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## LITTLE TREE HOMES

WORDS KATHY HUNTER | PHOTOS ROBERTO BUZZOLAN



The hanging chair lends itself to the vista.

Right: The lounge flows through to the outdoor living space.

There probably aren't many builders who have a degree in Philosophy and English, but Ryan O'Malley of Little Tree Construction is one of them. Does it help? He grins. "Maybe in the realisation that as a builder you're constantly fighting entropy. Things don't naturally want to come together – except when we do them of course! But once you accept that philosophically, it can make the hassles easier to work around."

Little Tree was set up over fifteen years ago with the idea of being a 'conscious' construction company. "The building industry can be pretty brutal. It's wasteful, toxic and expensive, and I wanted to try and do things a bit differently," says Ryan. "But you start out with grandiose ideas and then you hit the real world. You can't fix it all – but you can still try and do your bit."

Ryan and his partner Rachel (a marketing and design specialist) moved to Brick Bay seven years ago. The house they're living in was designed with Ryan's best mate from university, award-winning architect Dominic Glamuzina. Together they were building fabulous, top of the line homes around the Auckland region. But their own place, although it looks high-spec, was not high-budget due to Ryan's tight control of the materials and process.

With this in mind, around 2013 Ryan and Rachel decided to test a market for specially-designed, smaller, boutique homes that would look architect-designed (because they were) but didn't have the price tag you might expect. Ryan, Rachel and Dominic put a lot of time into the perfect design. They'd think they had it, but one of them would find a flaw and it was back to the drawing board.

But after a false start or two it's finally happening: they've got not one, but two different workable designs. And Ryan's halfway through his first build in Matakana. "I'm stoked," he admits. "It's been a long process but it's nice to be sure of the outcome."



Rachel's happy too – she's been dying to get her teeth into the interior design and start marketing, but has had to wait it out. (It's not all bad though – while she was waiting, she's been designing the entire look and brand of the new Sawmill Brewery.)

A big part of Little Tree Homes will be their high Homestar rating for energy efficiency. During the long design phase the plans were sent to an efficiency expert, who gave them the big tick. Houses will be sited for maximum sun to heat the slab and provide passive energy. Big windows are all double-glazed. There'll be options also for levels of energy efficiency – this new build started out as off-the-grid for Ryan's client but they've dialled it back to solar. Happily, Ryan's well-placed for news of innovation: his brother-in-law owns solar specialists Reid Technology.

Since he hates waste, Ryan tries to plan to industry sizes to avoid it as much as possible. On his building sites, he doesn't just have one skip for rubbish. He likes to have bins for glass, plastic, steel and paper. "It's not always easy to get tradies to walk the extra few steps," he says. "But I only want to be taking one skip to the tip at the end of a job."

Ryan and Dominic know well what parts of a house can be built with careful economy and also where no shortcuts should ever be made – the cladding and the joinery fall into that bracket. "We're building these places to last," Ryan affirms. "Joinery is the first thing to crash if you go cheap – you're using it all the time, so it has to be good. And we want to maximise those features that will make it feel architectural, without blowing the budget."

The O'Malleys are big admirers of Scandinavian design, and Little Tree Homes will reflect this. There'll be various options for cladding, but this first one will fit both their design and sustainability ethos particularly well, being clad with storm-felled beech from the west coast of the South Island.

Meanwhile the family is loving the house that was their design yardstick. Nearing the classic 'seven year itch', Rachel says they were thinking of selling. "But the location, the view and the house itself has spoilt us for anything else."

Their three kids Noah 11, Ari 9 and Matai 7, agree. They can run down through the bush to the beach, past Brick Bay sculptures. And at the moment all they can see is sea, paddocks and a couple of lovely old barns. Long may it last.

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

Ryan and Rachel on their bedroom verandah.

