

**THERE'S A TOUCH** of irony about the futuristic clubhouse at The Hills, Michael Hill's exclusive Queenstown golf club, being named a finalist in the World Architecture Festival awards.

It's in the same hallowed company as Beijing's Olympic "Water Cube" and London's new Wembley National Stadium – but while those structures both burst out of the cityscape, The Hills pavilion is almost hidden away from view.

But that is an intrinsic part of its beauty: the clubhouse, nicknamed "the Divot", is two thirds underground, blending into a rolling hill on the Central Otago landscape and overhanging the 18th hole like the prow of a ship.

Michael Hill – jeweller, violinist and golf nut – had a simple pitch for his dream clubhouse: he wanted people to be wowed by the beauty of the championship course, and then equally thunderstruck when they walked indoors.

Award-winning Auckland architects Patterson Associates created exactly that – so much so that the clubhouse won a supreme award at the New Zealand Institute of Architects' 2008 honours, the country's highest accolades for architecture, for its "truly sculptural feel".

Now it's been named a finalist in the sports category of World Architecture Festival awards, to be held in Barcelona next month.

"Our team is over the moon," says Patterson Associates' founder Andrew Patterson. "We'll be the underdogs when you think about the size of these other commissions. But we're simply delighted to be there... We get to attract the interest of the world in what we're doing here in New Zealand."

In that part of the clubhouse that juts out from the land, schist rock from local rivers and glass-reinforced concrete were combined with walls of double-glazed, frameless glass, used for the first time in New Zealand, to take in the full dramatic vista that extends to the Remarkables mountain range and the ski slopes of Coronet Peak. "It sustains the landscape: it's designed to take in every angle of the stunning view. It moves on a wave of the land," Patterson says.

The roof was angled around the equinoxes of the sun – it's warm in snow-blashed winters and cool in the searing Central Otago summers. And the roof is also part of the course: in a world-first, the pavilion is within playing bounds, so if your ball lands on the grass roof, you take your shot from there.

With a little help from some gifted architects (and his golfing buddies), retail king Michael Hill has turned his stunning Queenstown property into one of the country's best golf courses.

# HILL

Hill is proud of his new jewel, built on an old Arrowtown deer farm, which received the ultimate compliment by hosting the country's premier golf tournament, the New Zealand Open, last November.

The clubhouse has become a second home for the Hill family: Michael and his wife Christine, their daughter Emma and son Mark and their partners and children, who all live on the 200ha property 20 minutes' drive from the buzz of Queenstown.

The Hills often sit around the large table in the club's kitchen, which hosts cooking classes. Every day, the course chef cooks fresh local fare for club members: meals of ocean-run salmon, wild venison and – chief ingredient the blight of golf courses everywhere – braised wild rabbit in a horopito jus. A spa and gym are also in the clubhouse; the spa rooms are egg-shaped pods, nestled completely underground, and glow with colour-therapy lights to heal, calm and rejuvenate sore and weary golfers.

Hill's next dream is to build bunker homes on the edge of the course; like the clubhouse, most of each house will be beneath ground. "I would like to leave [behind me] a new way of living by introducing invisible underground homes around my course that will

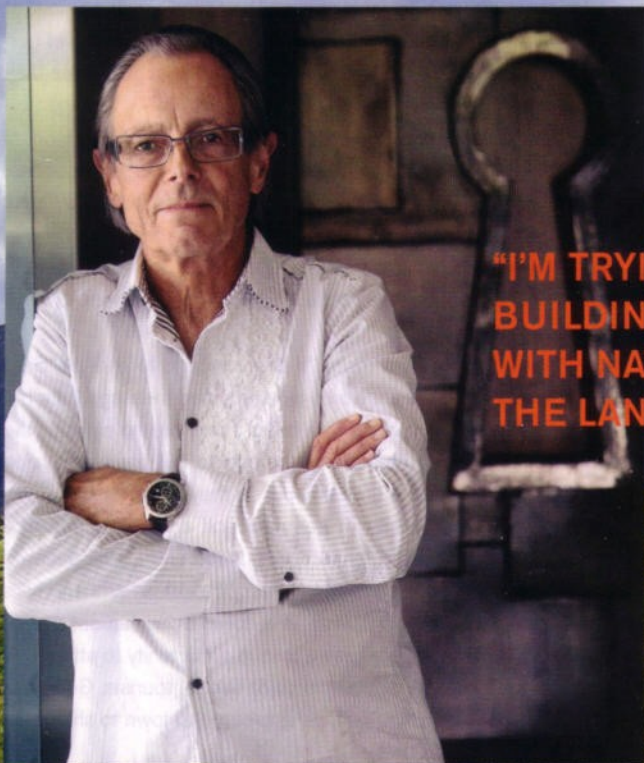
be a world first. I'm trying to build iconic buildings that are sympathetic with nature and blend into the landscape," Hill says.

That fits perfectly with Hill's principle of uniqueness. As Sam Gent, The Hills' general manager, says: "Michael always encourages us to think outside the square and that's what he wants golfers to do too."

Hill, 70 this year, is a man of mottos, and one of his favourites is "Everyone can do anything". When he opened his first jewellery store in the Northland city of Whangarei almost 30 years ago, he swept the floors, made the cups of tea and fixed watches. When he created this championship golf course in his Queenstown backyard, Hill spent hours waterblasting the rock faces on the 17th hole known as The Canyons.

