

NESTLED AMONG THE DISTINCTIVE POHUTUKAWA TREES OF NEW ZEALAND'S COASTAL AREAS, THIS RESIDENCE PUTS MODERN AMENITY AND STYLE IN HARMONY WITH THE NATURAL BEAUTY THAT SURROUNDS IT

Out of the woods

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On first sighting New Zealand in 1769, Sydney Parkinson, the artist aboard Captain Cook's *Endeavour*, described it as "agreeable beyond description, and ... might be rendered a second Paradise". For the last 60 years, Kiwi architects have adopted a similarly optimistic vision of how we might live in New Zealand's not-always-benign climate, and they have designed houses that maximise the potential for a lifestyle that flows seamlessly between inside and outside and makes the most of our vivid landscapes.

Auckland firm Herbst Architects have proved themselves among the most successful in this undertaking. Husband-and-wife team Lance and Nicky Herbst arrived in New Zealand from South Africa in the mid-1990s. After a period working for local architects, they established their own Auckland practice and soon afterwards built themselves a small holiday house on Great Barrier Island, a beautiful but then little-developed backwater located a 30-minute ride on a rickety plane from central Auckland. Originally intended

ABOVE: Steps from the main living area (left) lead down to a deck at the rear of the house – a secluded spot wrapped in lush greenery (right). **RIGHT:** Sliding window shades and a concealed garage door allow the bedroom blocks to become visually solid.





RIGHT: A bridge to the upper bedrooms has been fitted with shelving and a large day bed, making it a habitable space nestled on a treetop level.
FAR RIGHT: Laser-cut screens on the bridge follow the pattern of battens on the bedroom block walls.

for occupation only during summer, the off-the-grid building began as little more than a covered deck, some sliding screens, and a plywood structure containing a tiny kitchen and ablutions. A fully enclosed sleeping and living pavilion was added in subsequent years, but even in this extended form it was at once a carefully crafted building and a statement of the degree to which architecture could be dispensed with. Most importantly, this back-to-basics project led to a series of commissions for holiday houses on Great Barrier Island. These buildings continued the themes of pared-back, outdoor-oriented living but were larger, although the Herbsts recently won awards with a tiny shelter – little more than a deck, a roof and some shutters – that provided an outdoor living and dining space on the grounds of a cramped holiday home.

Their most recently completed house in this series of coastal retreats is Under Pohutukawa, located on a windswept beachfront property at Piha, a famous surfing spot on the west coast of the North Island, an hour's drive from central Auckland. The site was covered with gnarled pohutukawa trees, a much-loved and often highly protected

feature of New Zealand's coasts. To insert the house onto the site, a number of trees had to be removed, which required careful discussion and negotiation with neighbours, locals, and the city council. The trees also provided the guiding principles of the house's composition. Two visually solid blocks enclose bedrooms, bathrooms, and a garage – their dark, rough wooden cladding calls to mind the bark on a tree trunk – while the rooms within are lined entirely with light, smoothly finished timbers that suggest heartwood. Spanning between them is an airy pavilion comprised of floor platforms, a hovering roof, and a glazed structure that both evokes trees and gives dramatic views under the pohutukawa canopy.

The house has been well received. It was declared the 2011 Home of the Year, and received a national award from the New Zealand Institute of Architects. It is now starting to attract international attention, and was recently published in the Mexican *Architectural Digest* under the headline "Back to Basics". This phrase belies an interesting misreading of the house. Under Pohutukawa maintains the atmosphere of the Great Barrier Island holiday houses, particularly through its



