

In the living area of a beach house in New Zealand, which was designed by Lance and Nicola Herbst of Herbst Architects, the sofa is a custom design, and the fireplace by Masport Heating is set in a custom-made steel cabinet; the pendant light is by Secto Design, and the walls are sheathed in black-stained western red cedar. For details, see Resources.

BOWER HOUSE

In a remote New Zealand surf town, architects Lance and Nicola Herbst ingeniously tuck a spacious weekend retreat amid a lush grove of exotic trees

ELLE DECOR: Where on New Zealand's long coastline is this house located?

LANCE HERBST: It's in a popular beach settlement called Piha, which is about a 45-minute drive west of Auckland. It's one of the nearest surfing beaches to the city, and it's powerfully beautiful, with black sand and a mountainous backdrop. It can be wild and brooding.

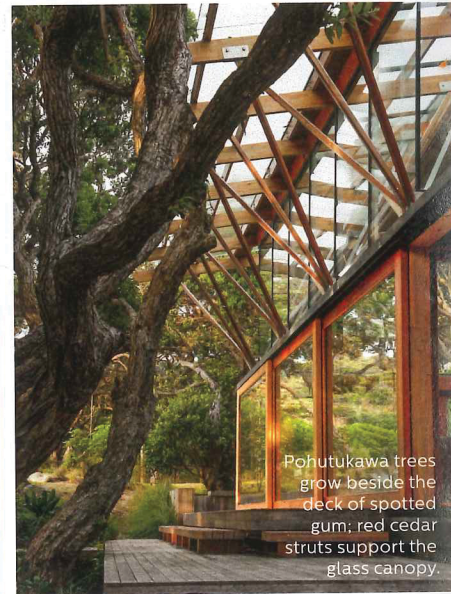
ED: And the property is at the edge of a protected forest?

LH: Yes. On this part of the beach, the buildable lots are only one or two deep, and behind them is a protected reserve of native vegetation that runs all the way up to the Waitakere Ranges. There's a narrow road that runs along the beach, with dunes on the sea side and residences on the other. The site was originally entirely covered with mature pohutukawa trees, which ▷

In the kitchen and dining area, the oven and refrigerator are by Fisher & Paykel, and the sink by Franke has fittings by Dornbracht; the dining table is by Simon James Design; the island and floor are spotted gum. For details, see Resources.



Laser-cut poplar plywood, right, lines a wall of the stairway; the light fixture is by Secto Design.



Pohutukawa trees grow beside the deck of spotted gum; red cedar struts support the glass canopy.

are legally protected and emblematic of the North Island in summer, when they bloom bright red. Because the height of our summer is in December, they are traditionally associated with Christmas. My first impression of the site was that there was no buildable area at all.

ED: Tell me about the clients.

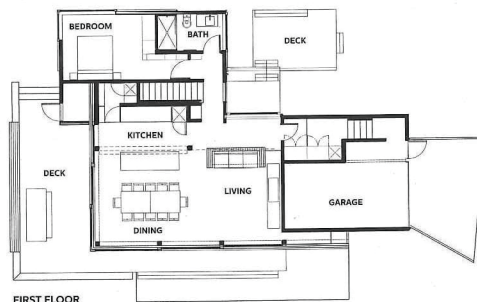
LH: They're an Auckland couple with grown children who are important patrons of art and architecture. Under Pohutukawa, which is what we call the house, was originally built as a weekend home, but they now spend a fair portion of the year here.

ED: What kind of building did they want?

LH: They came to us because Nicola and I have developed a reputation for sensitive responses to coastal sites, so they made a point of not being very prescriptive.

They requested a timber house with three bedrooms, a lot of light, and easy access to the outdoors. What they really wanted was a creative solution to the problem of building among the pohutukawas. We realized that only an extremely poetic yet sensible response would be palatable to the local council and local residents.

ED: I'm guessing that siting the house on the property was key.

