



# It was the quality of the light, bouncing off the harbour

A retreat on the Kaipara finds inspiration in one of New Zealand's finest traditions.

**TEXT** — Jeremy Hansen

**PHOTOGRAPHY** — Simon Devitt

When searching for a site to build her holiday retreat, architect Peggy Deamer pitched up above the Kaipara Harbour – drawn by the sense that the area felt remote but not isolated.



**Peggy Deamer spent her first summer in New Zealand fascinated with tents.** She'd moved here from New York City to teach architecture at the University of Auckland, and immediately become intrigued by the way people treated tents as BYO bedrooms during their holidays. "Everyone was saying that as soon as Christmas was over, they'd go and visit their friends on the beach and bring a tent," she says, "so I thought tents were the normal way to visit each other in New Zealand."

This sense of easy-going practicality stayed with her when, in 2014, she purchased a small piece of land on an inlet on the Kaipara Harbour and decided to design a summer place for herself there. She quickly realised her limited budget would never allow her to build a house big enough to provide bedrooms for everyone if her family came to visit. (Deamer's daughter, Frances, lives in Auckland, while her son, Cam, visits regularly from the US). Tents were an obvious way of providing extra summer bedrooms, but her property didn't offer a flat space to pitch them. So she began contemplating a platform on which they could be erected: a covered, elevated campsite from which to enjoy the view.

Deamer was perfectly comfortable with the idea of inhabiting the tents herself, so much so that she initially thought she might live in one on the platform and later add a small dwelling to the site. However, she soon learned that it was more cost-effective to build everything at once. So she designed a platform big enough for three tents, as well as a small dwelling containing two bathrooms (one for guests), a single bedroom and a compact kitchen and living area. The two structures sit perpendicular to each other, forming an 'L' shape that looks north and east out towards the harbour.

Keeping things simple was the goal. Deamer is a professor of architecture at Yale (she divides her time between New York and New Zealand, where she now teaches at Victoria University of Wellington) and has spent much of her career espousing the virtues of prefabricated architecture. Her Kaipara property isn't prefabricated, mostly because she couldn't find a prefab solution that allowed the house and the tent platform to share a design language. She did, however, maintain the prefab ethos of ensuring everything was emphatically no-fuss.

“There wasn't a tonne of ingenuity in it. Not every house needs to be a one-off, and show off its individualism. Let's not be afraid of being affordable.”

**Above** Peggy Deamer and Michel Bousader sit on the tent platform. Deamer bought the tents from Pinnacle Tents in Phoenix, Arizona.

**Facing page** A proponent of prefabricated housing, Deamer couldn't find a solution that would work for her Kaipara property. However, she did maintain an emphatically no-fuss design-and-build ethos. She was also determined to ensure the two rooflines would correlate and for the structure above the tents to appear as if floating.



**Above** The storage unit separating the bedroom from the living area was custom made by Bella Kitchens using stock materials. On display are vases from Te Uru Waitakere Contemporary Gallery. Pebble cushions are scattered throughout the living area.

**Right** Deamer created pared-back harmony with standard finishes: the walls are Gib and the floors in the living area are painted ply.

**Facing page** Deamer takes in the view of rolling hills surrounding the house from the front door.





**Above** The spacious tents are simply and comfortably kitted out with airbeds – and electric blankets for the cooler months.

**Facing page** Instead of a downpipe, Deamer specified a chain, which drops into the corrugated steel water tank.

**Page over** Lit up at night, the dwelling reveals its L-shaped simplicity.

To keep the build economic, Deamer designed the 58-square-metre house with services such as plumbing and drainage lined up along the rear wall to make installation as uncomplicated as possible. On the other side, the living areas open through double-glazed doors to the view of the hills rolling down to the harbour. The only internal doors are to the bathrooms, with the bedroom lightly separated from the living and dining area with a cabinetry unit so that the space reads as a single open-plan volume. The ply floors are painted, the kitchen cabinetry is off-the-shelf, and the exterior is corrugated steel. The shed-like aesthetic was entirely deliberate. “There wasn’t a tonne of ingenuity in it,” Deamer says of her keep-it-simple ethos. “Not every house needs to be a one-off, and show off its individualism. Let’s not be afraid of being affordable.” (The house and the platform for the tents were completed for under \$250,000 – because Deamer designed it herself, there were no architect’s fees).

Ironically, Deamer sweated the details more on the platform for the tents than the house itself. She wanted the rooflines of the house and the platform to feel closely related, so she designed them to tilt towards the harbour at the same angle. She wanted the roof of the 82-square-metre platform to have a lightness that made it look a little like it was floating above the tents. “I liked the idea of both structures looking like they had a platform and a roof, just that under one roof

is a house and under the other one is tents,” she says. “I didn’t think we could achieve that effect if the platform looked like a barn whose sides weren’t there. It would look too functional and too dumb.”

