

HOME

NEW ZEALAND
ARCHITECTURE,
DESIGN AND
INTERIORS.

NZ

A Place to Call Our Own

NZ ARCHITECTS' HOMES
IN AUCKLAND, ARROWTOWN,
CANTERBURY & LOS ANGELES

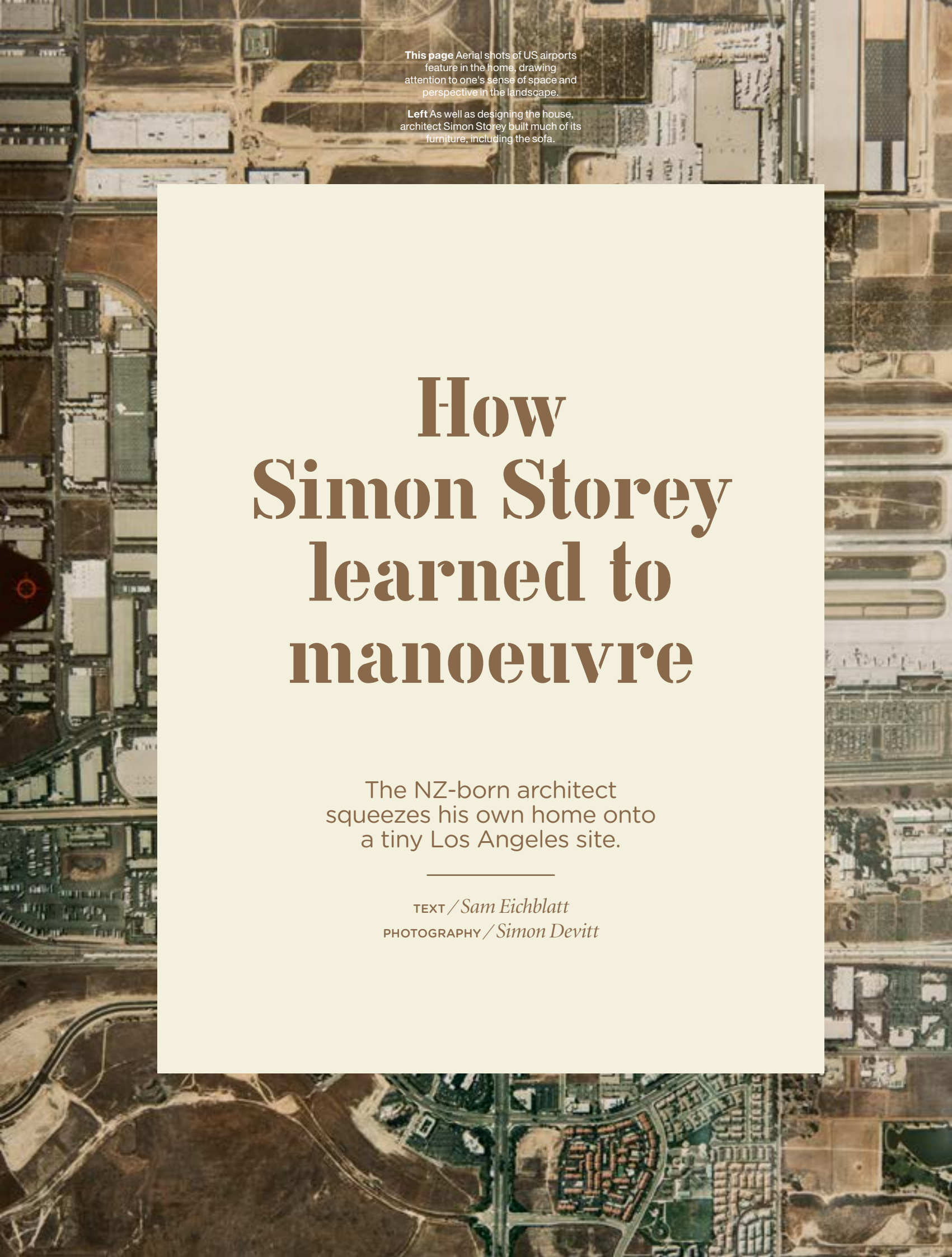
Photographs by
Simon Devitt



CHRISTCHURCH'S BEST NEW BUILDING
+ BEAUTIFUL BATHROOM DESIGNS

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This page Aerial shots of US airports feature in the home, drawing attention to one's sense of space and perspective in the landscape.

