

HOME
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FINALIST



To the island

On Great Barrier Island, Lance & Nicola Herbst of Herbst Architects show how bigger isn't necessarily better with this beautifully contained bach

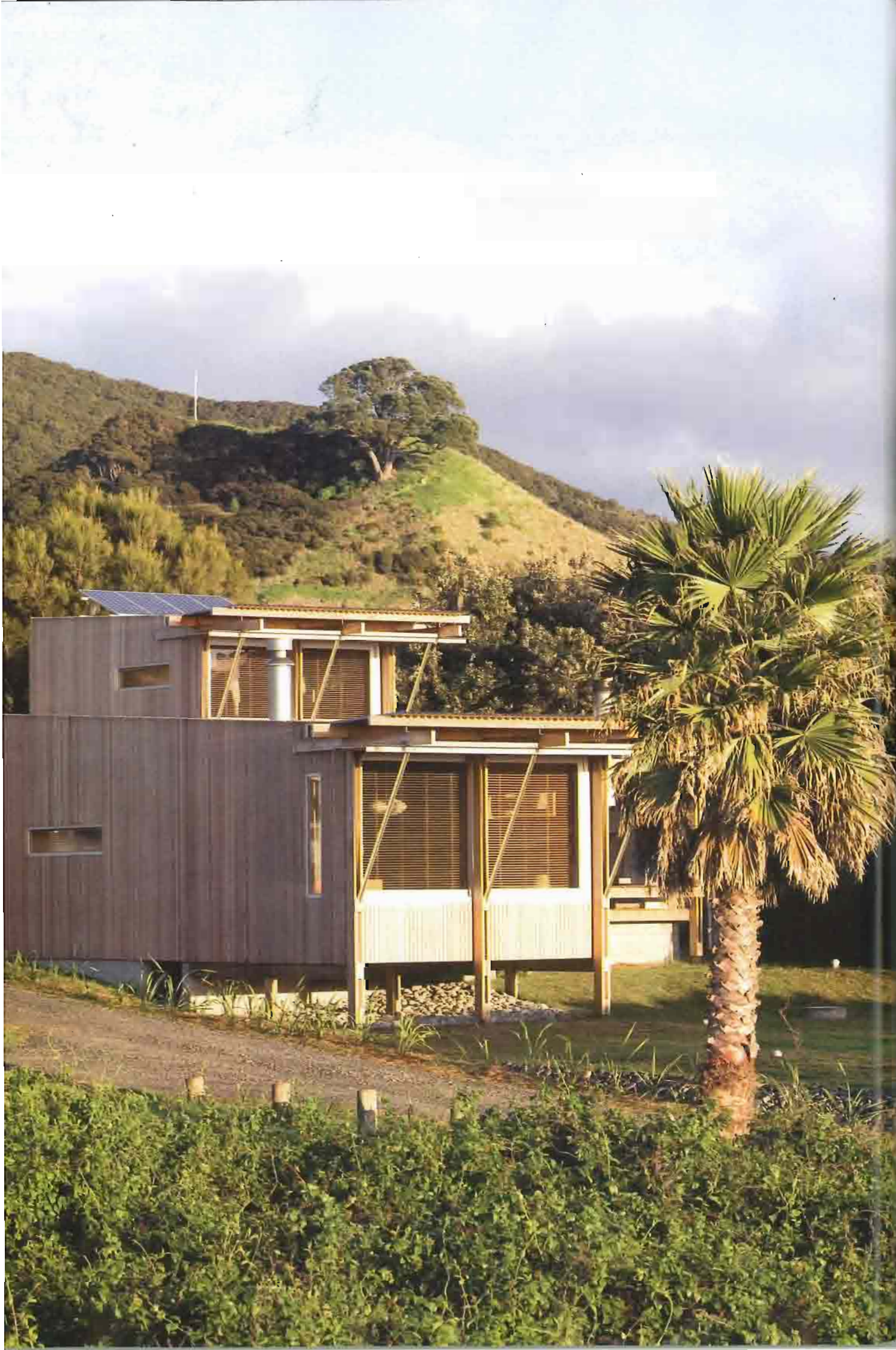
TEXT by Jeremy Hansen PHOTOGRAPHY by Patrick Reynolds

THIS PHOTO The two-bedroom bach is clad in cedar battens, with distinctive "eyebrows" keeping out rain and screening sunlight from the seaward-facing windows. Architects Lance & Nicola Herbst designed this bach for a client; their own home is a little further down Great Barrier's Medlands Beach.





