

# Creating a home with soul

You can spend tens of thousands of dollars creating the perfect-looking house – but will it make you happy? SARAH HEERINGA considers the difference between a house and a home

Emma wears 'Chloe' dress by Dalston. Polka-dotted cushions by Miranda Brown, curtain fabric from Martha's Furnishing Fabrics

What happens at home matters. A house provides us with an emotional security blanket, a haven from the world, a place where we express ourselves creatively – and where we can welcome and enjoy the company of others.

And as the Christchurch earthquakes graphically remind us, these fundamentals can't be taken for granted. An ongoing trauma for Cantabrians has been the loss of homes and the impact it has on people's sense of self, security and wellbeing. "Houses aren't refuges from history," writes author Bill Bryson, "they are where history ends up."

Houses are more than a safe place to eat, sleep and store our belongings. From the dawn of history, we've used them as canvasses for expressing our personal style. In his book *At Home: A Short History of Private Life*, Bryson describes the Neolithic town Çatalhöyük, built about 9,000 years ago in what is now Turkey. This large settlement featured no streets, but houses huddled together in a mass. Those in the middle could only be reached by clambering over multiple roofs and entering through ceiling hatches – an arrangement Bryson describes as "staggeringly inconvenient".

But archaeological evidence also shows Çatalhöyük was a sophisticated culture with crafts such as woven baskets, art and fabric with stylish patterns. They

embellish can be seen in our huge home improvement industry.

Homemaking is an effort worth making. Psychological studies (as well as common sense) confirm that our surroundings have a huge bearing on mood and resilience in the face of life's stresses. Without a home to provide privacy or relaxation, we become anxious and have trouble relaxing and sleeping. Relationships suffer and children are unable to play or do their homework.

Whether we rent or buy, simply paying for the roof over our heads represents a big slice of the budget pie. And because we consider our homes to be a statement of who we are (and of our status), we can sink a lot of money and emotional energy into decorating and filling them with carefully selected items.

But is achieving material perfection really the best use of our time, energy and the contents of our wallets? After all, homemaking is more than creating a better-looking place to be – at its heart, it's about things you can't see or touch. The homes we most enjoy visiting are appealing not because of the way they look, but because they reflect what is most attractive about the people who live in them.

Like the way rooms with books seem more interesting to us. "We look at other people's shelves to provide clues to their interests and characters – and for similar

From the dawn of history, we've used homes as canvasses for expressing our personal style. In his book *At Home*, Bill Bryson describes a Neolithic town with no streets and roof hatches instead of doors, but which had a sophisticated culture with crafts, art and stylish textiles. As Bryson points out, it's remarkable that we thought of striped fabrics before doors and windows

could even produce stripes. As Bryson points out, it's remarkable that we thought of striped fabrics before doors and windows.

While today's popular culture dictates how our homes 'should' look, we share the basic inclination to decorate with the people of Çatalhöyük. Today, this urge to

reasons, we are loath to throw away our own books because they feel a part of our identity," writes Damian Thompson in *Books Make a Home*. Or as the ancient Roman philosopher Cicero put it: "A home without books is a body without a soul."

Our attitude towards material possessions affects the vibe of our homes,





The ache for home lives in all of us,  
the safe place where we can go as we are  
and not be questioned -MAYA ANGELOU



says Auckland photographer Emma Bass. "If we try and hold on to things too tightly, the accumulation of stuff around us gets in the way of us connecting with the people who should be closest."

Emma recounts the experience of a friend who auctioned off the contents of his family estate after his elderly parents passed away. Growing up, his home had been perfectly kept and furnished with glass china cabinets filled with valuable objects. Having spent his whole childhood being told not to touch them, it came as a surprise when they were sold for much less than what he thought they were worth.

"It's good to remind ourselves that we

Guzellig is a Dutch word that can mean something enjoyable or quaint, conviviality, a warm and friendly atmosphere, a sense of belonging or even simply the feeling of seeing a friend after a long absence



come into this world with nothing and we leave with nothing,” says Emma. “It’s a relief to let go of stuff – and a relief to let go of the need to be perfect.”

Although Emma has photographed many of New Zealand’s fabulous homes and beautiful people, her latest photography project ‘Imperfect’ has been inspired by wabi-sabi, the Japanese art and philosophy of finding beauty and profundity in flawed objects.

“When I’m photographing people or their houses, the desired outcome is one of perfection,” says Emma. “People want to look their best – it’s life captured at the best angle with sympathetic lighting, no wrinkles. The concept of wabi-sabi offers relief from our Western pursuit of perfection. You can relax into it – it takes the pressure off.”

Wabi-sabi is about finding beauty in simple, rough objects, often handcrafted or drawn from nature. There’s wabi-sabi to be enjoyed in evenings spent alone in

a cottage in the woods hearing the rain fall – as well as in old, badly-matching sets of crockery, plain handcrafted wooden buckets and walls with blemishes, writes British philosopher Alain de Botton in *The Architecture of Happiness*. The word has no direct equivalent in any Western language.

Authenticity is the most important quality in the wabi-sabi mindset. The word ‘sabi’ means ‘the bloom of time’, and wabi-sabi objects carry the burden of their years with dignity and grace – including the cracks and crevices and all the other marks that time, weather and use leave behind. In wabi-sabi, the natural cycle of decay and death is one to be celebrated and enjoyed, not hidden away.

“The idea of wabi-sabi can help us develop a less pretentious and more complete perspective on all sorts of things – including attitudes towards our bodies, the ageing process and the imperfections of our home,” says Emma.

Rather than constantly updating our things according to the dictates of fashion, wabi-sabi might inspire a new appreciation of objects that have been around for a while, such as old bits of furniture that carry a patina of time.

Which brings us back to the question of what gives a home soul. The furniture may be dented or fraying a little at the edges, and surfaces not always immaculately clean, but homes with soul are places where lively conversation happens over meals, where books and music maintain more of a presence than the telly and where there’s a story behind the pictures on the walls.

Homes with soul may not be luxurious, but they exude an air of comfort. Inside, time is allowed to slow down and there’s evidence of sentiment and tender touches. They’re places where you might pop in unannounced and not be surprised to be offered a cup of tea.

The Dutch have a word for all of this



and it's guzellig. Pronounced 'gha-sell-ick' with a guttural 'gha', this difficult-to-define word means both 'heartwarming' or 'cosy' depending on the context in which it's used. It can equally describe how a room looks or how it makes you feel. Guzellig was first explained to me by Vincent Heeringa - the son of Dutch immigrants and later my husband.

"It's the exact opposite of adventure," he says. "It might be conjured by rich and colourful curtains, but it's just as likely to be generated by the satisfying feeling of food in your tummy or the relaxed, friendly atmosphere. It's the essence of easy company, the sense of replenishment, the warmth of relationship and the richness of a social vibe."

The idea of guzellig reminds us that creating an enjoyable place to be is as much about the warmth of our hospitality and generosity of spirit as it is about designer furniture. It's like the difference between entertaining and hospitality; one is about presenting the perfect house, meal or table setting, the other about sharing what you have and who you are.

Whether through wabi-sabi or less philosophical means, it's a relief to give up the pursuit of home perfection. Allow yourself to embrace the rough and unpolished - in your décor or your cooking skills - and you can relax into the role of homemaker and host.

As the artist Salvador Dali once put it: "Have no fear of perfection. You'll never achieve it."