Left As well as designing the house, architect Simon Storey built much of its furniture, including the sofa.

How Simon Storey learned to manoeuvre

The NZ-born architect squeezes his own home onto a tiny Los Angeles site.

TEXT / *Sam Eichblatt*

PHOTOGRAPHY / *Simon Devitt*



Simon Storey's Los Angeles home sits on a site that is only 4.5 metres wide. When he removes his car from the garage and leaves the door open, the space becomes a workroom, where he indulges his love of woodworking.

Below Storey and his wife Jen Holmes on the roof terrace which has panoramic views of Greater Los Angeles. He enjoys the sense of transformation being up there: "It's like the house doesn't even exist because it's beneath you."



Right The glass sculptures are formed by pre-existing pieces of glass being seamlessly fused together. Above them hang aerial shots of US airports.



From the roof terrace and unofficial fourth floor of architect Simon Storey's tall, compact, black stucco-clad home, there's a 360-degree panorama of the Greater Los Angeles area, taking in the Hollywood sign, the Santa Monica Mountains on the coast, and the soaring San Gabriels in the north, which are currently capped with snow – because apparently it's winter, even here in southern California.

"We're having a real cold snap," says Storey, shivering theatrically. "The temperature for the last couple of weeks has been down around 70 or 80 degrees." (That's between 21 and 26 degrees, for those working in Celsius).

The New Zealand-born architect arrived in the States after completing an undergraduate degree at the University of Auckland 20 years ago. After spending most of the 1990s as a ski bum in Colorado – during which he nonetheless saved enough for graduate school at the Southern California Institute of Architecture (also known as SCI-Arc) – he set up Anonymous Architects nine years ago, the studio of which is right below our feet.

Storey calls this house the "Eel's Nest", after the narrow urban properties of the same name in Japan. It was his first house to be realised off the drawing board and, it turned out, his most challenging. To

begin with, his lot had little-to-no room to manoeuvre. It was just 15 feet (4.5 metres) across, hemmed in by a concrete stairway on one side and another property on the other.

However, it had a price tag half the size of anything else on the market – and then there's the location. Echo Park, one of the city's leafier and more walkable neighbourhoods, reminds him of 1980s Ponsonby, he says, with a historically Latino population, and record stores and thrift shops next to bodegas and security-grilled liquor stores. "It was cheap, but even then, on a price-per-square foot basis, it didn't make much sense," says Storey. "I'd never had any interest before in building something skinny and tall, but it was my only option, really."

So, what does an architect do with a total area a fraction under 73 square metres, and a construction budget of US\$110,000? "My number-one concern was to make it feel like a normal house, as much as possible. And that came down to small details," says Storey. "I needed to make the front of the house work, which seems like a small task but was actually quite complicated, having to work within the confines of that 15-foot width. You can't step outside of that. You're stuck with a box, and if you want to get creative with that, it's only going to make it a smaller box.

"You're stuck with a box, and if you want to get creative with that, it's only going to make it a smaller box."

The skinny three-storey home barely casts a shadow on the sun-baked California street. Storey named his home Eel's Nest after the narrow urban properties of the same name in Japan.





Left top The light-shades by SS in the kitchen are made from sheets of aluminium cut by water jet, which were then anodised and folded by hand.

Left In summer, the door to the tiny garden is left open to extend the living space. The kitchen is slightly sunken, which subtly demarcates it from the living area.

