

# Skylark Cabin

LOCATION

**MACKENZIE COUNTRY**

ARCHITECT/DESIGNER

**BARRY CONNOR, BARRY CONNOR DESIGN**

PHOTOGRAPHER

**DENNIS RADERMACHER**







**Nestled beneath the wide, wide skies of the Aoraki Mackenzie International Dark Sky Reserve lies the small but intriguing structure that is Garry Wilson and Liz Harpelton's Skylark Cabin. Sited so as to be all but invisible from the road, its angular form tucks into a shallow undulation of the land, leaving nothing more at night than a faint glimmer to indicate there is a building there. In daylight, too, its presence is minimal; it almost appears as a cloud shadow atop the creamy tussock.**

This reticence was a deliberate ploy by architectural designer Barry Connor, and one that was enthusiastically embraced by the owners. Connor explains: 'We all wished to minimise the impact of building in such an iconic landscape. Buildings can be a bit brash, and here, where there is such an expanse of big-picture scenery, you want to do everything you can to soften their presence.' Consequently, black is employed as the primary external colour because of its recessive qualities, and, where colour is present, it is the particular shade of burnt orange found in the lichens and low grasses hiding amongst the more dominant tussock. 'This particular shade is one especially appreciated by Liz, although we all like it very much,' remarks Connor, 'so it was the obvious choice when specifying a contrasting colour for certain elements — the window frames and the structural frames that define the car port.'

This collaborative approach is the reason why Connor and the owners have worked together on several projects over the past five years. Wilson describes Connor as '... someone we just clicked with. His ideas are excellent as well as competent and workable, and he was the only person we would have entrusted with a scheme like this in a location so imposing.'

Connor admits to getting inspiration from the small as much as the grandeur of the wider landscape. 'It's magical the way the skylarks hover and dance over the tussock, so designing the form so two open-plan offset areas could almost appear (when viewed

**Previous page** The wide plains and skies of the Mackenzie Basin stretch in all directions from the deck.

**Top** The burnt orange accent note is exactly the shade seen on the lichens and low grasses found below the tawny tussock.

**Bottom** Strong simple forms are present, but a careful placement upon the site mean they do not dominate an area where landscape is all.





from above) as a bird's wing was a starting point. It's not a big space, but a form such as this allows both the bedroom area and the larger living one to gain from each other. It's basically an open-plan studio, but the angle caused by the offset gives privacy to the bedroom while permitting a wider perspective in the living.'

While the bird-wing form certainly maximises the usefulness of the interior spaces, it also works to make the best of the spectacular views and the shifting light that plays across the tussock. Thus the bent arm that is the bedroom faces east towards the Black Hills and Backbone Peak, an orientation that permits morning sun in both winter and summer. The longer and larger space faces west, with closer views of the Ben Ōhau Range through the standout architectural set-piece: the west-facing wall of floor-to-apex glazing. Here, the various living areas — kitchen, dining and seating — progress and expand out to an open deck set low amongst the tussock. This might be the obvious viewing platform from which to absorb the grandeur of the surroundings, but the circular skylight above the bed is another not to be missed. Since the images included in this chapter were photographed, the owners have installed an outdoor bath and changing area in the sheltered northern lee of the building. Here, too, is somewhere to watch the skies light up.

Both the bedroom and living 'wings' are lined in birch ply, a timber whose creamy tones, in Connor's words, 'blur the threshold' with the tussock outside, and by doing so 'capture the feeling of being nestled right in the landscape'. Black-edged ply-rib detailing takes this metaphor further. Connor sees it as representing the "cradle" of being inside, protected, safe and private'.

Conceived by both owners and architectural designer alike as 'a place for relaxation and retreat, the intention was to provide for only the essentials; a place to cook, sleep, reflect and bathe'. This might be Connor's poetic way of expressing the intent behind the project; Wilson and Harpelton just know it will be their holiday home

**Top left** A roof to the carport was necessary, but keeping it translucent meant it did not dominate.

**Top right and bottom** Black-edged ply-rib detailing adds interest to the birch plywood-lined interior and draws the eye to the angles introduced by the offsetting of the 'wings'.





for decades to come, and one they will enjoy sharing with family and guests. Wilson breathes a sigh of relief. 'It was a long-winded process, as building anything today always is, but now we're just really happy with it and are ready to settle down and enjoy it.'

**Top left** A large skylight makes the bed a platform for enjoying the night sky for which the area is world famous.

**Top right** The angled hall created by the offset shows how privacy is created by this device, despite the footprint being only 50m<sup>2</sup>.

**Bottom** An eye-level slot window, a skylight and more light entering from alongside the bathroom at the end of the hall mean the bedroom is bathed in a soft light from multiple directions.

**Next page** The night sky of the Aoraki Mackenzie International Dark Sky Reserve is what this area, and this dwelling, is all about.





## Design Notes

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The form consists of two open-plan spaces, offset from each other to form what, from above, resembles a bird's wing.

Seemingly randomly positioned burnt-orange windows are placed so as to frame particular views of mountains and sky.

