

cover story | Julia Richardson



See the sea: a recent design at Seal Rocks by Newcastle's Bourne & Blue, far left and above. A perspex-clad veranda is the trademark of Michael Bremner's reworked shack at Culburra Beach, left. The gangplank entry to a beach house designed by Nick Murcutt, opposite page.

The holy coast

Beach houses are sacred sites, no matter how far from the sea.

The salt, the wind, the rain, the sun. On the coast, the elements are inescapable. Curtains grow stiff with sea spray, carpets are worn away by sand, decorative clutter is bowled over by the ocean breeze. To live comfortably by the beach means working with nature and living with less.

The current crop of architects know this, which is why the best houses of the coastal strip embody two of the most significant trends in modern architecture – the desire to adapt to the environment and live more simply.

The coast has become the location for an increasing volume of work by local architects, which is affecting even houses a considerable drive from the beach. What home owner from Turramurra to Teengabbie hasn't considered the merits of a living area that flows out to a timber deck through bifold doors, or louvres that can direct a gentle evening breeze?

No doubt that city-wide love of seaside living was behind the popularity of Simon Hanson's timber renovation in Bronte, winner of the people's choice award in the state's Royal Australian Institute of Architects last year. The house, shown on this week's cover, bears the unmistakable beach house signature: an outdoor shower.

In eight years of practice, the Newcastle-based firm of Bourne & Blue has completed 21 new houses within 500 metres of the beach. Another 15 are in progress. Shane Blue and his partner Rachael Bourne have learned that work in the coastal strip will be scrutinised by all who believe they have a stake in the coastal environment: in other words, everyone.

The firm has several projects in the beachside village of Seal Rocks, north of Newcastle. "In that village, [Sydney architect] Caroline Pidcock did a house – and it's a polite house and it doesn't stand out. But some other people have done houses and the locals have given them nasty names like the pizza hut or the packing crate or the Mosman monster," Blue says.

These labels, he suggests, are born of a universal sense of ownership. "There's a real sense that no one wants to bugger up the coastline. I've heard a lot of comments from locals in areas where we've been working and they'll point at the local monstrosity and say, 'Gee, isn't that hideous?' And I know those people wouldn't be pointing at that [same house] in the middle of a suburb," he says.

Therein lies the extra layer of responsibility for architects. As they supply living spaces to their paying clients, they also add to a landscape that is one of the defining elements of Australian life.

Peter Lewis, of Porter's Paints, a company famous for popularising shades of primrose and hyacinth, says a beach house ought to have a muted public presence.

"The basic colours have got to complement

veranda clad with pieces of coloured perspex. The perspex has a functional role, supporting a sweeping span of timber, but it also contributes a sought-after sense of play.

The gleeful use of colour is evident inside the house, too, with dashes of apple green and vivid orange and plasticine purple, shades that hark back to a mid-century palette. The original floorboards have been bleached and refinished, a classic beach house treatment that speaks of driftwood and salty seashells while craftily masking scratches from sandy feet.

"I guess the most important thing is that there has to be a sense of escape," Bremner says of houses built along the coast. "It has to be different from where you would normally be."

Bremner identifies three distinct directions in contemporary coastal architecture. One tilts towards the provision of "serious, sophisticated,

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the grass or the sand – or the wet sand – or the rocks, whatever it sits in," he says. "When you're looking back in, you sort of want it to disappear into the sand dune or the hill or the green. It's got to look like a bit of foreshore rock or beach."

But abandon all restraint on the inside, Lewis counsels. "It's got to be practical, fun and functional. If it becomes too serious, you've lost the plot. You can be serious in Woollahra or Randwick, but you can't be serious on the coast."

On Culburra Beach on the South Coast, a '50s-era beach house brought back to the future with a renovation by Sydney architect Michael Bremner shows off just such a level of merriment and mischief. The house defies the aesthetic subtlety that Lewis recommends. Fondly labelled the beach towel house by its neighbours, its trademark feature is a first-floor

elegant buildings" that operate much like urban houses, expressing the good taste of their moneyed owners. The second is represented by "the project homes and the builder-designed homes ... and generally they've got no concept of where they are; they could be in the suburbs of Sydney, or wherever."

The third group, the one he identifies with, is those owners and architects who can trace their origins back to the 1950s beach house. "They're a bit more experimental, they're a bit more fun, they're a bit more low-key and, unfortunately, they're a bit rarer."

Architect Nick Murcutt also recognises the value of those quirky holiday houses. "These were not precious buildings," he says, "and that allowed home builders to get involved and play ... they were hobbies."

There is nothing precious about Murcutt's

timber camp beach house near Port Stephens. A long gangplank about a metre off the ground leads to two pavilions – one for sleeping, the other for living and dining. An outdoor shower, timber louvres backed by flyscreens and soft canvas shades that are erected when needed enhance an elegant, rough-hewn effect.

At Pearl Beach, on the Central Coast, there's something of the good, old-fashioned beach shack in a house designed by Graham Jahn.