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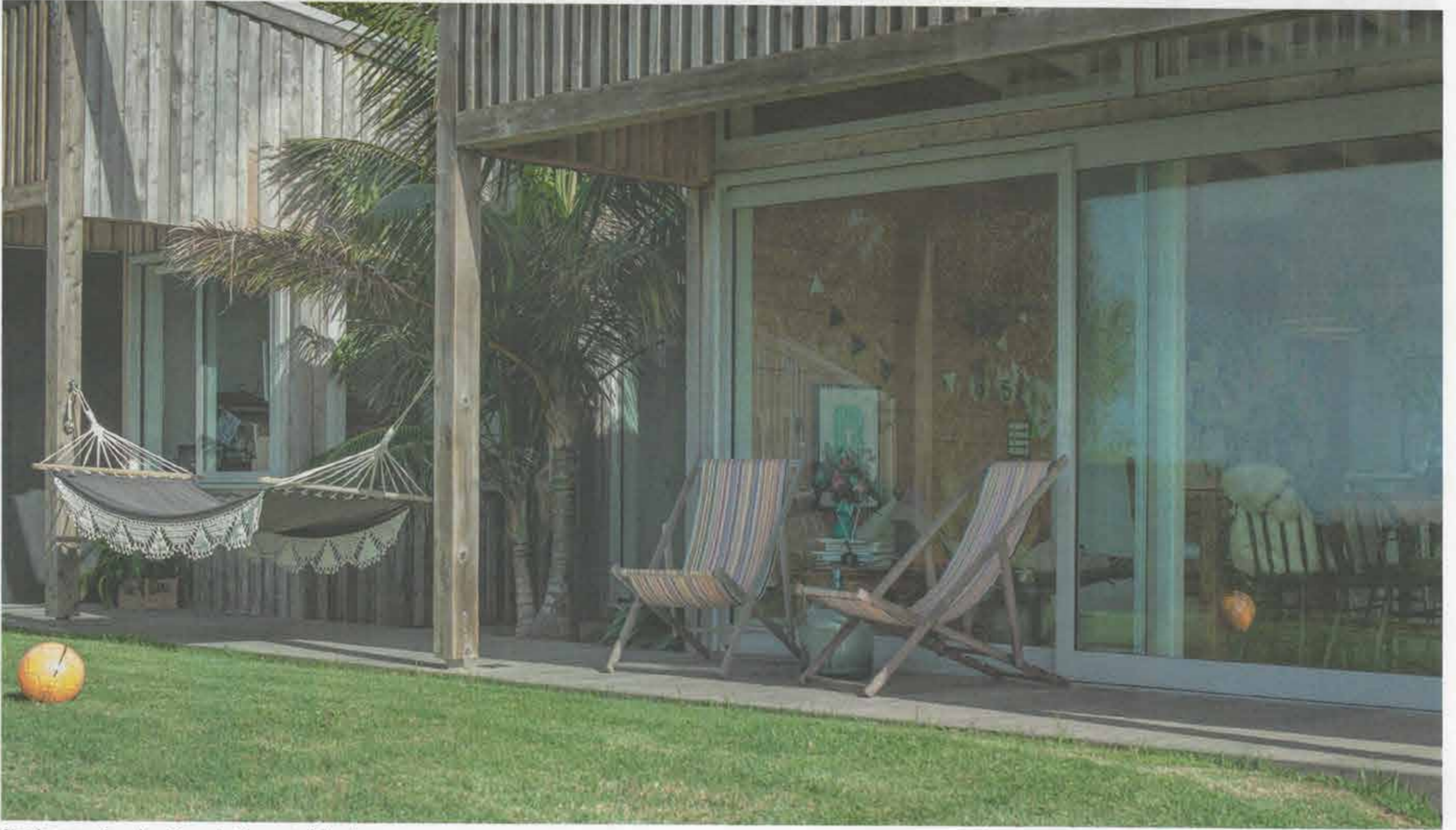
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The polished concrete fire surround was designed by Ryan.

Designed by Ryan, the polished concrete fire surround is a modern take on a traditional fireplace.



Matai (left) and Ari at the kitchen table.



Matai's room - all bedrooms open to the lawn.

With a view of the lawn, Matai's room is a bright and airy space.



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