So she collaborated with draughtsman Stephen Orchard and contractor Pete Richards to create a platform roof supported on a series of single poles, elegantly achieving a floating-like structure. The big roof collects rainwater that is stored in a tank at one end, and tilts downwards towards the north to keep the tents well-shaded from hot summer sun. The platform isn’t just for guests: when Deamer is in residence (she’s at the house for about three months a year, while her daughter visits year-round) she spends much of her time at a table in this sheltered outdoor area, working on her laptop or just relaxing and enjoying the view.

It’s a smart, simple solution for a summer retreat which is home to a single person for most of the season, but many more during peak times. Deamer’s carefully composed campsite has plenty of space for guests throughout the summer months, without her spending money she didn’t have on building additional bedrooms. It all seems so logical that you wonder why more people haven’t done the same. For her part, Deamer is bemused at the number of people who have praised her ingenuity. “Everyone’s been so surprised about the tents on the platform,” she says. “I just thought I was doing the Kiwi thing.”





# DESIGN NOTEBOOK

Q&A with architect and owner Peggy Deamer



**What was it about the piece of land that enchanted you in the first place and how does the design respond to that?**

It was the quality of the light bouncing off the harbour, and the birds, and the fact that the land was being sold by a farmer/landlord, not a developer. And that the land was both remote but not too remote; private, but I could see neighbours.

**The decision to use tents on a deck instead of a permanent building for extra accommodation is inspired, though sadly quite rare here. How did you come to that decision?**

I find this question funny. I got the idea from my Kiwi friends, who described their Christmas visits to baches as one of bringing tents and camping on the beach. And since I didn't have flat land, I knew that to have friends visit, I'd have to build a flat platform.

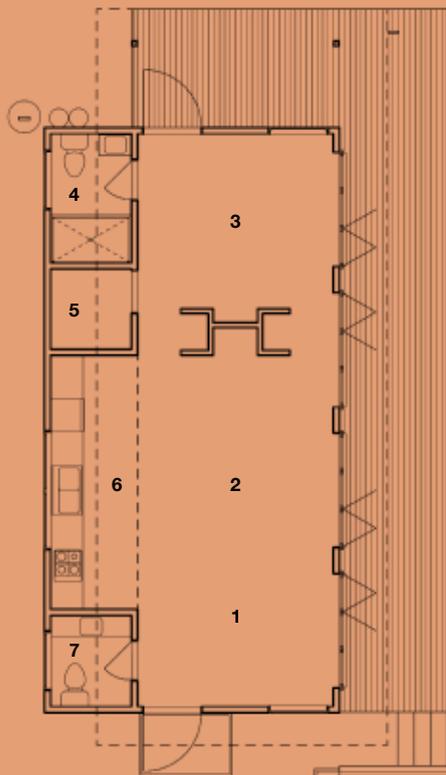
**It wasn't always going to be two mono-pitch roofs: how did the design evolve?**

Originally, I was going to have solar panels on the tent-platform roof, so something had to pitch in that direction – either half of a butterfly roof or the entire single pitch. The search after that was aesthetic. The single pitch on both proved the best in terms of

producing a unified form and provocative relationship between the two.

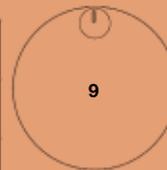
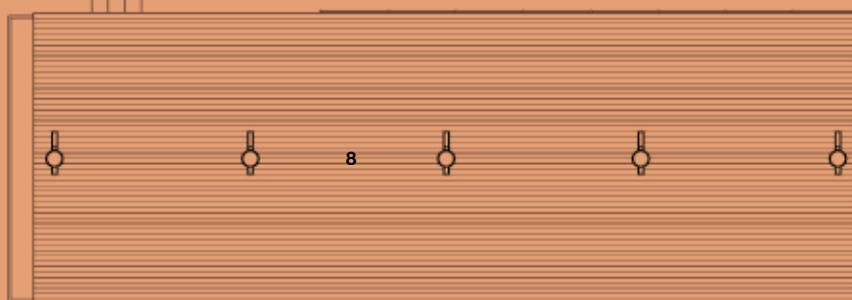
**You're an academic as well as a practising architect. How do the two intersect with this design?**

Both the academic and practice work engage the challenge of moving beyond the one-off building; hence the interest in prefab. Even though this ended up as site-built and singular, it held to the larger desire to produce a building that was affordable and made its cultural claim not via its stylistic innovation, but its addressing everyday shared concerns with a fresh eye. In addition, both my academic and professional work is very critical of the traditional design-bid contract and the animosity it creates between the architect, the owner, and the contractor. The architect-owner problem was solved (I was both) but I hired the contractor before design was complete because I wanted his input on cost and buildability while I was designing. It was invaluable. I consider he and the draughtsman (who knew what the council would need and what was 'common' practice) to be my teammates. The success of the time-and-materials contract made a very significant point for me.



**Above** Deamer often works on the deck when she's at home alone.

**Above right** The only internal doors in the home lead to the bathrooms.



**Key**

1. Dining
2. Living
3. Bedroom
4. Bathroom
5. Storage
6. Kitchen
7. WC
8. Tent platform
9. Water tank