

# A LIFE WELL LIVED

*It's a home filled with treasured belongings, family memories and personality galore. MiNDFOOD takes a privileged look inside the house of fashion designer Caroline Sills.*

Words by **Michael McHugh** Photography by **Kevin Emirali**

The possum-coloured French oak floor sets the tone for the open-plan ground floor of the Sills' home. The Arianna woven rope chairs from Rodolfo Dordoni face into the expansive double room, which is cut in half by the chimney. A white Philippe Starck Chaise sits at the right of the room next to a small Gacela side table adorned with a ceramic opium pillow purchased on a trip to Hong Kong.



**THE KITCHEN**  
The aluminium kitchen was designed by Italian company Driade and includes Carrara marble tops and Philippe Starck Sarapis Stools from Indice. "It's perfect for entertaining," says Sills.



**DINING ROOM**  
The English refectory dining table, circa 1800, is surrounded by cloth-covered Philippe Starck Lord Yo chairs.



**LIGHT AND AIRY**

*Clockwise from above:*  
The sofas in the formal sitting room are covered in Dominique Keiffer duck egg-coloured linen and set off the Philippe Starck Pratfall chairs; family dog, Manolo, sleeps on the bed in the afternoon sun, where he knows he shouldn't be; the stairwell features a Philippe Starck Miss Lacy chair alongside a concrete wall and stainless steel balustrade.

*Opposite page, clockwise from top left:*  
The bathroom and steam room display wall to wall Calacatta Carrara marble; the English Rococo console holds Simon candelabras and a collection of Borek Sipek glass vases; the chimney is the backbone of the home and anchors the open-plan space.



**THE STUDY**

The Jim Thompson silk-upholstered walls and limestone custom-carved fire-surround display artwork collected by the family over the years. Greenery outside the window offsets the silk blinds and complements the Nepalese and African mask collection.





From left: Lloyd Sills with family dog Manolo, Caroline Sills (holding eight-week-old puppy, Monty), daughter Christina, grandson Isaac, and older daughter Toni. Caroline gave the griffon puppy to Lloyd to celebrate their 38-year wedding anniversary. As Lloyd puts it: "It's the gift I never wanted." Opposite page: The frontage of the Sills' home.



**F**ashion designer Caroline Sills tells a good story. As we sit on her front verandah looking out over a reserve in Devonport, Auckland, with the Waitemata Harbour sparkling across the road, she has me in fits of laughter as she recounts her travels through the Amazon and being chased by the local Romeo while catching piranhas. Her tales of climbing Machu Picchu, visiting Iran and Burma last year, and a New Year's Eve in the Thar Desert with a Rajasthan band and a dancing eunuch, are utterly entertaining, and I am a willing audience, lapping up every detail.

It is perhaps Sills' narrative and the way she pulls things together, her sudden burst of ideas and watching each thread of them fall into place that makes her so entertaining. Before you know it you have learned something about a tribe in the Himalayas or the local council in Devonport. Her talents don't stop there: one minute she is reprimanding Bertie, the family cockatoo, as she squawks at passing traffic and tears leaves from the magnolia tree that hangs over the verandah; the next she is collecting the carnage the bird has left and, voila, has created a floral masterpiece, perfect for the photoshoot. "What do you think?" she says. "Could be fun?"

#### A DYNAMIC FAMILY

It's that sense of fun and underlying bohemian nature that draws you in. Much can be said of Caroline and husband Lloyd Sills' home. There is a family that works together. It would be easy to walk into this beautiful home and miss the intimate details; the collection of a life well lived, the photos and memories, the artwork and pieces of furniture collected throughout their lives.

Daughters Toni and Christina work within the family fashion business. The family home is a space that shares special memories; Toni was married there and the open-plan design leads itself to easy entertaining and a relaxed feel. The frontage fits in alongside Devonport's many streets filled with turn-of-the-century character wooden villas. The first mayor of Devonport actually lived in this house. The cleverly revamped architecturally designed home was a work in progress for a long time. "No one could get the design of the space quite right," says Sills. After trying five architects, McKinney Windeatt Architects from Ponsonby "cracked it".

"[I think of it as] my expensive tent, actually my *very* expensive tent. When it's all opened up you can drift from room to room."

Sills wanted to "live in a green goldfish bowl," so she could either "look at the sea or [at] green [foliage]". This is not your average family home. With "possum coloured" French oak floors, antique white walls and high ceilings, Sills' brief was to have "lots of light and shutters, with no curtains or carpets". Once all the doors are open it feels like a grown-up space, as though you are on holiday at a fabulous tropical resort. Only two floor coverings are used throughout the property – the wooden floors and the limestone that surrounds the verandah. "There can be too many elements and colours if you don't keep a restrained palette," says Sills.