Above Experimenting with alternatives to conventional windows, Storey used a regular door instead, which he keeps open in summer and treats as a balcony.

Above right The internal stairs run parallel to the public steps that walk up the side of Eel's Nest.

Even the stairwell, which filters light into the core of the house, is a chunk of space I've taken away from it."

The ground level features Storey's combined garage and workshop – or rather, what becomes his workshop once he's parked his car outside and opened up the doors. This is where the architect made most of the furniture for the house, including his sofa, coffee table and the speaker stack, which he based on the ramshackle piles of old stereo equipment commonly found in thrift store Hi-fi Corners. "I just do it as a hobby. I love wood-working, if I have time. And it's just really hard to find a good couch, if you're not willing to spend \$10,000. So that was a necessity."

The second floor contains the living room and kitchen, which opens onto a petite back garden and a single, but very productive, avocado tree. The kitchen is slightly sunken, which subtly demarcates it from the rest of the space. The next floor up has two rooms and a bathroom. Storey currently uses the room overlooking the street as his architecture studio, and the quiet back room as a bedroom. Its small balcony is the height of the avocado tree canopy, giving him the sense that he sleeps in a tree. And then there's the roof terrace, planted with three olive trees and drought-resistant shrubs, where he has friends over for drinks and dinner, and watches that spectacular California sun sink



Left Storey runs his company Anonymous Architects from his home studio. Eel's Nest has garnered him requests for similarly vertical designs on equally challenging sites.

Below Just a block from Sunset Strip, the home is in Echo Park, one of a few foot-traffic friendly areas of Los Angeles.





Far Left Living at Eel's Nest has surprised Storey as he's realised that a dwelling of modest proportions can be liberating – "it has nothing more than you need".

Left The white pine floors were an unconventional choice due to their softness but Storey likes the fact that they wear, giving warmth and character to the boxy dimensions.


Right Simon loves making models as part of the design process and finds clients respond to their physicality more so than to a digital impression.