Multimillionaire and retailing luminary he may be, but Hill has never been afraid of dirt on his hands – he and his family planted almost 50,000 red and silver tussock grasses around The Hills, before hosting the NZ Open. "The golf course looks so natural, like it was born here," says Hill, whose jewellery empire now stands at 210 stores in New Zealand, Australia and Canada.

The Hills is hidden from the road, behind macrocarpa farm gates



**"I'M TRYING TO BUILD ICONIC BUILDINGS THAT ARE SYMPATHETIC WITH NATURE AND BLEND INTO THE LANDSCAPE."**

# COUNTRY



Opening spread, main image: The Hills clubhouse sits two thirds underground; (inset) Michael Hill. This page, right: Kiwi golfer Michael Campbell with Michael Hill at the NZ Open.

bearing an unremarkable "private property" sign.

Snow blankets the fairways a couple of times a year – as you'd expect in the southern climes of Central Otago – and then Hill's grandchildren ski across the course's undulations. It thaws to reveal smooth emerald greens, sapphire lakes and golden bunkers, like gems in a jeweller's shop window. Ski and golf enthusiasts hit the slopes in the morning and play a round in the afternoon.

Michael and Christine were drawn to Queenstown in 1991; their jewellery chain had snaked across to Australia, and they were ready to move back to New Zealand but wanted a change of scene from the north. "Queenstown seemed so different and unique," Hill says. When they saw the run-down farm in Arrowtown they were immediately gripped by its beauty.

They built a home and Hill made a bee-line straight across the road to Millbrook, one of the country's pre-eminent golf resorts. He formed a group of golfing buddies, among them John Darby, the designer of Millbrook and the Clearwater Resort course in Christchurch.

With a growing zeal for the game, Hill put a putting green on his front lawn. Then, egged on by his pals, he built three pitch'n'putt holes on the property, which burgeoned into a five-hole short course dubbed "Hillbrook", attracting some of New Zealand's biggest golfing names and celebrities to its charity fundraisers.

Inevitably, Hill and Darby sat down and planned a full 18-hole course; completed five years later, it would cost Hill a princely sum. Hill's first golf project was a lot cheaper – as a schoolboy, he fashioned an 18-hole mini course with holes from baked bean cans in his backyard, and charged schoolmates 15c a round.

Ian Douglas was a greenkeeper at Millbrook when he heard about Hill's project and couldn't resist crossing the road to be part of it. "When we started building, Michael said to me, 'One day we'll host the New Zealand Open here,'" says Douglas, now The Hills' chief greenkeeper and operations manager. Little did either of the men realise how soon the dream would come true. After years of toil, the course was opened just days before the tournament began – tradesmen were being shooed out the gate as guests were welcomed in.

Michael and Christine Hill have gradually built up their property in Arrowtown – once a booming gold-mine town – to over 200 hectares. Some of the land is still farmed, and just before the NZ Open began, a gate accidentally left open let a herd of cows hoof it across four greens. Fortunately Douglas' green team of 14 keepers, with 24 tractors, restored the grass to its perfectly manicured self in time.

The Hills is a challenging course to play – at 6610m (7243 yards), it's long for the average golfer – and requires sharp strategy to get around in par 72.

The par-five 17th is possibly the most demanding hole – a dog-leg bordered by bunkers with the second drive uphill through the schist-faced canyon that Hill helped to score out with his waterblaster. Douglas' favourite is No. 6, romantically called Dragonfly Lake – named for the lake's dragonfly sculpture created by Hill's artist son Mark, whose other works, like a 5m-tall steel weta, stand guard on the course.

So far, there are just 36 members of The Hills Golf Club, most of them locals. "It's about exclusivity, so people can enjoy a round of golf without the hassle of tee-off times and we can almost guarantee they won't see another soul on the course," says Gent.

More than 35,000 spectators poured through The Hills' modest front gates for the NZ Open last year, with television images broadcast into a further 230 million homes worldwide. Other than the Open, to be played there again next March, the club hosts few tournaments – though Hill supports Cure Kids, the face of the Child Health Research Foundation, and will host a fundraising tournament for local golfers in November.

Non-members can play a round "if they manage to find us", Gent says. The course phone is answered by a recorded message from Hill – who moos like a cow instead of a beep. There are no signs at the entranceway, or distance markers on the course; Hill has an aversion to signs. Visitors play with a greenkeeper so they don't get lost.

Queenstown had a wealth of beautiful golf courses before The Hills was crafted out of the landscape, but Hill and Darby believed the town could sustain half a dozen great golf courses and The Hills would only help boost golf tourism in a town world famous for its adventure thrills. "Queenstown has a unique opportunity to attract the high-spending tourist, rather than herds of budget tourists. Golfers fit this bracket, and so does the golf we've brought to town to showcase our country to the world," Hill says.

Hill has more grand dreams for the town than just golf. The man who in his youth dreamed of being a concert violinist holds an international violin competition for emerging musicians and hopes a world-class hall will be built in Queenstown to attract a music festival like the nine-week classical event held in the US ski resort of Aspen each summer.

For a man of mottos, who has built his own Field of Dreams, Hill can attest: "If you build it, they will come."