

ZED HOUSE RTA STUDIO

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Structural Engineering by HFC Group • Geotechnical Engineering by LandTech Consulting



In 2011, New Zealand's catastrophic Canterbury earthquake brought many houses in the region to the ground, including the family home that preceded Zed House. When it came time to rebuild, the client's brief to RTA Studio was one of nostalgia. Built with resilient materiality, Zed House honours multigenerational living whilst establishing a new family legacy.

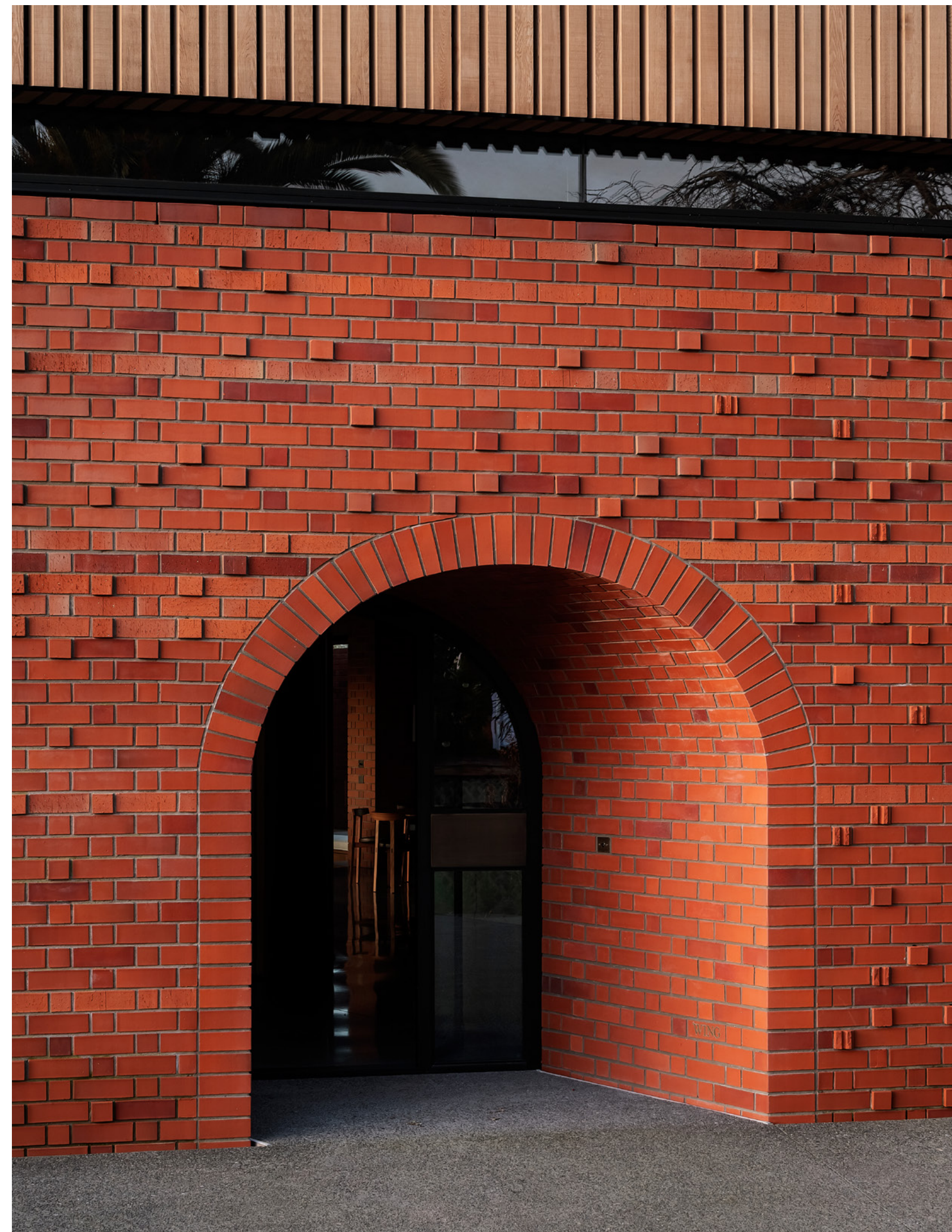
One of the clients of Zed House grew up on this special property in Christchurch on New Zealand's South Island, and although the family home had been reduced to rubble in the earthquake, she was reluctant to let the family's legacy do the same. This client purchased the property from her parents and set about rebuilding a new home for herself, her family and the generations that will follow.

