



ARCHITECTURAL LIGHT AND MAGIC

A spectacular hillside site north of Auckland presented husband-and-wife design team Nicky and Lance Herbst with a serious challenge: how to take advantage of views to the south-east, and still create a sun-filled, summery home?

TEXT by Claire McCall PHOTOGRAPHY by Jackie Melring

Houses, like people, sometimes need to present different faces to the world. Rising out of the hillside in an established sub-division at Leigh, this holiday home by Nicky and Lance Herbst exploits its split personality to the max. On one level it's a rocking party precinct; on another it's reclusive and private.

"It was to be a fun palace, a beach pad, the equivalent of a land-based launch," remarks Lance. "But the owners also insisted on a space to retreat to."

Owner Marty Kells has long-term connections with Leigh. His childhood memories include travelling through green Waikato paddocks to holiday at his family bach on this



stretch of coastal paradise. His uncle also bought land here, and five years ago Kells took the tradition a generation further by purchasing a slice from him. Pleased to have secured a comfort zone, he was keen on a design that pushed the boundaries.

The site lies on one side of a steep valley that falls dramatically to a stream below. With neighbours on the opposite slope, the two-fold challenge was to build in this vertiginous fishbowl and to capitalise on views. To see, yet not be seen.

A linear plan strung along the ridge became an obvious solution. Another was to raise the living onto a block-wall podium. "It grows out of the earth to start life as a retaining wall then leads you into the experience of the house," explains Lance.

The concrete block podium is the anchor for the clear pathway up and through the house, that begins at the entrance – a slot cut in the concrete wall – and culminates on the terrace beside the swimming pool.

A true multi-tasker, the concrete also acts as an anchor, wrapping its embrace around the guest bedrooms and bathroom on the lower level and lifting the main living space into the view.

All substance and solidity, the materiality of this bagged wall is treated with respect. Carefully placed windows that correspond with bunks in the bedrooms are fashioned as gun slots to keep punctures to a minimum. Indeed, articulating openings is a pet passion for the duo. "We like them to be strong, positive – almost interventionist," says Nicky.

"Making an opening in a wall is such a deliberate action," adds Lance, "so we look for ways to provide some depth."

This practical philosophy is evident in the treatment of windows in the timber-clad upper layer that perches in a prime position on its supporting plinth. Chunky cedar frames surround the aluminium joinery, delineating function and amplifying the aesthetic.

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Under the shelter of the building, a privacy screen as well as a canopy, right from the start.

FACING PAGE The lounge and the swimming pool are the culmination of the journey through the house that starts at the entrance.

ABOVE The living area was created with a block wall podium and timber-clad upper level. The designers, Nicky and Lance, are from the Pacific Coast.



ABOVE The south-east facing site prompted the architects with a common conundrum: how to maximize views, and still allow sunlight into the house. A location that blew only to the north and allowed sunlight into the kitchen provided the solution.

FACING PAGE Cedar beams, vertical framing and built-in meranti ply cabinets provide plenty of natural warmth on the living area.

Perhaps better known for their all-timber baches on Great Barrier Island, Nicky and Lance enjoyed coordinating the marriage of heavy and lightweight materials used in this home. They say it's all about what's appropriate.

"Baches are light insertions on the land," says Lance, "whereas homes are serious buildings. This is a cross between a bach and a house – it's at the beach but sophisticated."

For the Herbsts, all-timber homes on piles are anathema anyway. "It feels as though they might just walk off – and they sometimes do," remarks Lance.

Not this one. The elevated living zone is a cantilevered cube clad in vertical cedar boards. The 4.5-metre overhang creates a convenient carport below, a reference to the 1970s when vehicles were always on display. "It gives a sense that this is a transient space where visitors can come and go as they please," says Nicky.

Internally, the picture window at the end of the living room exerts a hypnotic pull. A rise in floor

level here, in combination with a deliberate slump in the roofline, creates an intimacy that focuses the eye on the vistas that stretch to the horizon over a shifting sea. Like a widescreen television, the building frames a blue and green tableau of Takatu Point and the distant Coromandel Peninsula.

It's a room that can be both sociable and serene. There are built-in meranti ply cabinets and a long laminated kwila bench that runs the length of the kitchen cum living area, changing function as it does so from pantry to hi-fi storage. Sliders open up on two sides to provide access to a pool, courtyard and deck, and a bright red firebox is a colourful gathering point.

Although south-facing, the space has a real warmth, a result of cedar lining, meranti ply ceilings, kwila floors and clever planning.

"It's a common conundrum," remarks Nicky. "The views were to the south and the light came from the opposite direction."

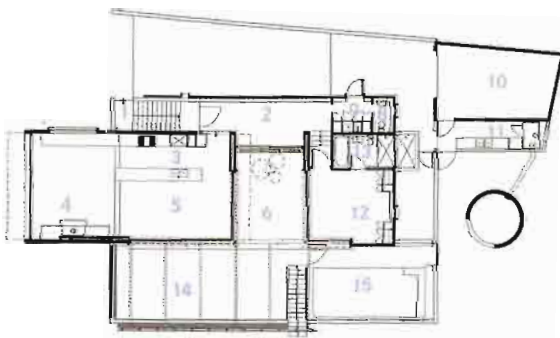


New architecture

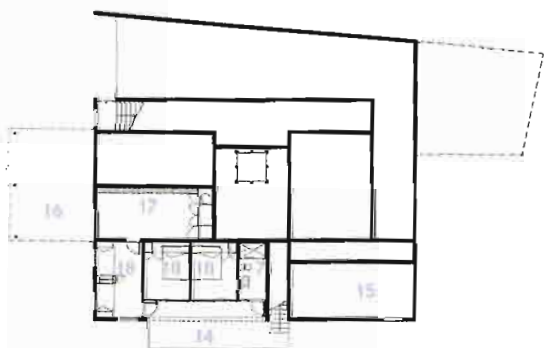


THIS PHOTO Exterior lighting emphasises the warm tones of the vertical cedar cladding, with slot windows allowing small glimpses of the interior.

UPPER FLOOR



LOWER FLOOR



- 1 Entry
- 2 Study
- 3 Kitchen
- 4 Living
- 5 Dining
- 6 Courtyard
- 7 Bathroom
- 8 WC
- 9 Laundry
- 10 Boat shed
- 11 Smoker yard
- 12 Master bedroom
- 13 En suite
- 14 Deck
- 15 Pool
- 16 Carport
- 17 Cellar
- 18 Bedroom

A roofline that flicks away to the sky in the north ushers in sunlight to fall across the island bench. But consideration wasn't only given to what's above and beyond. Playing with floor levels has defined the way the house operates, too.

A courtyard separates the public area from the master suite. A step up from the living zone, this room steals views across the pool and deck. A timber skin attached to the building provides a privacy screen that still hints at the green expanses of the site, and focuses the eye on the view out to sea. The steel fixings of the screen form a pergola over the deck.

The owners say it is this sort of detailing that is the architects' strength, and Jerry Sabo, a builder from Browns Bay, would attest to this. "No leaks, no remedials," were Kells' words to him on commencement of the project. Despite lots of nail biting and hair pulling by the owners through the three-and-a-half-year process, the end result lives up to their expectations.

At night, a soft yellow glow emanates from the slot windows and light washes beautifully over the slatted timber screen. The home becomes a beacon on the hill.

Inside, through summer and winter, the house wears its double identity like a chameleon, changing with the seasons and social situations. Ultimately, it's architecture that adapts – architecture of welcome and respite. **H&E**