THIS PHOTO The indoor living and kitchen area is lined with cedar and features simple built-in furniture designed by the architects. The fireplace is from Warmington's and the swabs are covered in 'Ficus' fabric by Mokum. The door at the rear opens to a deck on the other side of the gabion wall that serves as the building's spine. There is also an exit on the right of the picture that leads to the main outdoor room. The 'Saucer' lamp is by George Nelson from Matisse.



Building a bach on a beach is, in many minds, not the simple proposition it once was. Spending a fortune on a coastal section can bring with it a sense of obligation to avoid undercapitalising and build something grand. These days there are also expectations of masses of guest bedrooms and en suite bathrooms, the everyday luxuries holidaymakers of old – with their tents, caravans and gas cookers – were either too poor or only too pleased to be without. A way of living – or at least of holidaymaking – has been disappearing. Modesty went out of fashion a long time ago in some beach communities.

What a relief, then, to find that Great Barrier Island – a half-hour's flight in a very small plane across the Hauraki Gulf from Auckland – has remained, for the most part, pleasantly old-fashioned in its approach to beach housing. Even picturesque Medlands Beach, regarded on the island as a flashy summer hangout for Aucklanders, has mostly adhered to the local desire for modesty above all else. For beachgoers more accustomed to the souped-up holiday homes of the Bay of Islands or Coromandel, a simple two-bedroom bach like this one by Nicola and Lance Herbst of Herbst Architects can seem positively revolutionary. Just two bedrooms and a single bathroom – you call this a house? And yet, it's a building of such charm that it makes

