



ART OF CONTEXT

Nicola and Lance Herbst famously injected new life into the New Zealand 'bach'. *Andrea Stevens* visits their projects and finds elegant compositions with great sensitivity for context and social fabric.

close up

the herbsts — AUCKLAND, new zealand



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A series of small timber dwellings on Great Barrier Island launched the New Zealand careers and reputations of Nicola and Lance Herbst. The buildings resonated with a small but vocal backlash against the suburban character of many coastal communities. Going back to basics, they worked with post-and-beam construction, honest materials and created humble but artful spaces. Since then, larger scale-projects have become their mainstay, yet they continue to develop ideas first investigated in the Barrier ‘baches’. “We have a real concern for contextualism,” says Lance. “It was drummed into us when we trained, and has really informed the way we think about architecture. Everything is a response.” Whether in a rural or urban setting, their buildings reflect the natural, built and social contexts. This is their point of departure and regular touchstone in fitting sensitively with the spirit of a place.

The Herbsts approach design with a high degree of rationalism. They are rigorous, careful designers, who create functional buildings with clever spatial relationships. Timber and steel detailing is driven by a desire for legibility, elegance and lightness of expression. They layer building elements, filter the light, contrast textures and use ‘classical’ proportioning to create depth and beauty.

Originally from South Africa, the couple immigrated to New Zealand in 1998. While studying architecture at the University of Cape Town, they were exposed to a generation of Late Modernist architects. One of the most influential was head of school, Professor Roelof Uytendogaardt. He ran a Bauhaus-style school, under which architecture and urban design were united. “What was really important in our training was that urban design was an adjunct to architecture,” Nicola recalls. “We always worked with urban fabric and at civic scale.” This concern is apparent in their residential work, not only in how they relate to immediate context, but also to the broader neighbourhood and community.

One of the deciding factors on whether to settle in Auckland was a visit to Great Barrier Island, 90 kilometres from the CBD. The small

01
Nicola and Lance Herbst in their Parnell offices.
02 – 03
Living is kept simple and functional at the Herbst Bach, complete with a field kitchen and outdoor dining room.

“Nothing is *formal* at Barrier... baches typically develop as an accretion of *small elements* over the years, and this is how we approach their design.”

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NICOLA





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- 04 Clarkson House (2008). Main entry is by a link bridge, which separates living from sleeping.
- 05 A child's cubbyhole below stairs leading to the main bedroom.
- 06 Folding roof forms and structure create a sense of enclose.

“The weather encourages a *rigorous approach* to semi-outdoor space... it is a wonderful *pointer* and *anchor* to work with.”

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NICOLA

beach community and the natural beauty of the island were everything they were looking for. “We completely fell in love with it,” recalls Lance. They returned for several holidays and eventually bought a piece of land at Medlands Beach.

The first bach they designed at Medlands was their own, which they built piece by piece over time. A water tower was built initially with wet areas below, followed by a communal room and covered deck. Dining and the ‘field kitchen’ are contained on the deck, and protected with wind shutters and a simple iron roof. A few years ago, they built a sleeping cabin and workshop at the rear of the site. The whole arrangement is anchored around the tower, with a large open green space between both shelters. “Nothing is formal at Barrier,” Nicola observes. “Baches typically develop as an accretion of small elements over the years, and this is how we approach their design.”

Coming from a warm, dry African climate with year-round outdoor living, what struck them about New Zealand was the changeability of the weather. Subject to El Niño and La Niña patterns, it is not unusual for northern regions to experience four seasons in one day. “The weather encourages a rigorous approach to semi-outdoor space,” notes Nicola, “and we embrace that because it is a wonderful pointer and anchor to work with.” The orientation and fabric of their buildings are designed to trap the sun and shield the wind. They go to great lengths to create protected space, thus maximising the number of months people can live outdoors.

In 2008, they designed the Clarkson House on the outskirts of a city in the Waikato, a region that has a cooler climate than Auckland and generally a flatter topography. The main feature of the site is a sapling forest, and so the building is all about integrating with this forest and bringing views of the trees into the architectural composition.

A strip of clerestory windows and ground-level windows were one of the first architectural decisions. These captured different forest layers – trunks versus foliage – contrasting and thus highlighting the architecture

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- 07 Compson Bach (2008). Raw timber and concrete provide texture and warmth.
- 08 Enclosed bedroom wings bookend the living space.
- 09 The guest bathroom opens onto a private deck and lightwell.



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close up

the herbsts — AUCKLAND, new zealand



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Spatially, they have used light wells and screens to create *transitions* and *private zones* for the apartments – devices first seen in their baches.

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Via Centro (2008).
This mixed-use
building takes cues
from its context.

of the trees. Local agricultural sheds drove the folding roof forms, and an exposed steel frame reinforces this reference. One of the most interesting aspects of the house is how the architects have connected it to the ground. “We have used a grid of concrete rails to lift the building out of the ground”, says Nicola. “We feel there should be more of a differentiation in New Zealand between inside and outside levels, due to dampness.” They have ‘stitched’ the house into the site by extending these rails into the yard and by bringing natural stone up to the house. In between, small timber platforms hover and create a gentle transition down to ground level.

The Compton Bach of 2008 displays a highly resolved example of designing for the environment. The whole living room is conceived as a covered deck. Space is graded from fully inside, to semi-inside to semi-outside to outside. An external wall with wind shutters protects the southern aspect, and the floating roof encloses all but the last bay. “In terms of living,” says Lance, “the building needs to make its own little micro-climate, so we have controlled all the edges.”

By contrast, the Herbsts’ African projects were earth-bound masonry buildings. The materials used were rough bricks, rough plaster and rough timber. Gravity loads and shedding these loads was key to a legible building in the modernist sense, while texture and the play of light animated surfaces. They retain these influences in their New Zealand work, and have transferred their obsession with structure to post-and-beam detailing, as it provides the clarity and character they are looking for. Most of their open-plan living spaces on Great Barrier have exposed frames, which are detailed so they move seamlessly between inside and outside. Their interest

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Via Centro (2008).
Cast aluminium
screens filter the
street for privacy.

in texture has transferred to rough-sawn timber and exposed concrete block, which appear regularly in their work as strong textural anchors.

On a larger scale, 19th Century brick warehouses in Freemans Bay were the context for their recent mixed-use development, Via Centro. The project entailed stripping back a 1980s building to its concrete frame, then reconfiguring and re-cladding it to suit offices and apartments. Materials were derived from the local industrial vernacular. "The red brick is very strong, but it is breaking down with other materials being used instead," says Lance. "We have a responsibility to re-work it." Spatially, they have used light wells and screens to create transitions and private zones for the apartments – devices first seen in their baches.

Whether rural or urban, single dwelling or high density, the Herbsts break a building down into its component elements – materially and spatially – to achieve subtlety and clarity of expression. With the advantage of a contrasting point of reference, this insight has enabled them to create a unique and elegant vernacular.

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