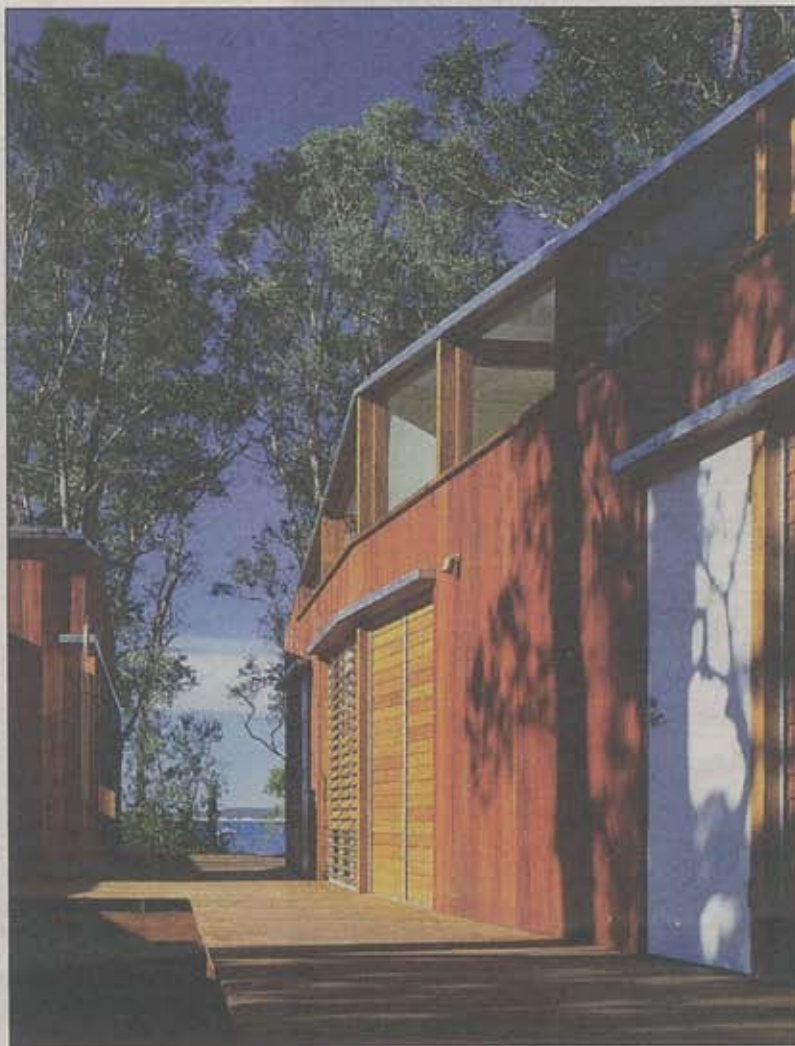
"It's interesting that it was the simple, functional, low-cost architecture of the modern movement which became the beach house: simply framed, panelled, mono-pitch buildings with small floor plans," he says.

"It's because the idea of the beach house fitted the idea of the modern house. The modern house was really about [being] free and easy, with no genteel or bourgeois symbolism."

Jahn says he and his clients believe a coastal house should look, feel and behave differently to a city house. He chides those who have failed in this aim, producing seaside residences indistinguishable from those in the suburbs or the city. "There's been no good reason to turn the character of the retreat, of the alternative existence, into the ordinary existence."

Jahn's Pearl Beach house also embodies a sublime piece of puzzle-solving, embracing the location while preserving a degree of privacy. The solution lies in hybrid, intermediary spaces – an indoor-outdoor dining room with walls composed of slats of white cedar at the front of the building, facing the coastal road and the beach beyond. Also at the front, in the style of many older Australian houses, is the kitchen.

"The owners tell me a lot of people come and talk to them," says Jahn. "There's something natural about them being in the kitchen window or being in that dining area and people just striking up a conversation with them."



Bremner says that kind of accessibility is essential. "It's not like a suburban house where you go in and close the door. It's an open sanctuary," he says of his coastal house ideal. "They've got open verandas and you just see people sitting there having a drink and you get to know them and wave at them and it's really nice."

Blue believes that people are much more willing to be experimental in the design of coastal weekenders than in their permanent residences. Which is just as well, given how the climactic conditions in the dune zone shift and change from hour to hour.

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– Graham Jahn

"Blueys Beach, for instance, faces south-east – and that's tough. It's a really harsh way to look. You need to create spaces that you can withdraw to and feel like you're out of the southerly."

Blue and Bourne follow an approach that treats the house like a boat with trimmings that can be used to suit the weather's moods. "So you might have blinds that drop down in the afternoon to protect yourself from the north-west," Blue says.

"You might have louvres or windows to catch a breeze that you know is going to come up at a particular time of day or a particular time of year. I think that's a much more satisfactory way to inhabit a block of land than closing things up and putting on an air-conditioner."

Bourne & Blue Architecture, 4929 1450; Jahn Associates, 9211 2191; Mackenzie Bremner 9319 2051; Nicholas Murcutt Architects, 8297 3590.