PROJECT DETAILS

PRINCIPAL ARCHITECTS: Lance Herbst, Nicola Herbst
STRUCTURAL ENGINEER: Jonathan Boersen of Structure Design
CONTRACTOR: John Armstrong
STAINLESS STEEL FABRICATOR: Designer Stainless
DESIGN AND DOCUMENTATION: 8 months
CONSTRUCTION: 13 months
FLOOR AREA: 160m²
BATHROOMS: Bisazza glass mosaic shower tiles from Heritage Tiles, Corian vanity top, Caroma fittings.
CABINETRY: Designed and detailed by Herbst Architects and constructed by Lindon Harris of Johannes Errin Cabinetmakers
CLADDING: Western red cedar battens on Cedartech bandsawn ply with Dryden wood oil finish
JOINERY: Aluminium high-level glazing with stainless steel fins by Alitech, cedar sliding doors by McNaughtons with Osmo UV protection oil finish
KITCHEN: Spotted gum, black steel and stainless steel bench by Johannes Errin, poplar ply cabinetry by Johannes Errin with Osmo Polyx finish, Dornbracht tapware from Metrix

Architect statement

The site with which we were presented was extremely challenging in that it was 90 per cent covered in mature pohutukawa trees, the site being a part of a continuous belt of forest that edges the road along the beachfront.

The circumstances not so much allowed, but dictated a sensitive, poetic response to a building that, in order to exist, would require the destruction of a large number of mature trees.

To do this we looked to the trees themselves to give us the cues that we needed.

We separated the brief loosely into private and "public" components, giving us smaller individual masses with which to articulate the forms. The private functions of bedrooms and garage are housed in two towers which are construed as freshly sawn stumps of the trees that were removed. To allude to the bark of the stumps the skins of the towers are clad in black or brown stained, rough-sawn irregular battens. The interior spaces are then seen as carved out of the freshly cut wood, achieved by detailing all the wall/ceiling and cabinetry elements in the same light timber.

The public space connects the two towers and attempts to engage with the surrounding pohutukawa forest by defining a crossover space between the powerful natural environment and the built form. The plane of the roof form pins off the towers to engage with the continuous tree canopy, disintegrating from a rigid plane to a frayed edge which filters light in a similar way to the leaf canopy. The primary structure holding up the roof is a series of tree elements which allude to the trunks and branches of trees but are detailed in a rigorous geometric arrangement which suggests an ordering of nature as it enters and forms the building.

The height of the public space with its light glass division responds to the height of the surrounding trees. The roof plane is partially glass to allow the full extent of the trees to be felt as they lean over the building. A walkway links the towers at the upper level allowing engagement with both the natural and man-made.

LANCE AND NICOLA HERBST

extensive use of natural materials and intimate connection to the site. Living there, however, is in no way roughing it. The house has every modern amenity – from built-in sound system to flat-screen TV to ice maker – and has been meticulously constructed with technologies ranging from sophisticated traditional timber jointing to laser cutting.

The nature of an architect's early work can colour the way their work is understood decades later, even when the nature of that work has undergone fundamental change. Tadao Ando is perhaps the most notable example. He established his reputation with the 1976 Row House in Sumiyoshi, a diminutive concrete box that, through its denial of home comforts – moving between rooms required going outside – and presenting blank walls to the street, represented a comprehensive rejection of modern consumerism. Ando's houses have continued to be interpreted as exercises in restraint and reduction, despite a rapid expansion in the scale of his commissions – his clientele were soon drawn from the most sophisticated and wealthy sections of society, and his later houses were gigantic by Japanese standards. Ando's recent House in Sri Lanka is almost 40 times the size of the Sumiyoshi Row House. While it retains Ando's

concrete vocabulary, this shift in scale inverts the meaning of his architecture.

The challenges that have tested Ando – created by the inevitable increase in scale through a career – would also be faced by the Herbsts. Their remarkable achievement with Under Pohutukawa has been to provide the level of comfort and amenity now expected from a contemporary house and yet retained the informality and intimate sense of connection with the site. They have gone back to nature without going back to basics. The house is a sophisticated piece of design in a spectacular location, and its combination of casual lifestyle, connection with the outdoors, and highly crafted wooden construction crystallises many of the widely held aspirations of New Zealand architects. It is destined to become a classic of Kiwi architecture and a realisation of the paradise envisioned by Sydney Parkinson back in 1769. M

BELOW, LEFT TO RIGHT: Closet door handles have been cunningly laser cut from the same ply as the doors themselves; The bedrooms are lined with smoothly finished poplar ply; Bathroom amenities such as mirrors have been concealed to maintain the casual holiday ambience

