



**Architecture** | With their sleek, low profiles, wild locations and connection to nature, contemporary homes are pushing the country's design codes, and turning international heads. By *Jessica-Belle Greer*

Australian-born, Singapore-based entrepreneur Matt Chapman considered many countries when looking for a place to buy an isolated retreat.

"I wanted to find the most magical place possible," he says. That place was Parihoa, whose minimal outline and slick, dark-stained timber facade are a dramatic contrast to the rolling hills and rugged cliffs of the landscape where it resides.

It is one of several sleek modern architectural projects designed in conversation with the striking geography of their New Zealand locations: often low-lying, playing on the need for isolation, and constructed in materials that stand apart from, but take on the profile of, their surroundings. The simplest of cribs and baches – the Kiwi terms for holiday homes – have also inspired New Zealand architects to engage with the wild in their designs in interesting ways.

Parihoa was built for a farming family, taking inspiration from traditional Māori attitudes towards nature, says Andrew Patterson of architecture

studio Pattersons, which was behind the project. "In New Zealand, the ethos of the country is we are the children of the sky father and the earth mother [Ranginui and Papatūānuku]. And that comes with a certain responsibility."

Forty-five minutes from the country's largest city, Auckland, it is perched on the western coast's cliffs, looking out to the Tasman Sea. "With the weather rolling off the ocean, you can see a storm coming before it hits you," says Chapman. High winds and horizontal rain mean "visibility will go down to nothing". But, adds Chapman, "it gets these heavenly sunsets [...] It's like an alien fortress."

Similar to the earth ramps of an old pā (or fort) in view of the house, Parihoa lies low along the line of the hill and is configured with a central courtyard. The living areas stretch along the glass walls at the front of the house; walls that can be rolled back when weather permits. The four bedrooms join the courtyard at a range of angles to ensure a window or door can be opened regardless of the direction of the wind and sun

(the country has particularly high ultra-violet light levels).

New Zealand is "not bogged down in an idea of architecture from a different time; it's a country of people that are essentially looking forward", says architect Lance Herbst. Yet nods to tradition remain a keystone. On

**'It is clad in solid zinc, which forms a silvery patina that resembles the pine forest behind it'**

Great Barrier Island, the outermost island on the Hauraki Gulf, Awana Beach House was completed by Herbst Architects in 2020 for an Auckland family. Like many of Herbst's designs – such as the award-winning Dune House on North Island's east coast, whose undulating curves mimic the sand dunes nearby – the building is wrapped in sliding screens that reference the country's vernacular timber-framed buildings.

The screens are made out of untreated cedar, which is constantly battered by sea-spray, creating a silvery effect. "What we're always trying to do with these beach houses, essentially, is blur the line between the building and the landscape," says Herbst.

Unobtrusive design was also Chapman's aim when he started a new project in 2018 – a 24-hectare site on Roys Peninsula, which leads into Lake Wānaka in the South Island. He also wanted to emulate Parihoa's connection to its surroundings. Here, the mountains channel strong winds, snow and cloud (Aotearoa, the country's Māori name, translates to "Land of the Long White Cloud"). He commissioned Fearon Hay Architects to create Synchronicity, which was completed in 2023. Nestled in the hills, it's made with a mix of concrete, glass, corrugated iron and aluminium screening. Red cedar adds warmth inside, while the red cedar cladding outside is slowly taking on the dusty grey tones of the region's schist rock.

"You don't see that building from afar. We have not changed the hierarchy of how powerful that peninsula is," says architect Tim Hay. "It feels like it hasn't disrupted that equilibrium."

Two main bedrooms are at either end of the long single-storey structure, between a series of living areas that can be reconfigured depending on how many are staying. "I like isolation for creativity and being able to really drop in, because a lot of my work has been virtual," says Chapman. "But, by the same token, you need to get people to come out [to visit]. You need to become a good entertainer."

Two bunkrooms (and a ski drying room and other amenities) are separate from this central building – forcing occupants outside, much like at the shepherding and hiking huts in the high country. "That adventurous outdoor lifestyle can get lost by providing creature comforts," says architect Jeff Fearon, also of Fearon Hay Architects. "Having a client who was willing to explore those sorts of solutions was exciting."

Biodiversity requirements for planning approval at Synchronicity meant 25,000 native plants were added to the site. Chapman embraced the challenge. "You have a responsibility when it comes to the health of the land and the relationships with other people who connect with it," he says. "I've found it very humbling."

Chapman, who has become a New Zealand citizen, is selling Synchronicity and Parihoa as he slimms his portfolio and builds a primary residence nearby in



## New Zealand's new modern



(From top left) Parihoa's minimal outline and slick, dark-stained timber are a dramatic contrast to the landscape; Parihoa, by Pattersons architects, perches above coastal cliffs; Lenticular House in Te Arai, also by Pattersons; Herbst Architects' Dune House, on the east coast of the North Island; a rendering of a Sear-Budd Ross project near Queenstown, South Island

Wānaka. Designed again by Fearon Hay, it will be a partly subterranean house called Telepathy.

Duncan Ross, chief operating officer of Bayleys Realty which, alongside partners McGrath Estate Agents and Knight Frank, is listing both properties, says the houses are attracting international buyers as well as domestic interest. "There's a lot more activity from offshore parties. While it's still very difficult to get access, there's certainly that desire to have a bolt-hole."

"They're stylised to fit within the landscape but equally to stand out," says Ross, and they create a "feeling of safety and security inside this rugged environment. When you see them, you really understand it."

Most foreigners must go through the Overseas Investment Act to purchase property; Wānaka and neighbouring Queenstown, in the South Island, are growth regions for international ownership. In the North Island are new developments at Te Arai and Tara Iti, golf resorts by the sea. Pattersons recently completed Lenticular House, situated among the dunes of Te Arai, for a young Australian couple. Looking out to the Little Barrier Island reserve, with a lenticular cloud almost always hovering over it, the aim was to create a home without visual clutter so focus would be on the view.

The house has two symmetrical wings and, like Synchronicity, has matching bedrooms (and offices) at either end and a living area in between. It is designed so different sides can be opened, whatever the weather. The front floor-to-ceiling wall of glass slides open almost silently at the press of a button. "This house anticipates an age where people aren't tied to an office," Patterson says. It is clad in solid zinc, which doesn't rust in a coastal environment but forms a silvery patina that resembles the pine forest behind it.

Thomas Sear-Budd of architecture studio Sear-Budd Ross considers the country's nature-adjacent projects to be putting "New Zealand architecture and New Zealand modernism on the map".

Sear-Budd Ross is completing Central Otago House, which has sliding floor-to-ceiling windows, a protected courtyard and a tonal exterior (this time with cast in-situ concrete), and is surrounded by nature. The five-bedroom home, with a piano room and an area for tea ceremonies, is for a family based in the US and Taiwan. "We're enthusiastic about pushing New Zealand architecture forward, and that, even though it's contextual, has an international element," says co-founder James Ross.

Between them, these architecture studios are embarking on projects in other remote areas – taking the "New Zealand modern" aesthetic to Australia, Asia, the Middle East, the US, the UK and near the Arctic Circle.

"There's an overriding desire, if you're out in nature, to be as one or respectful or in harmony," says Patterson. "You don't have to design in a particular style, referencing what's gone before. You can go straight to the source, which is the environment."

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