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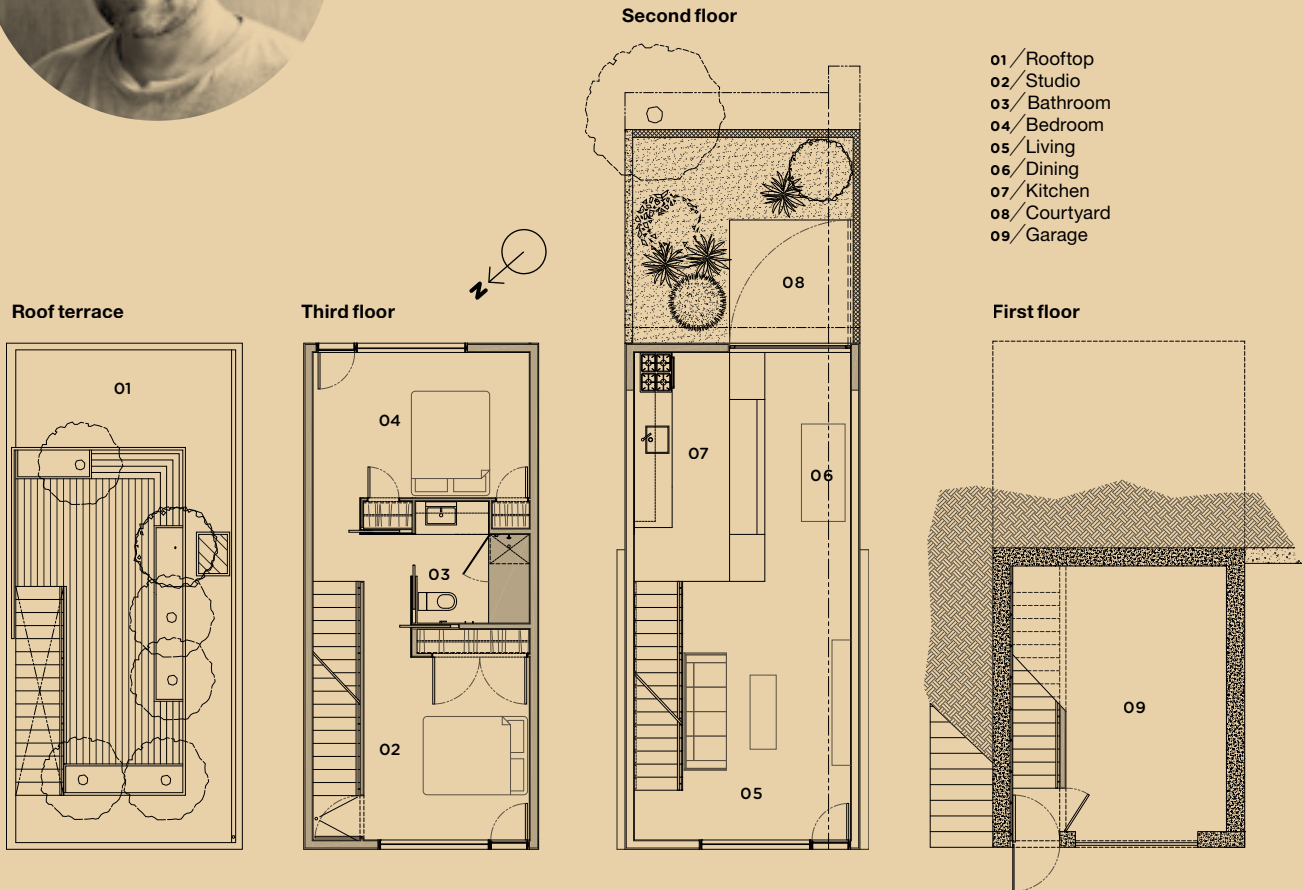
below the horizon. "Going up there is like a transformation; it's like the house itself doesn't even exist because it's underneath you," he says.

While necessity originally prompted him to design with such uncompromising verticality, the concept has proved remarkably adaptable. Since he finished Eel's Nest, he's been asked to design others, including one in North Carolina surrounded by a couple of acres: "The clients want the verticality," he says. "It also works there because it's in a forest and each level will have a different aspect. The top has a canopy view. So I'm kind of surprised, but this concept, with a few tweaks, is actually relevant in different locations."

While Storey focused on solving the spatial issues in a no-frills way, he didn't realise until after the house was finished that it offered a different way of living. "I never expected it to be that interesting, actually," he admits. "It was only after I started living here that I realised 960 square feet is all you need, as long as it's well thought out and has lots of natural light. It becomes a pretty liberating space to live in, because it's nothing more than you need." 



Left In the bedroom at the back of the house, away from the street and with the trees peeking inside, nature lends a restful aspect in an urban location.



DESIGN NOTEBOOK

Q&A with architect Simon Storey

Most of your buildings, so far, are in Los Angeles. What kind of people do you work for? A lot of my clients end up being fairly young people, actors, people who are artists or work in the arts, like curators, or people in music.

In terms of design and architecture, the city has a strong mid-century presence. Is this a factor in your work? One of the things I do is pretty much ignore LA and its influence. It's always more interesting to do projects that don't necessarily reference the past here. If I've been influenced by anything, it's probably European and Japanese architects, because it would be too easy to design the same kind of buildings that are

already being built here. I want each of my houses to be very different from the last one. That's part of the reason for the name, Anonymous Architects. I try to imagine each building as so different that you can't find a thread, you can't recognise it's the same architect.

You build your own furniture – does working with your hands feed into your practice as well? Yeah, I'm really, really into model making. The physicality of the model will really influence the design. You discover so many things with a real model as opposed to a digital rendering. I love making models, and people respond to them so well, too. I love the whole process.