

BIG HOUSE

SMALL HOUSE

NEW HOMES BY NEW ZEALAND ARCHITECTS



JOHN WALSH & PATRICK REYNOLDS

TECTS

DER
HUTUKAWA
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Previous pages The kitchen/dining/living areas of the Piha bach designed by Herbst Architects. The house is oriented to the west and the sea.

Left Looking into the bedroom at the rear of the ground floor.

Facing page The house from the northwest.

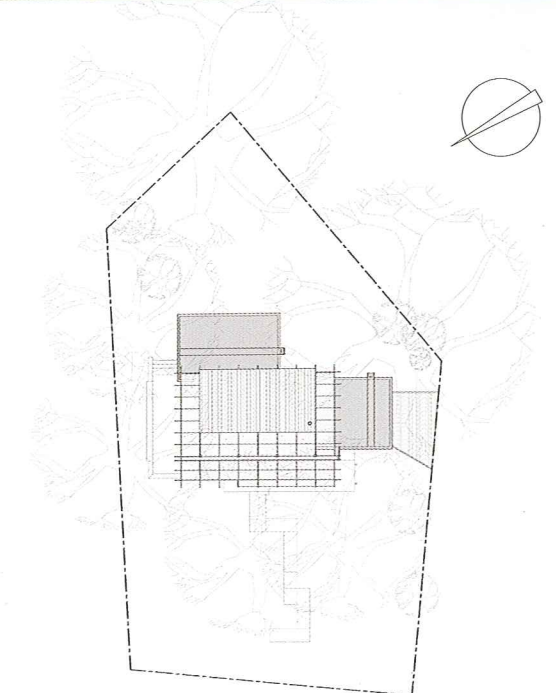


THE PRACTICE OF South African expatriate architects Lance and Nicky Herbst has become well established in New Zealand over the past dozen years, and is particularly renowned for its reinterpretation of the classic Kiwi bach. While it is possible to pay too much attention to exotic origins — a good architect usually manages to find ways to be a good architect wherever he or she works — it's certainly true that the Herbsts have brought fresh eyes, and enquiring minds, to an indigenous building type. Their bach work, exemplified by a series of commissions on Great Barrier Island, constitutes a sophisticated return to simple first principles. New shapes, old spirit: a Herbst beach house is a contemporary ordering of holiday self-sufficiency.

In their latest, and most ambitious, project, the Herbsts have moved to the mainland and crossed over into new

territory. This beach house is at Piha, on Auckland's dramatic west coast. Designed for an Auckland couple with a strong interest in the arts and architecture, the timber and glass pavilion serves not only as a seasonal holiday house, but also as a year-round retreat for the clients and their grown-up children.

'Conceptually, detail-wise and materials-wise, this is the most advanced project we've worked on so far,' says Lance Herbst. The clients wanted a house made of timber, and were aware of the Herbsts' reputation for working with this material. That's putting it mildly: inheritors of the masonry tradition of the Cape Province, the Herbsts have taken to timber with the fervour of converts. The clients already owned a bach on the site behind their new beach house — the old bach has been retained — and had bought the front section to pre-empt unsympathetic development, to



SITE PLAN



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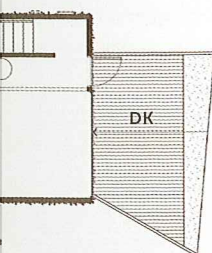
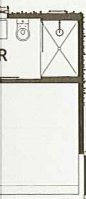
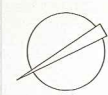
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which, demonstrably, Piha is not immune.

Increasingly, New Zealand's lovely and once-lonely beaches are being bossed by big, ugly buildings. The Herbsts have always abjured imposing mega-scale houses on coastal sites, focusing instead on creating low-key, but highly designed, buildings that encourage a fluid transition between outdoor and indoor space. Site sensitivity was particularly important in the case of this house, which lies within a stand of mature pohutukawa that filter the sunlight and soften the force of the onshore wind blowing across Piha's black sands.

'We were cutting down trees, as few as possible, but still, that's a serious act in New Zealand,' Lance Herbst says. 'The house is replacing them, and it has to acknowledge that. We were essentially building inside and beneath

the canopy.' Inside, the house seems voluminous, but as it is almost as tall as it is wide the footprint is deceptively modest. The house is composed of two black, cedar-clad, oil-stained towers with bleached wood cut-outs on the inner walls, a contrast that visually references the bark and paler heart wood of the surrounding pohutukawa.

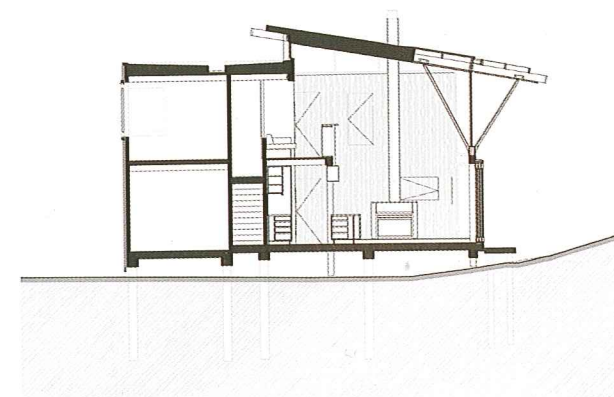
These rear towers contain the bathrooms and bedrooms — the house's private spaces. As in other Herbst projects, the bedrooms are simple, elegant cells lined with ply. Each bedroom connects with aspects of the site. While the master bedroom has a view of the sea, the downstairs bedroom looks straight out to ground-level flora. Another upstairs room, designed as a flexible secondary living space but currently a guest bedroom, gives out onto a north-facing deck. All of the

bedrooms are placed at an outer edge of the house, and, in each, sliding windows can be pushed back to leave an open corner sheltered by the overhanging cantilevered roof.