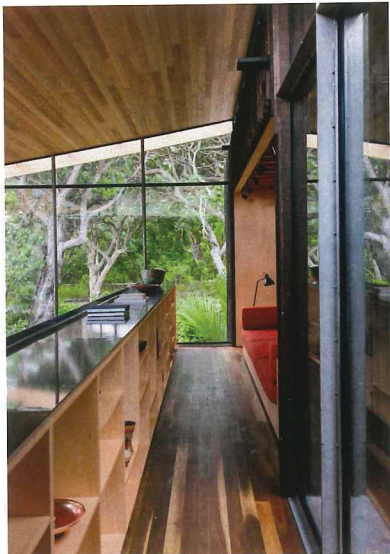


LH: We wanted to cut down as few trees as possible and keep the impact of the house on the landscape minimal. The entire structure is on timber piles rather than on a concrete slab to give a degree of flexibility in positioning during construction and to avoid the tree roots.

ED: How big is the house?

LH: It's 1,725 square feet. We divided the space into three pavilions. The first is the double-height great room with living, >





WHAT THE PROS KNOW

- Lance and Nicola Herbst designed large furniture pieces from the same timbers they used to build the house. The living area's sofa and kitchen island are of spotted gum to match the floors; there's a poplar plywood daybed in the open hallway over the living area, above, that is lined with poplar bookcases that echo the walls and cabinets of the kitchen and bedrooms. For contrast, wooden pieces are detailed with the same blackened steel used for the living area's fireplace surround.
- Light and dark meet in the stairwell and the upstairs bedroom, where the Herbsts created walls of laser-cut poplar plywood with a pattern that Lance describes as "the negative of the pattern of the exterior cladding." They like the way the laser leaves a charred finish, he says. The house's dark, rough exterior is carried indoors onto a living-area wall, which has a discreet hidden window that provides a bird's-eye view from the master bedroom above.
- All three of the bedrooms have corner windows with sliding cedar-batten "shutters" and glass sliders that meet where the walls abut one another. When the sliders and shutters are open, the trees are near enough to touch. "We like to think the windows go beyond framing the view," says Lance. "Instead, they give a kind of cropped but three-dimensional view of the trees."

dining, and kitchen areas. It's mostly glass, including part of the ceiling; when all the doors are open, it's as much outside as inside. Adjacent to that space are two-story "towers," one with upstairs and downstairs bedrooms, the other with a bedroom over a garage. We oriented the house toward the water, approximately northwest, under the canopy and inside a perimeter of trees.

ED: How does the house relate to the traditional New Zealand building forms?

LH: A bach [pronounced *batch*] is a small rudimentary structure, often made of reused materials and castoffs. Its magic is in what it doesn't provide rather than what it does. We moved to New Zealand from South Africa in 1998 and became fascinated with this Kiwi tradition. We built our own bach on Great Barrier Island, which is northeast of Auckland. It kicked off our career here. We have done eight baches on that island and have been exploring the limits and evolution of the form ever since. Under Pohutukawa is far grander and more permanent, but it has the same very blurred relationship between inside and out and is conceived for easy, simple living.

ED: You talked about a poetic response to the forested site. What did you mean?

LH: We wound up taking down four trees, and we just felt that the building needed to acknowledge or remember them. So we developed some metaphors for the house. We thought of the towers as the stumps

of the trees we had removed and covered them in a skin of rough-sawn cedar battens of random lengths and depths. We stained them black to conjure an image of bark. Inside, we used a smooth and much lighter poplar plywood as a metaphor for the sapwood that you find inside a freshly cut tree.

ED: And you then created some new "trees" of your own?

LH: Yes. We imagined the floating roof that links the towers as a tree canopy. The supports are stylized branches made of steel and western red cedar that we kept geometrically rigorous to establish an ambiguity between the natural and the man-made.

ED: How did you choose the various woods used in the house?

LH: We chose each timber for the purpose required: Pillars and beams, for example, are radiata pine, a common structural lumber in New Zealand. We chose western red cedar cladding for its stability and longevity; poplar plywood for the light color; and spotted gum on the floor for its hardness and high visual impact.

ED: In what ways is the house "green"?

LH: It collects its own water. It's very well insulated. And all of the timbers are sustainable and treated with natural oils. But the most significant green attribute, I think, is simply the house's relationship with nature. ■



A bedroom features sliding shutters and windows that open to the trees; the walls are sheathed in poplar plywood, and the chair and ottoman are Jens Risom designs. For details, see Resources.