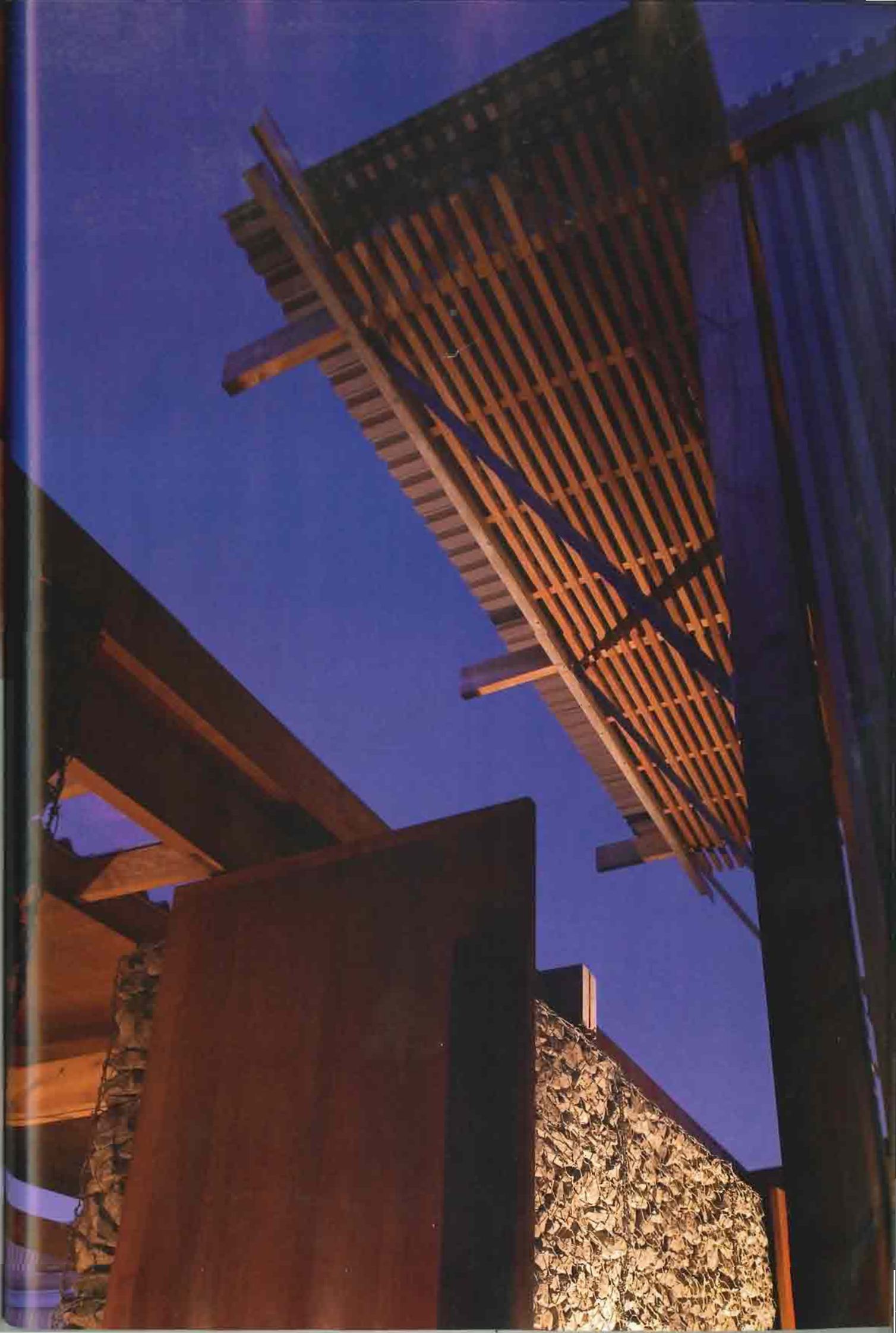
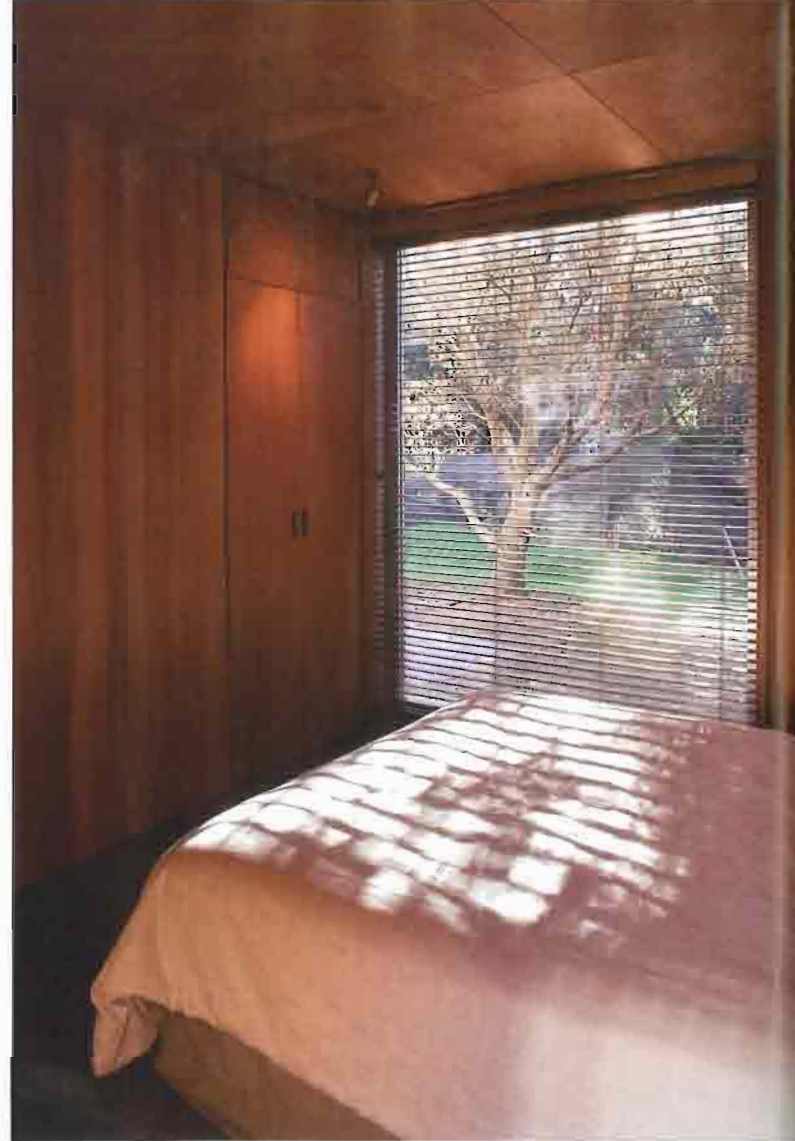
deprivation – well, a gentle version of it anyway – seem suddenly fresh and appealing.