Structural legibility and material frankness are hallmarks of the Herbsts' architecture. They see no reason to keep confidential their methods of construction and details of composition. Quite the contrary: they're so forthcoming that, faced with a customs officer asking them if they have anything to declare, I can imagine them saying, 'Everything'. Above all, the Herbsts would own up to the joy of assembly. Just because you renounce ostentation, it doesn't mean you're a Puritan; the Herbsts are, unapologetically, material sensualists. In this house, exposed posts, rafters and beams impart a tectonic dynamism, eucalypt floors and

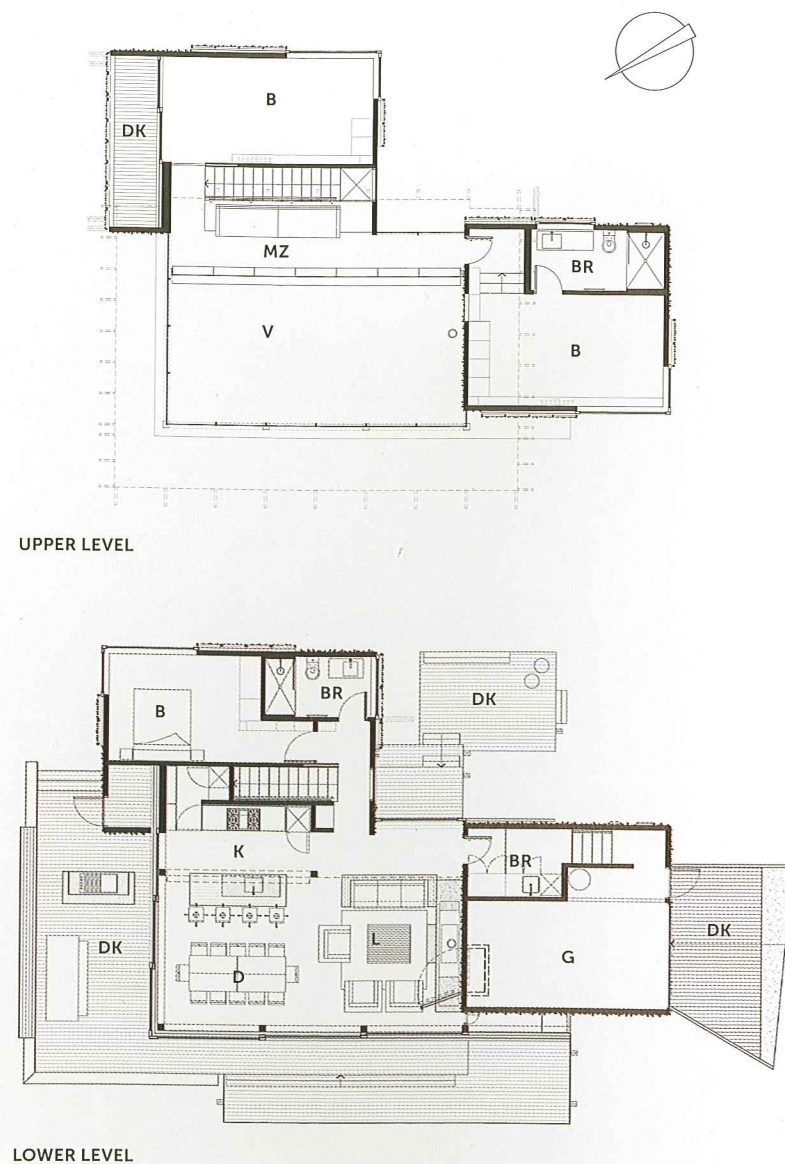
soft-grained, ply wall panelling lend light a gentle quality, and the pleasant smell of naturally oiled wood permeates the interior.

The towers support a roof that 'frays' from solid wood to glass above a central, double-height living area which gives a full view of the surrounding trees. In a reprise of the Herbsts' now-signature take on the outdoor room, sliding doors on both sides of the living room — a term inadequate to convey its interstitial qualities and habitable possibilities — can be rolled completely away. Above, a bridge between the two towers creates a mezzanine at the height of the pohutukawa canopy, furnished with a built-in day bed and a balustrade with shelves for books and objects found on the beach. By day a tree house, by night a lantern in the forest, the house is, at all times, a taonga.



SECTION

SAM EICHBLATT



UPPER LEVEL

LOWER LEVEL



Previous pages The house, carefully placed in a stand of pohutukawa.

Right Looking along the west-facing mezzanine.

Facing page Looking from the living area out to the deck; the beach is to the west, at left in this photograph.

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