The process of rebuilding following the impacts of any disaster can be a sensitive matter. Finding an architect who understands this sensitivity is paramount, and after several recommendations and hearing the name repeatedly in conversations, the clients engaged Auckland-based RTA Studio. Aside from the structural requirements, RTA Studio's projection of Zed House was intended as an abstract interpretation of the traditional home that existed before it.

A common architectural typology found in the more affluent suburbs of Christchurch is the English-inspired brick mansion. "It's interesting,"

Rich Naish, Principal Architect at RTA Studio, recalls, "because if it wasn't for the earthquake, the clients may have just inherited this traditional brick house as it was." However, with the opportunity to do things in their own creative and contemporary ways, the clients briefed RTA Studio to reference the previous home through the reinterpretation of some of its key elements, such as the brick material. "This project was really personal and all about injecting nostalgia in a modern way, so the clients could feel at home with the new outcome without having to build a replica," Rich notes.

Using bricks was a personal reference point, but they also speak to the site as well as the broader context of the neighbourhood and the Christchurch vernacular. "There's subtle striation in the brick layers in the new house," Rich says, "and that's quite nicely representative of the relationship to the riverbed that Christchurch rests on. The layered nature of the façade and the colours in the bricks provide a sort of geomorphic connection to the context of the natural landscape."







A long brick wall with one small arched opening marks arrival at Zed House. Though retaining a traditional forecourt approach and arrival sequence, RTA Studio slightly altered the typically formal arrangement within the house. Zed House takes the shape of a Z – three brushstrokes across the landscape. Two sides, or wings, are separated by a diagonal spine with all the home’s bedrooms. At one of the horizontal ends is the kitchen, dining and living areas, whilst the other has the garage, laundry and gymnasium. “The house has a formal side and an informal side,” Rich says. “From the moment you enter, you can see how the functionality of the more formal spaces is connected to a much looser spatial arrangement.”

The spatial arrangement and experience of Zed House are also categorised by its fluctuations in roof and ceiling heights. One almost crouches through the arched entrance, purposefully lower than expected at just over 1.8 metres, then walks into a space with the highest ceiling at four metres. The bedrooms also enjoy this extended ceiling height. The

informal living areas are positioned on a slightly lower level, and at the northern end of the home in the final living room, a few steps up, there is a feeling of compression as one sits down and enjoys the view out over the well-established garden. “We played with floor levels and ceiling levels to sort of give more purpose and poetry to each of the various living and sleeping spaces,” Rich describes.

The configuration of Zed House has allowed RTA Studio to do more with less. As most of the traditional brick mansions of the region were two storeys, the clients were expecting the rebuild to be of the same stature, yet much to their comfortable surprise, Rich and the team instead delivered plans for a single-storey house and demonstrated how they could make the architecture work harder to create more zones and architectural moments. For instance, the Z shape and its three strokes created two additional concave spaces, one in the arrival precinct and then a garden courtyard on the other side.



Timber joinery and soffits with concrete and brick reference the original house whilst informing the soft furnishings and complementing the clients' art collection.

This playfulness has established an organic relationship between the architecture, the interior and the landscape, with materiality connecting the dots between each. RTA Studio explored how the continuity of a certain material could blur these boundaries – and not solely through the reimagined use of bricks. Timber soffits flow seamlessly from the outside to form the interior ceilings. The combination of brick, concrete and an abundance of timber joinery references the original house whilst informing the soft furnishings and complementing the clients' existing modern New Zealand art collection. This combination of hard interior elements was the spur for interior designer Kristina Pickford's soft furnishings and floor coverings. RTA Studio established a strong working relationship with Kristina, who contributed to the conversation from the outset, delivering an interior that communicated the personal aesthetic of the owners.

To accommodate future generations, Zed House adapts to its seismic geology and is built of permanent materials – with a minimum design life of 200 years – resilient to earthquakes and flooding. Although a single-storey dwelling, Zed House presented a number of challenges

during the planning and construction phase. Building to the new seismic codes was a huge constraint, particularly given the masonry construction method. "That was a big part of the brief," Rich recalls. "We needed this house with its use of heavy masonry to have a solid foundation in order to survive 200 years. Everything we did was in the best interest of the house's longevity." This approach, in turn, had significant benefits to the environment. RTA Studio is a sustainably minded practice that is conscious of the embodied energy in this project. The project team explored ways to reduce the carbon footprint through operational means such as solar panels, low-energy heating systems and light sources, low water use, high levels of insulation, biophilic principles and natural ventilation.

It is safe to say RTA Studio successfully fulfilled the brief. The clients see the new home's visible threads of connection and experience that trigger childhood memories from growing up in the previous home, on that piece of land. Zed House honours this history, building upon the traditions of its ancestors in a socially and environmentally responsible way, creating a functional space for the family and generations to follow.



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