

Below The home fits on the footprint of its predecessor, but reaches up into the pōhutukawa forest.

A clerestory runs the perimeter of the house, capturing the established trees in its framing.



HOME OF
THE YEAR 2018
&
WINNER BEST
RETREAT

Nesting instinct

Our 2018 winner by Lance and Nicola Herbst floats among the pōhutukawa at Piha on Auckland's west coast. At once elemental and polished, it's a striking response to a difficult site.

TEXT — MARGO WHITE
& SIMON FARRELL-GREEN
PHOTOGRAPHY — PATRICK REYNOLDS
STYLING — SARA BLACK





Above The main bedroom is contained within ply walls stained the same tone of pōhutukawa branches. The fold in the ceiling required detailed 3D modelling to resolve its structure.

Right The timber rain screen is recognisable Herbst vernacular.

As you drive along Marine Parade at North Piha to our Home of the Year 2018, designed by Lance and Nicola Herbst of Herbst Architects, you notice two things. Firstly the trees: ancient pōhutukawa, their massive boughs twisted and gnarled, carpet the hills and fringe the road. Then you notice the houses, perched among the trees, climbing for the view – and in just about every case, there’s a deck on the front, cantilevered up on poles, high above the ground.

It’s understandable. New Zealanders like decks. We like to stand on them with a glass of wine in hand, to contemplate the view. We like to cook on them, gather on them with friends in summer, and we like to sit on them until late at night. The thing about decks, though – and even more so on this blustery stretch of west coast, where the south-westerly can blow in cold and strong – is that they’re exposed. Half the time you can’t sit on them. It rains in winter and it’s windy in summer. You want to look at the view, and you want to look at the weather as it races in off the Tasman. But you don’t always want to be in its path. It’s all the more powerful, then, that this beach house neatly reaches for the view and light, without exposing its occupants to adverse elements.

Designed as a retreat for a couple with adult children, in future it will be used on a more long-term basis. The bach that previously occupied the site was at ground level, tucked behind the house in front and overshadowed by protected trees – much of the site is a Special Ecological Area, the highest form of protection in the Auckland rule book – and it lacked both light and sun. “It was a seriously sun-challenged site, with the mountain wrapping around it, getting very steep to the east and north,” says Lance Herbst. “As the sun comes around, it’s taken up first by the mountain and then the pōhutukawa.”

Not long after buying the house, the owners approached the Herbsts, who’ve featured in these pages numerous times, mainly for beach houses and baches (many of them award-winning) on the west coast – at Muriwai, Bethells and Piha – and on the Gulf islands of Great Barrier and Waiheke. “We wanted to use someone you could just say, ‘go ahead and do what you do’, someone you could trust with a particular piece of land,” says one of the owners.





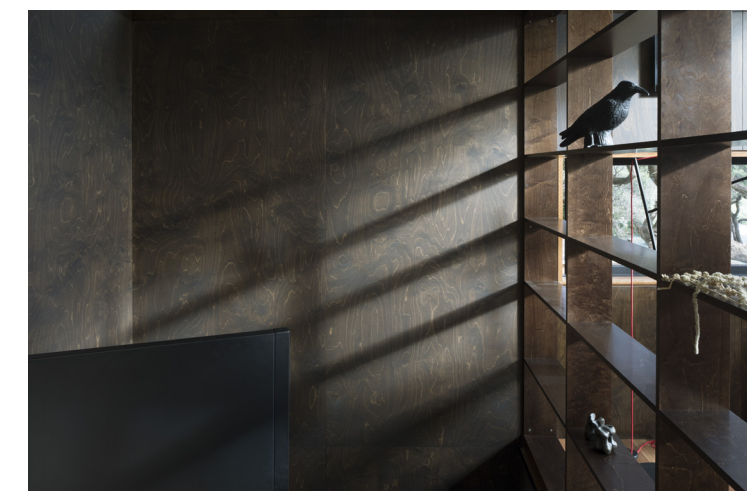
“With the house pushed as high as possible into the canopy, you get a view of the ocean and a tree-house feeling.”

It helped, also, that the Herbsts are used to working with and preserving trees, as evidenced at ‘Under Pöhutukawa’, just down the road from this one and which won Home of the Year 2012. As its name implies, the home nestles in the centre of a grove of those iconic coastal trees. In that case, several trees were carefully moved to make way for the house, which then seemed to take on the form of trees, its structure reaching upward to echo boughs and trunks.