#### OPEN-PLAN LIVING

The shutters are all enclosed in cavities, as are the large sliding doors that open up to the outside living space and which telescope back into a narrow part of the wall. The entire home is well thought out and effortless in its design and execution.

The central fireplace is the backbone of the house. The property is north and south facing so can experience two climates within the open-plan living room in one day. The main living space has a sofa and small chaise with Gacela side tables, graced with ceramic opium pillows from Hong Kong. The Arianna woven rope chairs from Rodolfo Dordoni reference the sight and sound of the sea outside and the outdoor room offers another space to entertain with an oversized pot of flowering gardenias and classic Lord Yo Philippe Starck chairs grouped around a limestone table.

The kitchen space gets the first of the morning sun. The Antonia Astori 1968 classic designed kitchen sits comfortably alongside modern appliances. Aluminium benches and Carrara marble tops, a Gaggenau cooktop and oven, and Philippe Starck Sarapis stools from Indice offset the large open space and the bi-fold doors looking out to a wall of green. "It's a fantastic kitchen to cook in because of the double benches and the open space," says Sills. "You can have so many people helping you when you entertain with those double-island benches. It's an intelligent use of the space."

Sills' collection of her mother's Georgian silver, Wedgwood plates and Waterford crystal sit in the glass-fronted Astori-designed cabinetry. "My mother was a war bride and had five barrels of stuff packed in straw. Everything was broken except one barrel full of this beautiful old cream Wedgwood," she says. ▶



Tall green hedging rings the property and contrasts with the white limestone verandah. *Opposite page, clockwise from top left:* Sills wanted to be able to look at the sea or green foliage; Bertie, the family cockatoo, squawks at passing traffic from his perch; a beautiful archway frames the nearby sea; grandson Isaac plays catch with Manolo; Caroline holds eight-week-old Monty.

FLOWERS: NINAFORFLOWERS.CO.NZ  
 INTERIOR DESIGN: SKINNER DESIGN,  
 SKINNERDESIGN.CO.NZ  
 FURNISHINGS: INDICE, INDICE.CO.NZ  
 ARCHITECTS: MCKINNEY WINDEATT  
 ARCHITECTS, MWARCHITECTS.CO.NZ



### RESTFUL SPACES

At the front of the home sits the study – Sills’ refuge – and is in complete contrast to the large, minimal, open spaces of the living rooms that anchor the home. The study has donkey-coloured silk-lined walls that hold a collection of artefacts and objects including antique books and tribal masks from global travels. “I’m mad about these,” she says, pointing to the masks sitting on the glass side table. “They are from the Kingdom of Mustang, in Nepal.” This is the perfect room to watch TV and escape. The cosy fireplace is made from the same limestone around the house.

The formal sitting room has two plump sofas upholstered in Dominique Kieffer duck-egg coloured linen that reflects the colour of the sea as your eye travels out to the view. The coffee table is by Spanish designer Oscar Tusquets, offsetting the Philippe Starck Pratifall chairs and Sills’ mother’s gorgeous silver Art Nouveau light.

A beautiful English rococo console table circa 1700, below a French antique mirror, holds a collection of Borek Sipek glass vases with overflowing ivy and white hydrangeas, and a pair of Simon candelabras. Matching chandeliers, purchased in Italy and made as a pair in the 1930s for a villa in Florence, hang in the sitting room and over the English refectory dining table (circa 1800).

### A FULL HOUSE

As Sills’ daughters arrive, a gaggle of dogs run through the house and Bertie flies down from the magnolia tree. Christina’s dog Billie chases Monty, an eight-week-old griffon – a gift from Caroline to Lloyd marking their 38-year wedding anniversary. “It’s the gift I never wanted,” says Lloyd. Two-year-old grandson Isaac wanders around asking for Grandma with his “emergency” bag of chips.

Daughter Christina says: “We first started working in the business when we were about 11 or 12, earning money for the Christmas holidays by packing boxes and making morning tea.

“In our early twenties Toni and I travelled through Africa and the Middle East together. We lived in London and shared not only a flat but also a bedroom for a year.” After three years Toni headed back to New Zealand with her husband, Jarrod, and started working in the family business doing sales and marketing. Christina stayed in England then moved to Sydney before returning to New Zealand two years ago to join the family business and cover Toni’s role while she was on maternity leave. “Now our roles intertwine, with Toni working part-time while I look after the retail side of the business.”

There is never a dull moment with this family who work and play together. “Mum and Dad are great to work with. They are progressive and very open to suggestions,” says Toni. You can see they are a great team and balance each other out. “If Mum held the purse strings,” says Christina, “we’d be poor but look fabulous, while Dad would have his money stuffed under his mattress living off ready-roast in a bedsit.” Sills’ storytelling and sense of style is clearly running through another generation.

This house or “very expensive tent” is an anchor where the family return to entertain and laugh. It is without doubt a wonderful home.



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Read an interview with Caroline Sills where she opens up about her new phase in life.

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