The Monocle
Guide to
Cosy Homes
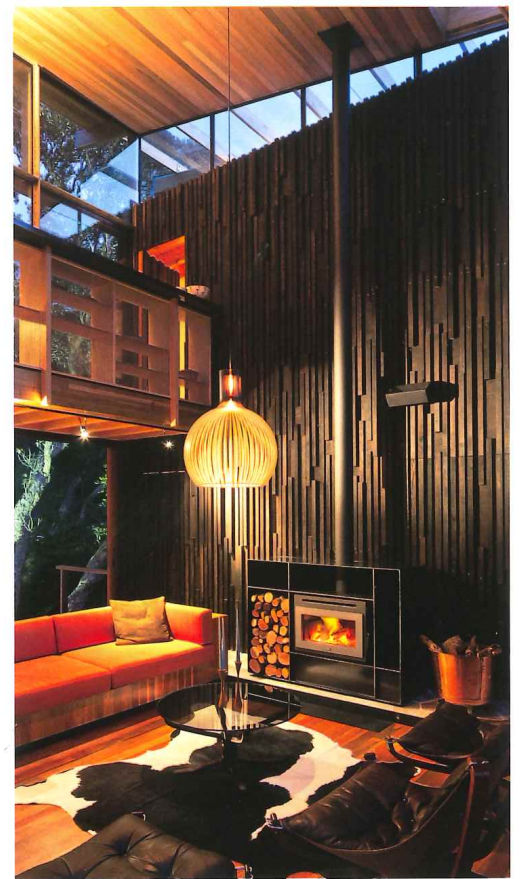
With locally sourced wood, floor-to-ceiling glass windows and minimal environmental impact, Herbst Architects' beach house at Piha in New Zealand successfully pairs sustainability with liveability.

BRANCHING OUT — *Piha*

01 02

01

Herbst Architects is renowned in New Zealand for its signature remodelling of the classic Kiwi "bach": a traditional cobbled-together holiday home or beach shelter. It has designed a series of highly sophisticated, sustainable dwellings on Great Barrier Island, 90km by sea from downtown Auckland.

The firm's construction of a project back on the mainland marked a crossover into new territory. Designed for an Auckland couple, the Under Pohutukawa house was created to be not just a holiday house but a coastal retreat for extended periods of time. "This is the most advanced project we've worked on," says Lance Herbst who, alongside partner Nicola, runs the Auckland-based firm. The airy cedar-and-glass pavilion lies within a belt of native *pohutukawa* trees that soften the force of the onshore wind at Piha, an often blustery surf beach on the west coast.

Building regulations in New Zealand, especially ones relating to the natural landscape, are tight. While it seems voluminous inside, the house is nearly as tall as it is wide so the floor plate is, in fact, very small. "We were cutting down trees; a serious act in New Zealand," says Lance. "The house is replacing them so it has to refer to that. We were essentially building it inside and beneath the canopy."

As a result, the beach house is composed of two black-stained, wood-clad towers that visually reference the surrounding trees and contain the private spaces: the bathrooms and bedrooms. As in other Herbst projects, these are designed as simple, distraction-free "cells" lined with poplar ply panels.

Throughout the house, the use of exposed wood gives the light a mellow quality, the grain lending its own low-key detail. "We're interested in the patina that develops through age, using cedar that fades to driftwood-grey colours and letting nature do its thing, instead of plasticising everything," says Lance.

The towers support a roof that "frays" from wood to glass above a double-height living area that gives a full view of the surrounding trees, which firmly establishes a sense of place. Sliding doors on both sides can be rolled completely away – the Herbsts' clean (and now trademark) take on the outdoor room.

"This room is an interface between inside and outside," says Lance. "But in winter the owners can close it up and get the fire going." A bridge between the two towers acts as a mezzanine area and the balustrade has been detailed with shelves to collect books and objects discovered on the beach. "The longer [the clients] live there, the more it will reflect the life of the beach," says Lance. — (M)

Previous spread:
01
Entrance to house through pohutukawa trees
02
Double-height living area

02

03

04

05

01
Doors to the living and cooking space can be slid away, opening completely onto the forest
02
Ground-floor bedroom
03
External view of garage and master bedroom
04
Steps leading to breakfast deck
05
Minimal framing on bedroom window gives uninterrupted views

01
Living area
overlooked by
bedroom bridge
connection
02
Entrance to main
bedroom with
lots of cupboard
space
03
Ensuite bath-
room attached to
the main bedroom
04
View of living
area from the
upper bridge
05
Mezzanine floor
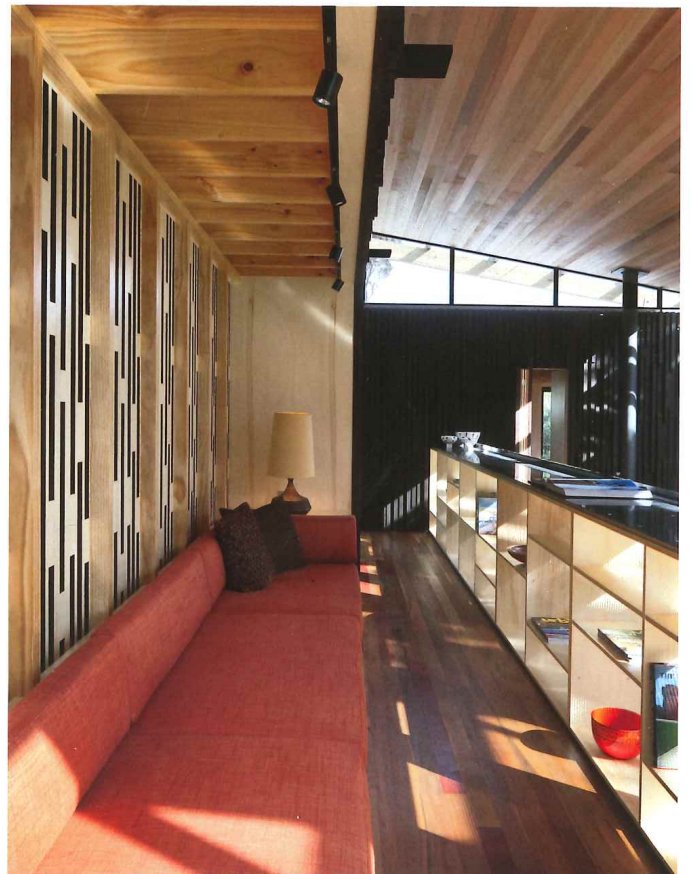overlooking main
living space

01

02

03

04

The details

Architect: Herbst Architects
Year built: 2011
Size: 164 sq m

Layout: Double-height living
area with 3 bedrooms and
2 bathrooms.

Key materials: Cedar, glass,
radiata pine, poplar ply, spotted
gum, stainless steel and zinc.

Why we'd live here: Spaces are
planned in a calm, rational way with
the bedrooms and the airy, glazed
living area all permeated by the clean
scent of natural, untreated wood.

05