Here, the approach was a little different, not just because the existing footprint offered an obvious place to build. The opportunity here was to reach up into the canopy to touch the sun, light and views and, in doing so, celebrate the very forest in which the house sits.

In essence, the Herbsts’ plan was to build on stilts. Externally, the house is a gentle, understated wood-and-glass building on six elegant steel poles and a central concrete-block box with a stone-floor entry. A steel spiral staircase leads to the second level and sea and tree-top views. “Essentially, all the good stuff was in the upper level. With the house pushed as high as possible into the canopy, you get a view of the ocean and a tree-house feeling,” says Lance. “That not only brings in the light, but lets you engage with the canopy – and the most beautiful part of the site.”

To get away from the wind, the house eventually evolved into a sort of square doughnut based around an internal courtyard, which features an outdoor fireplace. Along the front of the house, there’s a west-facing kitchen-living-dining area with floor-to-ceiling sliders. In essence, this space operates like a covered deck, complete with a chunky steel balustrade designed to allow leaning, contemplation and a drink.



Left The elegantly curved spiral staircase rises from the entry and service area up to the living areas.

Above The screen between the staircase and living area also serves as display shelving.





Every opportunity has been seized to bring in the light and draw attention to the tranquility and beauty of the site.

Previous page The architects worked closely with the owners to choose furniture from Simon James Design for its clean lines and harmonious material palette – the furniture feels like an extension of the house. The 'Liaison' sofa by Cameron Foggo for Nonn; 'Parallel'

armchairs by Simon James; 'Journal' coffee table by Cameron Foggo for Nonn; 'Soul' dining table by Cameron Foggo for Nonn; 'Narin' dining chairs by David Irwin for Case; and 'Spar' floor lamp by Jamie McLellan for Resident are all from Simon James Design.

Behind the courtyard, tucked against the slope and forest, are two compact bedrooms in each corner, with spectacular views into the trees; a bunk room sits between them and cleverly acts as a passageway when not in use. From here, a decked bridge leads to the hillside, which will eventually contain a spa pool. Two bathrooms, meanwhile, sit snugly between the bedrooms and main living area. It's an exercise in technical precision, fitting rooms into a pre-determined size; when you put a house up in the air, it instantly seems bigger.

Every opportunity has been seized to bring in the light and draw attention to the tranquility and beauty of the site. Unusually, the interior plywood walls have been stained a similar dark brown to the tree boughs, while the inward sloping ceiling of light birch pulls your gaze up to a continuous clerestory window that wraps the perimeter of the house and captures the tree canopy.

Left The window banking the kitchen and living area slides open, and is divided horizontally by a steel balustrade that echoes the type you'd find on a deck. Steel mesh panels sit below the balustrade. The 'Fisherman' pendant light by Mattias Ståhlbom for Zero Lighting and 'Radice' barstool by Sam Hecht/Industrial Facility for Mattiazzi are both from Simon James Design.

Above Without the customary front deck, the courtyard is the key outdoor living area and provides shelter from the west coast's more extreme elements. The 'Tio' table and chairs by Chris Martin for Massproductions are from Simon James Design. A citrus juicer by Gidon Bing from Everyday Needs sits on the table. The 'Breeze XL' sofa by Harbour Outdoor is from Dawson & Co.



Left The glass shower screen cut-out enables it to sit flush against the wall when not in use.