The Herbsts are originally from South Africa, a country where the coastline is highly developed and the building code doesn't allow the use of timber. In the mid-90s, they spent a year in New Zealand and visited Great Barrier. A few years later, they moved to Auckland permanently and quickly purchased a small plot of land at Medlands for themselves. "We needed to grow roots here," Lance says, "and the best way to do that was to buy some land." Before emigrating, they had worked only on masonry buildings, hence their fascination with the buildings on the Barrier, what Lance calls "these little timber buildings we had never experienced before – tiny shacks with 20 years' accretion of stuff". Their own place at Medlands is almost breathtakingly simple, with just a single bedroom, an outdoor kitchen and seating area and small shower.

The Herbsts these days could be described as the architects of choice at Medlands Beach, where the sixth home they have designed is currently in development. Their experience in the area made them an obvious choice of architects for Marc Lindale, who commissioned them to design this bach after he purchased a section on the island. By this time, the Herbsts had developed a reputation for modest

LEFT The bach's two main forms – a single-storeyed living area and a two-storeyed structure containing the two bedrooms and a bathroom – sit on a concrete pad and are anchored by a gabion wall (just visible at left) made of local stone.

ABOVE The space around which the rest of the bach circulates is the outdoor room with casual seating and views of the sea. Great Barrier Island has no power supply, so the bach is solar-powered. To conserve energy, the outdoor room is lit with candles or a gas lantern.



There is romanticism in this small timber creation, but what makes it successful is its thoughtfulness and rigour

baches perfectly suited to the Barrier's built environment. "He liked the building we had done for ourselves," Lance remembers, "and he was emphatic that his bach had to be sensitive to the context of Medlands. He didn't want a bling house on the beach."

Indeed, Lindale got something far more discreet than that. His bach is a dwelling that eschews the desire to crane its neck for the sea view, instead choosing to settle its slight timber form into the shelter of the sand dunes that surround the 50-metre-long site. It is a pad built around island rituals of fishing for food in the late afternoon and eating it afterwards. It oozes feelings of relaxation.

To be sure, there is romanticism in this small timber creation, but what makes it successful is its thoughtfulness and rigour. On arrival at the bach, the usual formalities are quickly dispensed with. There is no front door, just a few steps up to a gloriously simple outdoor room with a fireplace contained by a gabion wall (constructed from local stone) that serves as the building's spine. Behind it lies a slim two-storeyed structure with two bedrooms and the only bathroom; reaching toward the beach is a long cedar-clad room comprised of the kitchen and lounge. Out the back beside the garage is another deck with a bench designed for gutting and filleting fish. And that's about it.

The ideal of living outdoors was pivotal in the bach's design. "We come from a significantly hotter climate," Lance says, "so we are always looking to trap that sun." The essential aim was to create a sun-filled, sheltered outdoor space that would be particularly welcoming in the last two hours of each day. In this case, the gabion wall provides shelter from the prevailing cold southerly breeze, with the other deck serving as an alternative space in different weather.

