



— G R E A T B A R R I E R I S L A N D

OFF THE GRID

In a remote island in New Zealand, Herbst Architects have delivered a home that boasts all the informal character of the traditional Kiwi holiday shack — without compromising in terms of aesthetics or functionality.

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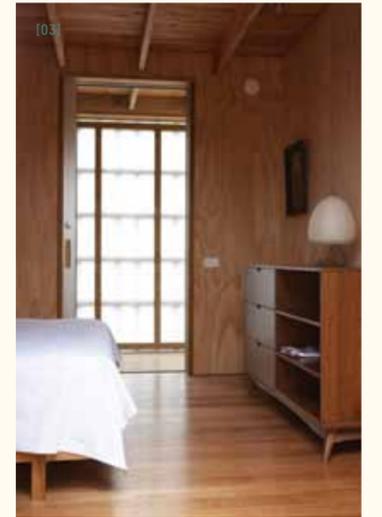
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RATHER THAN PUSH FOR A SEA VIEW,
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The mountainous Great Barrier Island is the last stop on the very outer edge of the Hauraki Gulf before the vast blue of the Pacific Ocean. During summer, this island is relatively busy. Hundreds of small bays are dotted around the calm, western side of the island that looks back towards the mainland, while the outer, eastern edge has broad, white-surf beaches.

As soon as autumn starts, the seasonal ferry stops, and access to the island is limited to a small propeller aeroplane service. The Great Barrier Island is also off the electricity grid. Mobile phone reception is patchy, and there is no public transport, street lighting or banks. In other words, if it's refuge from modern life you want, this is where you'll find it.

Nicola and Lance Herbst, the duo behind Herbst Architects, have designed eight distinctive, contemporary baches (small holiday retreats) on the island, including one of their own. Timms Bach is their latest creation, and combines a back-to-basics approach to holiday living. The Herbst's increasingly sophisticated and intuitive understanding of the island coupled with the robust sensibility of the Kiwi bach, seen to good effect in this project, offers an interestingly fresh approach to a part-time life in the bush. It is also a highly sustainable project: from the materials involved in its construction to the build-

ing's independence of external power and water services. The demands it makes on the world are minimal.

The site, located on the wild, 'bushier' west side of the island, is a classic 'quarter-acre block', roughly 16 metres by 50 metres long. Kaitoke, a long, unbroken stretch of white sand and surf, is the closest beach, and the Timms Bach site backs on to native ti trees surrounding the tiny Claris Airport (effectively a single grass landing strip). The road that extends down to Kaitoke Beach is flanked by a small subdivision of single sites.

"There's a slightly suburban context with buildings to each side of the bach," says Lance Herbst. "But, ironically, those are the only 20 buildings on the whole beach, so you actually are out in the middle of nowhere."

Rather than push for a sea view, the architects decided to concentrate on framing the silhouetted ring of mountains that lies inland. "If you went double-storey you'd kind of get a view of the sea, but you'd be looking over the roofs of the other houses," says Nicola. "There's the beautiful horizon of Mount Hobson, the highest mountain on the island, so instead of making the building crane its neck, we decided to stay low and focus on that. The foreground is full of windswept ti trees, which won't be touched as it is reserve land. That was our starting point."

[01] The deck was placed in such a way as to frame views of the nearby mountain range.

[02] The covered deck is the main entertaining and dining area. Sliding shutters on both sides give the owners flexibility to open or close it up completely, making it comfortable year-round.

[03] Nothing more, nothing less: the bedrooms offer all the modern comforts needed, without a hint of shabby.

[04] Solid elements screen out the view of the neighbours and the side of the house.

[04]





Creating a sense of seclusion from the neighbours was the next step. As much of the land on the Barrier is protected by the Department of Conservation, new buildings tend to exist in small pockets, and so the issue of privacy is not a new one for the Herbsts.

“The site dictated a long, skinny solution,” says Nicola. The result is an elongated but simple rectangular plan, the two longest sides of which hold the bach’s communal spaces between them.

“We made ‘edges’, basically,” says Lance. “We used the mass of the building, the ‘container’, to screen space from one side, and the heavy stone wall to screen the other. The negative space between them is the primary covered deck.”

The plans were conceived as a single interior and exterior design project, revolving around this outdoor space. Unlike traditional beach houses with an internal entertaining area that opens out onto a deck, in the Timms Bach the deck is the entertaining area. It has sliding shutters of western red cedar to each side, an open fireplace at one end and, at the other, large sliding glass doors that lead into the kitchen.

The shutters were carefully engineered and fitted to block out any drafts. This was important, as the wind on the island has a capricious character – it can come from nearly any direction. The screens also give the owners flexibility to close or open up the space completely, or just block off one side.

“The area needs to be comfortable enough for them to use all year round,” says Nicola. “If the weather is very inclement, the island bench inside is designed to take bar stools. However, we don’t tend to double up on dining – there’s no surplus of space.”

