

# Home for the artist within

As head of a large architectural practice Gina Jones has a busy professional life, but it is in her version of the garden shed that ideas are really lighting up, writes **Ann Packer**.

**H**ER ARTIST'S studio may have won the Small Project category of the 2009 Wellington Branch New Zealand Institute of Architects (NZIA) awards – but Gina Jones, founder and principal of Accent Architects, does no architectural work at all in the simple rectangular structure she designed for herself under the shade of an old walnut tree at the back of a half acre lot in Greytown.

With a sign on the main street advertising Accent Architects, passersby could be forgiven for thinking the studio is perhaps a new Wairarapa office for the practice that operates in the capital out of premises on Thorndon Quay. Wrong. That office is still in the front room of the century-old working man's cottage Jones and husband (and fellow director) Malcolm Fleming bought in 2003, when they were unable to find commercial premises to lease in the bustling weekend town.

The studio – which replaces and takes its visual inspiration from a dilapidated shed in one corner of the property – is strictly for use by Gina Jones, artist.

When she's finished her work for the week in town, Jones heads over the hill knowing the weekend is all hers to pursue an ever-expanding wealth of ideas lighting up in her head. With the studio set up for conceptual work and a rented church hall within walking distance in which to experiment with sculptural concepts – currently involving laser discs and mirrors – and for storing large crated works like those which have just come back from a solo exhibition at Aratoi, in Masterton, Jones is in her (other) element.

Growing up, Gina Jones really wanted to be an artist. At Onslow College she excelled at art. But her engineer father had other ideas. So it wasn't until 2002 that Jones, one of the artists in Warwick Brown's *Seen This Century* collection of 100 New Zealand artists, was able to develop her art practice.

Not that Jones, who now heads a team of 15, has any regrets about pursuing a career in architecture; she has practised since 1986 and established her firm in 1995.

It was after a colleague suggested she apply her skills to sketching perspectives for clients that Jones decided to enrol in an Inverloch art school class called Drawing for the Terrified. Thirteen courses and 18 months later she was persuaded to look at studying for a masters degree. The timing was wrong for New Zealand universities but someone from RMIT University in Melbourne was in Wellington talking to interested students. Jones was interested – though she didn't realise she had had an interview until she was offered a place in RMIT's distance masters programme.



**Out back:** The shed that inspired the artist's studio.



**Artist's work:** Untitled (You are in My Sight 2).

Jones and Fleming – with a Massey BBS, he runs the business side of things – are disciplined and focused, rising early each day so she can work on concepts in the original offices on the ground floor of their Tinakori Rd townhouse before the inevitable round of meetings. But fitting in 20 hours' study per week while working fulltime was still a challenge, even with Fleming volunteering to do all the cooking.

Her MFA behind her, the architectural practice taking on bigger and bigger projects – everything from industrial buildings and contemporary



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homes to refurbishing heritage buildings, including several in Greytown's Main Street for the local cultural heritage trust, which she chairs – and professional awards such as the New Zealand Institute of Building Medal (only the second woman to receive it, after the late Professor Helen Tippett, her mentor), Jones' art practice began to light up.

A finalist in the Norsewear, Waikato Contemporary Art and Wallace Art awards, Jones discovered light by chance when looking for a way of illuminating a pine-needle work for her masters. The lighting company showed her an LED (light-emitting diode) panel – and she was hooked.

These days she uses materials such as polished aluminium, lacquered steel, glass and perspex in conjunction with light sources, in strongly sculptural works inspired by concepts as diverse as bulls-eye targets, and her grandmother's thimbles. She has even designed a building incorporating light sources designed to change over the day – though for reasons beyond her control it was never built.

With several exhibitions lined up for 2010 – a solo show at the Sanderson gallery in Auckland and one at the Cat Street Gallery in Hong Kong, Jones continues to fit in more study – a cultural heritage management paper in Canberra and a masterclass with iconic Australian architect Glen Murcutt in June. Weekends at her Greytown studio will be even more precious.



**Mind space:** Gina Jones in her studio.

## GIVEAWAY

NZ House and Garden Tours offer a chance to see inside some of Wellington's most interesting homes and help raise money for cancer charities. The tours, which last year raised \$250,000, will this year benefit the Cancer Society of New Zealand and cancer charity Look Good Feel Better.

The Wellington tour on March 19 will include 12 homes, both historic and modern, ranging from Premier House, the prime minister's official residence, and an 1890s Te Aro cottage, to a Roger Walker-designed award-winning Eastbourne house, a 1920s Oriental Bay bungalow (pictured) and a steel-framed Pauatahanui hilltop home.

Tickets are \$55 from Ticketmaster outlets or Ticketmaster.co.nz, phone 0800 111 999. Ticket purchasers will be sent tour details and maps about a week before the event. Note: No wheelchair access or children. Information: nzhouseandgarden.co.nz.

We have a double pass worth \$110 to give away. To be in our draw write your name, address, including postcode, and daytime telephone number on the back of an envelope and post to: House Giveaway, Indulgence Draw, Features Department, Dominion Post Contests, P O Box 3741, Wellington 6140, or email: home@dompost.co.nz with House in the subject line. Mailbag closes at noon on Wednesday. One entry per person.