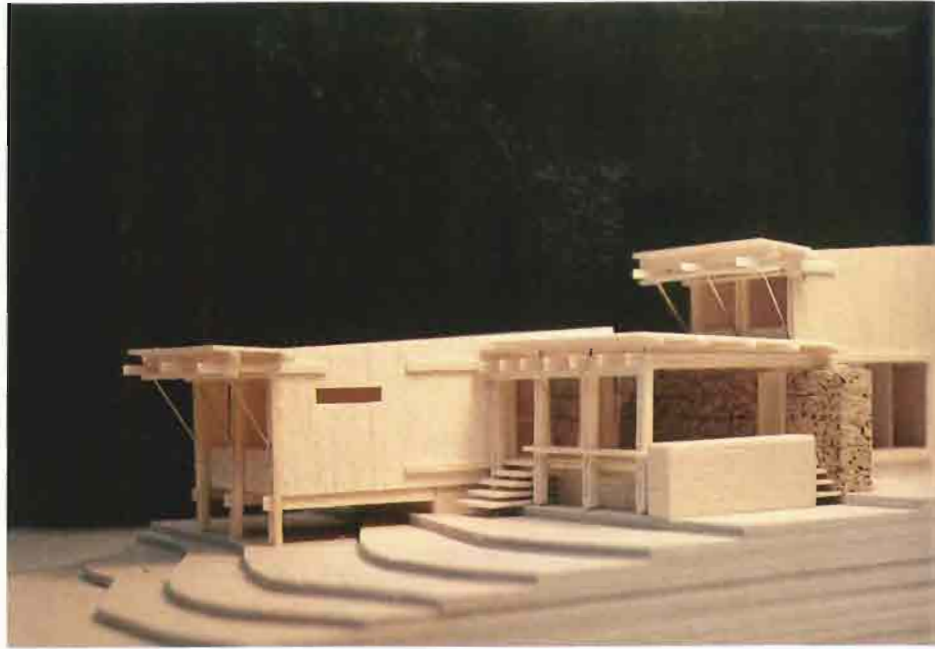
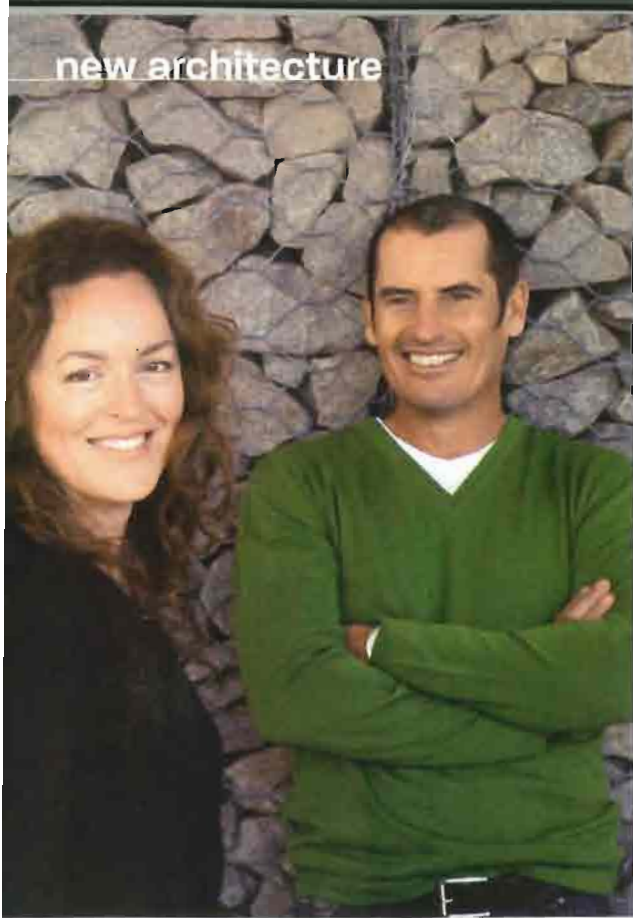
Much of the bach's simplicity is the result of the restrictions that come with building on Great Barrier. There are no local power or water supplies, so the bach is solar-powered (with gas water heating and a backup diesel generator that is very rarely used), rainwater is collected from the roof and sewage is treated in a tank on site. Most of the lighting comes courtesy of candles or gas lanterns. Hooks on a wall in the main bedroom stand in for a wardrobe. In a sense, it's a reversal of the normal approach to building a home, where convenience is everything. "Houses have become machines for living and there's less humanity in them," Lance says. "Here, we were looking to sacrifice convenience and create delight." Visiting this small but perfectly formed bach, it's clear that this has been a sacrifice well worth making.

ABOVE LEFT In the bathroom, furniture designed by the architects complements a 'Scarabeo' basin by Il Bagno, and a 'Geo' WC by Caroma.

ABOVE RIGHT The bedrooms were designed with minimum fuss and the same cedar cladding as the rest of the home's interior.

OPPOSITE The "eyebrow" on the second-floor bedroom means windows can stay open in the rain. The building's gabion wall provides a shelter for the main outdoor room and also acts as the building's spine, separating living and sleeping areas and anchoring the bach to the land.

new architecture



ABOVE Nicola and Lance Herbst of Herbst Architects, whose own bach is also on the Barrier.

BELOW A view from the rear deck shows a door leading through the gabion wall to the main outdoor room.

RIGHT The architects' early drawings of the bach, including an early diagrammatic plan (with sun); the northwestern elevation (far right); a later version showing the garage at the rear of the site and, top, the finished model.