The entry point and car parking area are contained beneath a series of exposed frames — also in burnt orange — which, although an open skeleton, is anchored and sheltered on its outer edge by storage cupboards and bike racks, and made practical by a transparent roof.

## Fact File

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**Site size:** 4ha

**Building size:** 50m<sup>2</sup>

**Orientation:** North

## Products and Materials

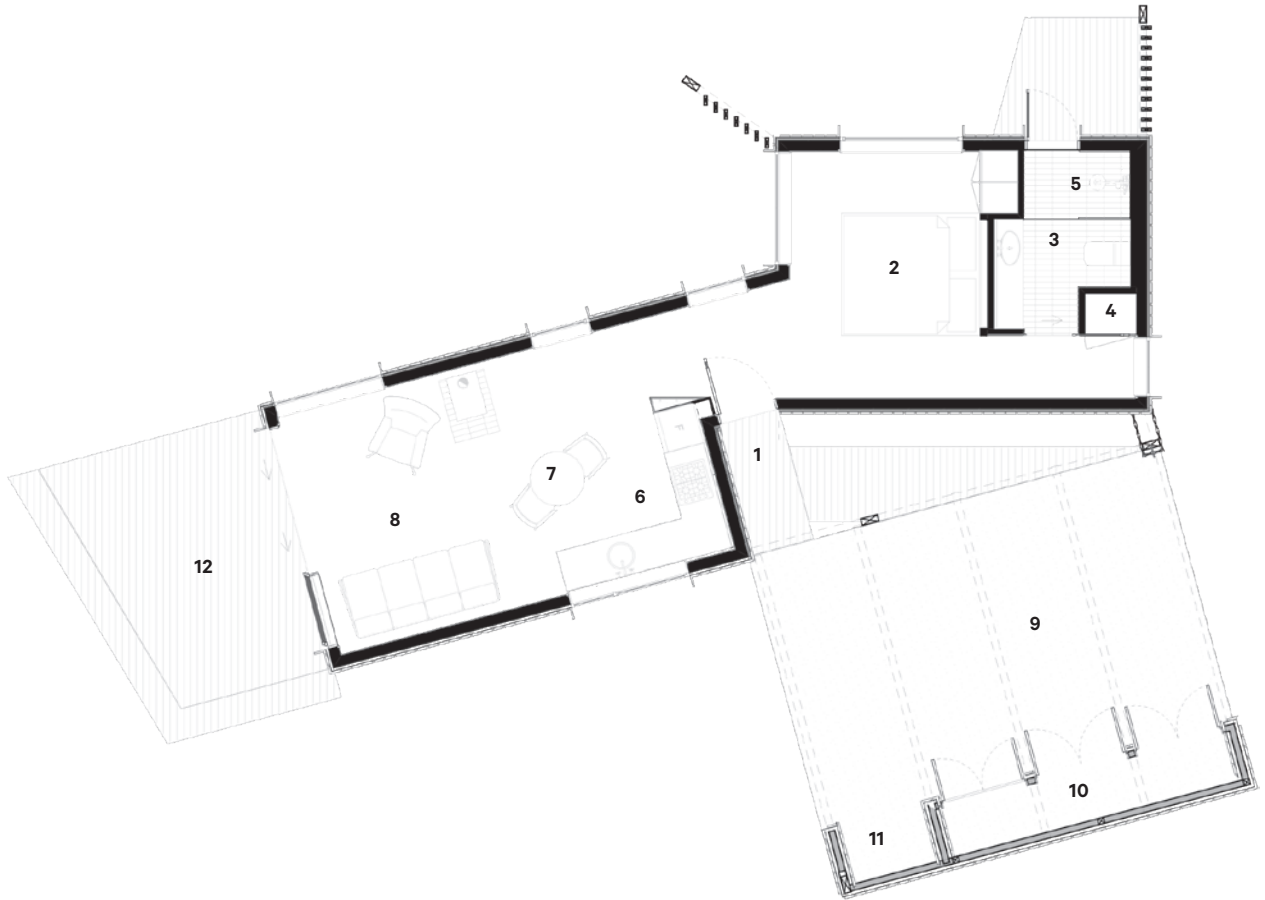
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**Exterior cladding:**  
A rough-sawn, black-stained Siberian larch rain-screen covers a waterproof membrane (walls) and iron (roof)

**Interior lining:** Birch ply with black-stained ply-rib detailing

**Wood-burner:**  
Pyroclassic Mini painted in Resene Dijon, [www.pyroclassic.co.nz](http://www.pyroclassic.co.nz) (this can be ordered in any Resene paint colour)

**Handbasin:** Petaline Vessel Basin in matte black by Kohler



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|---|------------|----|--------------------|
| 1 | Entry      | 7  | Dining             |
| 2 | Bedroom    | 8  | Living             |
| 3 | Bathroom   | 9  | Carport            |
| 4 | Laundry    | 10 | Wood store/Storage |
| 5 | Rear lobby | 11 | Bike storage       |
| 6 | Kitchen    | 12 | Deck               |