Creating a tricked-out super bach has always been the antithesis of the Herbsts’ intentions. Arriving from Cape Town 15 years ago, they were delighted to find coastal land in New

Zealand was largely undeveloped in comparison, giving them the chance to try something more low key.

Lance explains: “The philosophy we’ve developed is that, specifically, these are not city houses. It’s amazing how quickly that gets lost in translation. You’re out of work mode when you’re there, so to fill the day you go through these rituals – finding the wood, making the fire, cooking on the fire, catching fish, cleaning the fish.”

The couple had experienced similar ad hoc, cobbled together beach houses in South Africa. After the Great Barrier Island’s raffish charm won them over, they began to break down exactly what makes the bach so special in the nature-seeking psyche.

“If you look at their history, they’re just little shacks that were thrown together,” says Lance. “There was a long drop at the end of the garden, a sink and candles. But if you talk to the owners 25 years on, they have this wonderful memory of growing up there, and the rituals, the outdoor loo, the darkness, the torches.”

The building that replaces the caravan, shack or tent needs to hold onto that thread for the next generation, or it will cease to exist, he says. “Every time you provide a convenience, you sacrifice something. You put in a dishwasher, you lose that moment at the end of the meal where people get together and wash the dishes. A gas barbecue means you sacrifice the collecting of wood and standing around waiting for the fire to die down, so you can cook on the coals. It’s those experiences that make the memories.”

So, the architects created a series of ‘semi-outside’ spaces. The deck is one example. The walkway running the length of the container is another, and necessitates crossing the outdoor space to move between different areas of the house. Though mostly sheltered from the elements, the edges of the door panels are slightly inset, allowing air and light to penetrate and deliberately evoking a camp site metaphor.

[05] The kitchen island is a simple, utilitarian open bench.

[06] It can be pulled into service as a casual eating area in particularly bad weather.

[07] The internal living area can remain open to the elements in summer, but once the sliding glass doors are shut a simple wood burner heats the space efficiently.





[08]

THE FRIDGE, LIGHTS AND STEREO ARE POWERED BY A PHOTOVOLTAIC SYSTEM; THERE'S GAS FOR HEATING WATER AND COOKING, IF IT ISN'T DONE OVER THE OUTDOOR FIRE.

"When you set up camp, the first thing you do is put up a shelter, and then a kitchen table and gas burners – and that's where you live," says Lance. "Then you sleep in separate tents. We've made that big communal space where everyone hangs out, and played down the bedroom functions by making them small, simple cells."

"With all our baches, you get to the bedrooms via an outside connection that isn't totally waterproof. It's a collection of structures that make the bach as a whole, so the advantage is that you avoid the idea of a big building suddenly appearing on the beach," adds Nicola. Even if the brief gets larger, the architects make it in smaller pieces. "The individual parts still have an appropriate scale to the context."

The structure of the house is legible in the interior design, with visible posts, rafters and beams that add interest and dynamism to the internal spaces. Sustainable woods were used throughout – radiata pine for the structural elements, cedar joinery, macrocarpa walls and Tasmanian oak floors. This gives the light a mellow quality, the exposed wood grain lending its own low-key detail. "We're interested in the patina that develops through age with Corten steel or cedar that fades to driftwood-grey colours, and letting nature do its thing, instead of plasticising everything," says Nicola.

The architects designed all of the built-in furniture and the large outdoor table, but were also commissioned by the owner to choose everything else, from the Noguchi light fittings and Candywhistle bar stools, down to the cutlery. The open shelving of the island bench adds an urban touch, and was designed to specifically resemble a piece of furniture, a kitchen table, rather than a solid 'block' to hide appliances.

And that, of course, is the bach's main point of difference – it has no extra appliances. "Some visitors arrive and they can't believe they can't just plug in a hairdryer," Lance laughs. The fridge, lights and stereo are powered by a photovoltaic system; there's gas for heating water and cooking, if it isn't done over the outdoor fire. The indoor brazier is an efficient space heater in winter. Rainwater is collected from the roof, filtered, used and then put through an on-site sewage treatment system. "The lovely thing about the Barrier is that it's forced us to do very sustainable buildings, because you have to be self-sufficient," he says.

In this case, however, achieving sustainability was about rethinking the use of space and resources, and tapping into an archetype to create a contemporary model for the traditional beach house. "A malaise of our society that has developed over the last hundred years is that you have more and more expectations in terms of the power you use. You plug more stuff in, you use more water," says Lance. "So the best thing about off-the-grid buildings is that tangibility is brought back into it. When you have a shower, in the back of your head you're wondering how full the tank is, because you're getting near the end of summer. It makes it real because you realise all this stuff we take for granted is an illusion – it's all coming from somewhere. One of the things we strongly believe is that the most sustainable thing you can do is to do less." (*inside*)

[08] Over time, the exterior skin of the house will react with the elements and develop a patina of soft silver-grey, making it even more at home in this wind-swept coastal area.

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