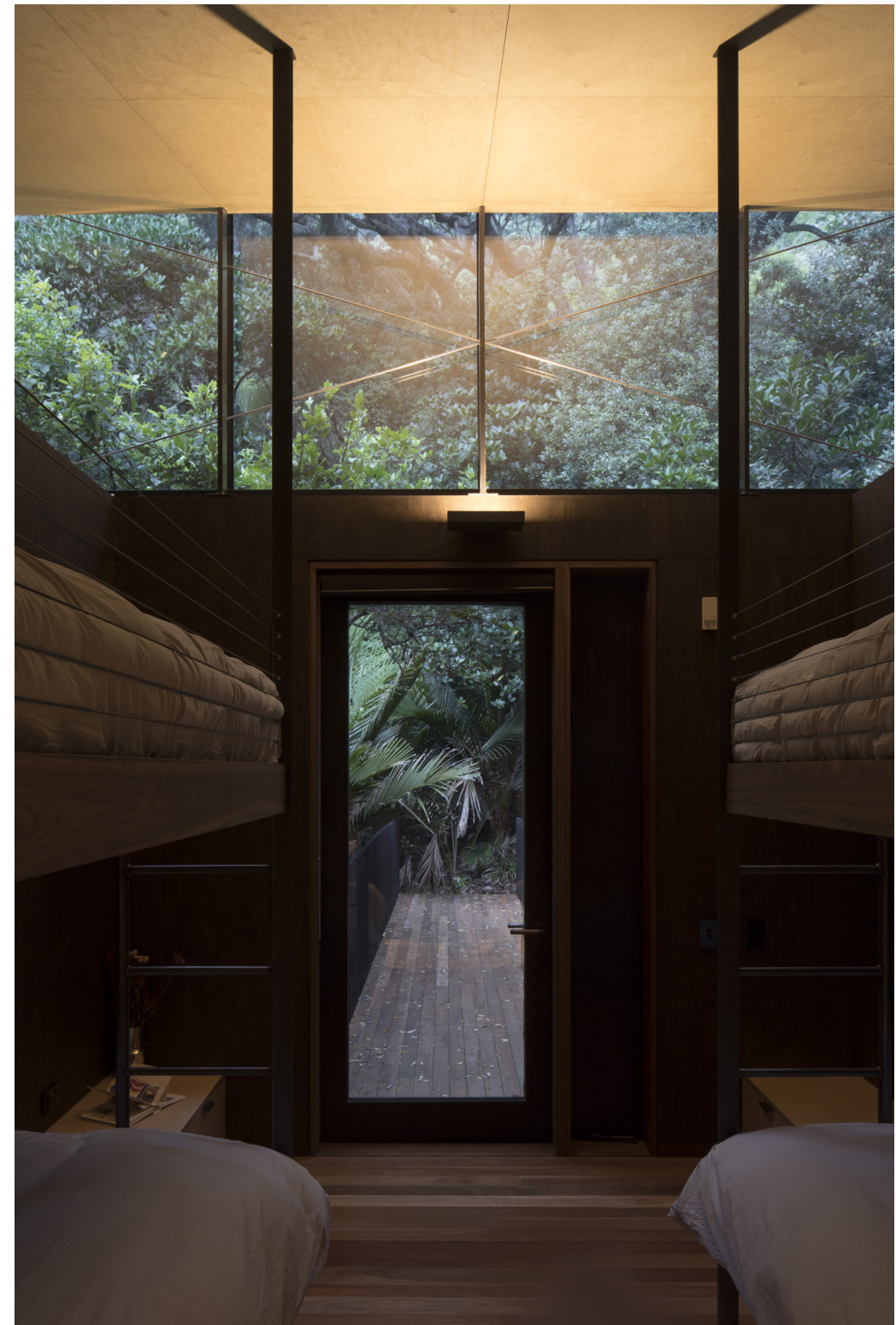
Below Colours throughout the home have been sourced from the surrounding natural environment, including the muted grey-green mosaics, which pick up on the pōhutukawa leaves.



“We wanted to play down the wall planes with the dark colour, making them recede into the background, into the pōhutukawa boughs,” says Lance of the move. “The fact that we’re so sheltered from the sun allowed us to do this very glassy response.”

Despite retreating inwards, the house forces its occupants to engage with the landscape in the most direct ways. In winter, storms wash in off the Tasman, rain splashes the glass and trees move in the breeze, almost like kelp. When we visited on a late summer afternoon, the sun washed in, the air seemed soaked with salt and the house filled with a deafening cacophony of cicada song.

In December, the pōhutukawa burst into blowy, vermilion bloom and fill with feeding tuis. Being there at this time must look and feel like all your Christmases have come at once. “It’s insane, the entire forest just goes off,” says Lance. “The light punches through the canopy, a canopy that goes on and on and on, so you get dark and light patches... a God-like light comes through it all.”



Above There’s no wasted space in the design: the bunk room doubles as a hall and leads to a bridge at the rear of the house. The hillside will eventually contain a spa pool.



