach is more than just a getaway, as internet access makes working there for short stretches entirely possible (when the owners are not there, Ohau House is available for weekly rental through the website www.lakeohau.com). It means the dwelling at Ohau is less a bach, and truly a second home. 



ABOVE Wixon had the streetside part of the section excavated to create shelter for the rear courtyard. Cedar battens screen the carport and also the bathroom windows.
MIDDLE Bathroom finishes were kept deliberately simple, with large

grey tiles surrounding the shower area and a long shelf of jarrah veneer along one wall. The basin is a Duravit ‘Scola’; the WC is a Duravit ‘Happy D’.
RIGHT Architect Hamish Wixon of Dunedin’s McCoy & Wixon.