

AWANA BEACH HOUSE HERBST ARCHITECTS

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Amidst the rugged landscape, the soft grey linear forms of the Awana Beach House appear nestled between the land and ocean. Through a deep connection with the unique site and conditions of Great Barrier Island, Herbst Architects has produced a reverent addition to this terrain.

This thoughtful project is a culmination of many years that Nicola and Lance Herbst, Founders of the practice, have spent refining their craft on Great Barrier Island, or Aotia as it is known in Māori. Located 90 kilometres east from Auckland, Great Barrier is the outermost island on the Hauraki Gulf. Largely undeveloped, it has a permanent population of about 1,000 residents, which swells over the summer months. There is an idyllic simplicity to living there; the island is off-grid, residents rely on solar and wind energy and rainwater is collected in tanks. Parts of Great Barrier can also be exposed to unruly weather. While the western side of the island offers sheltered harbours, the eastern side, where Awana Beach can be found, faces unrelenting winds blistering in from the Pacific.

With two-thirds of the island being public land and administered by the Department of Conservation, this house sits on a rare parcel of private property on the beachfront. A small house was originally built on this site in the 1970s, which resulted in an outcry from the local community. To prevent any further development, the Department of Conservation acquired the remaining sites. With this holding as the only development along the beachfront, Herbst Architects has designed the structure of Awana Beach House to be sympathetic to its surrounds, facilitating its role as a private holiday retreat in the summer but also acknowledging its solitary public presence year-round.

Great Barrier has long been a site of experimentation for Nicola and Lance. Over the last 20 years they have designed a series holiday houses here, beginning with their own bach. Their earlier projects, at a smaller

scale, have a raw quality. There is just enough and an unpretentious ease to the lifestyle they invoke. Over time, the projects have become more ambitious and the briefs more complex, however, the outcomes consistently heighten the experience of living within the surrounding environment. In these iterations of the beach house, Herbst's designs are a response to the varying environmental conditions of each site. Despite a change in scale, key design moves in these early explorations are echoed in Awana Beach House.

Sheathing the two rectilinear forms at Awana are moveable timber screens, a common element in many of Herbst's Great Barrier projects. When closed, the screens offer the house protection from the elements but, when opened, they allow the occupants to engage with the environment. In the Awana Beach House, these screens are not only implemented to offer mitigation of the strong easterly winds but have become integral to the entire scheme. In closing the cedar screens, which have been left to grey, the house from the public beach reads as one form. For most of the year, this is how the house will be viewed. As Lance notes, in previous projects on the island, "those screens were components of houses that were developed for particular reasons and for particular spaces, and in this one, we essentially distilled the entire building to that component, that essential component of the skin." Comparative to the use of screens to mitigate harsh conditions in other Antipodean houses by Donovan Hill and Sean Godsell, Herbst's continued refinement of this approach and focus of the element at Awana Beach suggests a mastering of their own architectural language.



Striking contrast is found between the timber, local rock and concrete. Using natural materials embeds the building into the land, deeply connecting it to the environment.

The design of the entire project is drawn from this key element. While there has been deep consideration of how the building is read when it is unoccupied, the moveable screens animate the house when in use. At night, the screens become a veil for the building lit within and, from the public beach, the house glows as a lantern below the hills. Lance notes, “we were trying to have a filigree of a building almost sitting there; it’s almost dematerialising as it sits in that space.” Comparatively, when you are within the building, the screen acts as a curtain of privacy. Highly functional, these delicate elements also add a lightness and beauty to the house’s simple geometric forms.

In response to the winds that relentlessly pull across the Pacific, Herbst has oriented the house to both enjoy the expansive ocean views but feel sheltered from the unpredictable weather. In plan, the building is composed as a T-shape. For the occupants, a couple and their two children, the primary functions of this holiday dwelling sit parallel to the beach front. However, shifting from this lineal form, Herbst borrowed the Hawaiian term of ‘lanai’ to describe the second living space that pulls back and centres the building. Lance explains that the lanai is an “outside space, with an outside fire, but it’s still got a ceiling and it’s still got shutters, so this main space sits behind the living pavilion, and then we use the glass and the shutters, facing on to the sea, to control and ameliorate that breeze that comes through. So, essentially, you’re looking through

the building to the sea all the time.” Acting as the central node, the lanai also connects to the pavilion of bedrooms and private spaces that sit perpendicular to the beach, at the upper level of the house. Through this planning, the secondary bedrooms are protected from the harsh winds and given distance from the public space of the dwelling.

In contrast with the moveability of the timber screens, the house is anchored by stone and concrete. Using rock from a local quarry, a stone plinth runs around the building, determining the floor of the upper level. The same stone is repeated in the private bathing court situated behind the main bedroom. Internally, concrete is used as the main spine element and the fireplace in the lanai. “With the building as light as that, we wanted to bed it into the land,” Lance notes. The reduced material palette of timber, stone and concrete is heightened by the considered and elegant detailing.

There is a sense of respect and care of place presented by this elegant addition to Awana Beach that is evidence of Herbst’s deep connection with this environment. Here, the culmination of the years of experimenting and refining an approach to the beach house is actualised. There is a certain inevitability about this house; it is of here. Experiencing the building from within or without and at the mercy of the ever-changing weather, one feels intrinsically a part of the landscape.



Timber screens become a veil for the building, adding an internal lightness and beauty to the simple geometric forms.



Sitting on a rare parcel of private beachfront, the structure is sympathetic to its surrounds, facilitating a deep connection to the environment.



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