Above The home sits in a Special Ecological Area, which required a sensitive approach by the architects.

Above With doors closed, the elements are held at bay but the view carries on. With limited sun to the site, the response was a liberal use of glazing.

Design notebook

Q&A with Lance Herbst
of Herbst Architects

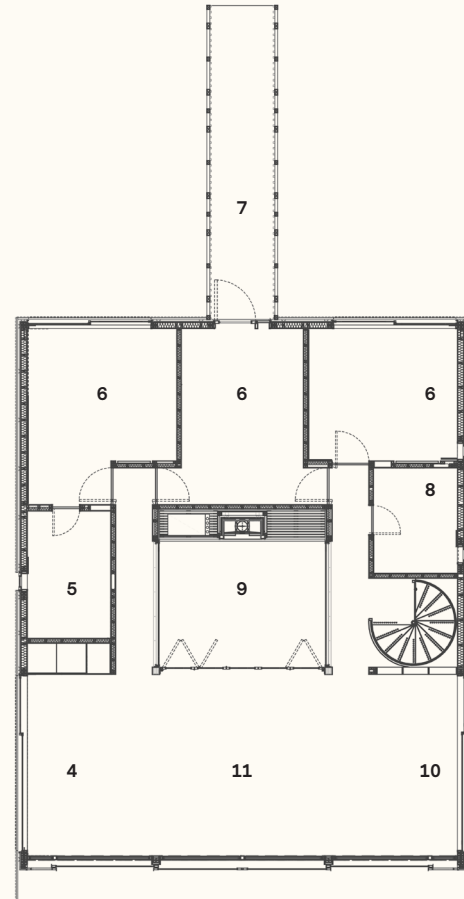


What was the brief like? The brief was quite straightforward. The clients essentially wanted a beach house with a main bedroom, guest bedroom and a bunkroom for overflow. But they put a lot of faith in us. They were quite architecturally experienced, as they had built houses before and understood the ups and downs that go with that process. They were really good at briefing us, then empowering us to come up with an interesting response to the brief.

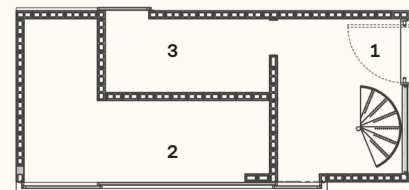
Describe the roof design. What were you trying to achieve visually, and how complicated was it technically? The idea with the roof was to lift the perimeter up all the way around the building and separate it from the wall pane by a continuous clerestory window to engage with the tree canopy. Inversely, we wanted to keep the parapet height of the courtyard as low as possible to allow a view up to the trees and mountain from the living room and passages to the bedrooms, and to allow as much light as possible to penetrate. This resulted in the inward sloping roof – the dominant feature of the house. Technically, it did get complex in that the plan is not a true square, but the ceiling plane needed to resolve internally on a fixed datum line and critically at the four folds of the ceiling. This resulted in the ceiling and roof planes being at different pitches on two of the roof faces, so it required detailed 3D modelling to resolve the structure and junctions. We thought it was pretty tricky but our incredible builders were totally unfazed.

In your design of the ‘Lindale’ bach on Great Barrier, you deliberately preserved the feeling of camping, including some of its inconveniences. In the book, *New Zealand Houses* by Patrick Reynolds, you were quoted as saying “convenience robs a holiday of its rituals”. How is your approach to this house different? Ha, I’ve got into a bit of trouble for that comment. But there’s a difference between a bach, where you might only spend a few weeks every year, and buildings where people might want to spend two months in July, when it would not be responsible to make people walk outside to get to the bedroom. We might do that in a real bach, when we have clients who go along with that and we can push it really hard. But it doesn’t really apply when we’re talking about a beach house.

How is a beach house different from a home-house? It needs to feel like a beach house, like you’re getting away from the city, but be friendly in all weather and sustain prolonged occupation. You still want to create a feeling of difference, in terms of how it’s made and the materials used, and the way it engages with the natural environment. Here, you have expansive sea views and the trees feel like they’re coming inside; it allows for a very powerful response to nature.



First floor



Ground floor

1. Entry
2. Storage
3. Laundry
4. Kitchen
5. En suite
6. Bedroom
7. Deck
8. Bathroom
9. Courtyard
10. Living
11. Dining

