

BETWEEN THE TREES

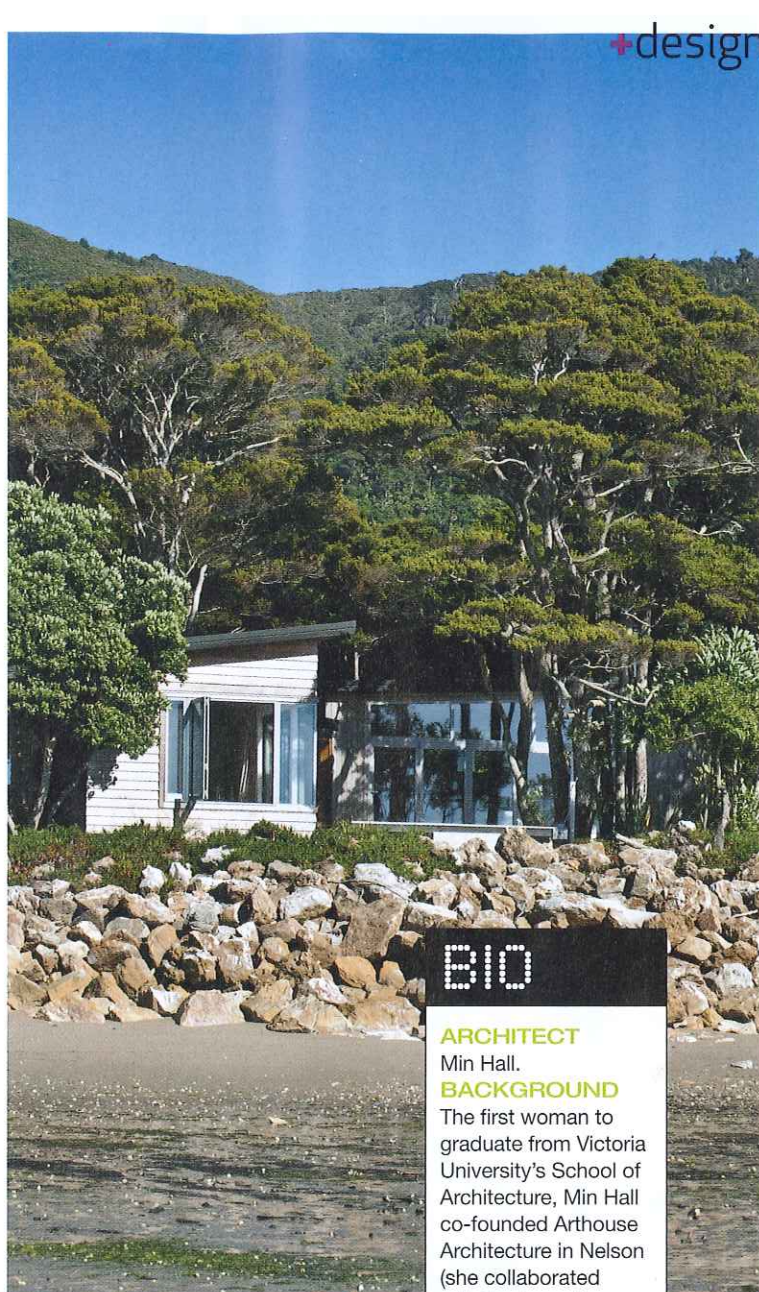
A new bach in Golden Bay steps lightly around the forest that surrounds it.



Arriving at Richard Carr and Alisa Emerson's Pakawau bach, you encounter an immediate and very tangible sign of their commitment to the special qualities of their site. There, in the middle of the path between parking bay and house stands a large kanuka, around which you must sidle to reach the steps. "It is all about the trees," remarks architect Min Hall of the house she designed for the couple as a retreat from their busy London lives.

Pakawau is a special spot, a sandspit west of Collingwood in Golden Bay that is home to a rare stand of coastal totara forest. According to Carr, it is one of only three sandspits with totara anywhere, and the site they built on was among the last at Pakawau set beside the sea but still covered in bush. Even if they hadn't wanted to, they were bound by their resource consent to preserve as many trees as possible – to "tread very lightly", as he puts it.

The house that Hall and her team at Nelson-based



BIO

ARCHITECT

Min Hall.

BACKGROUND

The first woman to graduate from Victoria University's School of Architecture, Min Hall co-founded Arthouse Architecture in Nelson (she collaborated with the team there on this project) and worked there for three decades. She now lives in Auckland, running her own architecture practice and teaching architecture at Unitec. She has also researched the performance and potential of alternative building methods such as earth and straw-bale houses.



Clockwise, from bottom left: The house fits neatly around the trees; the ocean view; discreet from the front.

Arthouse Architecture devised achieves exactly that – only four large trees were lost – and seems to do it effortlessly, but it was tougher than it looks. Initially, she says, the clients wanted a more conventionally organised house, but it just couldn't be done within the footprint. "We were struggling and I said, 'I have this other idea, please let me have another go.' The minute I threw my idea at them, they loved it."

Her idea was to break the house into modules – one for living and the kitchen, another for the master bedroom, and a third wing for guests – that are set above the forest floor, and connect everything with covered walkways. Once the preoccupation with a single building had been abandoned, preserving the trees instantly became an easier proposition. (Around 200 of the smaller trees and shrubs were removed to a nearby nursery then replanted, with a 90 percent survival rate). There were three obvious building sites, gaps in the forest coinciding with the original bach, a

driveway and a small clearing. It was those spaces that defined the various shapes and sizes of the modules.

For Hall, now based in Auckland, the plan immediately appealed to her long-standing desire to work on smaller houses. "It's not a huge house anyway – just 140 square metres – but by breaking it down we turned it into three small projects rather than one big one."

To emphasise that fact, the modules are all subtly differentiated. The guest wing, closest to the road, is clad in dark green Colorsteel, reflecting the little corrugated iron sheds you see beside Totara Ave. The living module is vertical cedar boards, echoing the trunks of the forest, while the master bedroom beyond is also clad in cedar, but here it runs horizontally.

This lessens the impact of the house from the street. "Designing in Totara Ave, you have to think about the whole community and how you affect everyone else," says Hall. Arthouse has designed three other houses on the road and Hall owns a property at nearby Onekaka.

kāgi

design



Above: The three modules create a welcoming sense of openness. Below: The simple interior.



Inside, the aesthetic is simple and spare – there are only two pictures in the entire house, says Carr, who adds that it couldn't be a greater contrast to his rambling early-Victorian home in London. Clever moves such as putting a hidden laundry beside the boardwalk and a walk-through wardrobe as a link from the master bedroom to the ensuite help keeps things uncluttered.

Nature is the star here, providing all the contrast and complexity. Heavy bi-fold doors open to the deck and the sea, so close that at high tide you could almost throw a line in. Beside the dining table, meanwhile, a box window frames the view of a little inside/outside cloister of bush created by

the sheltering angles of the three modules. Hall calls this the "tree museum" and likens the box window to a vitrine, or glass display case.

"It's about exaggerating the experience," she says. "Having those huge bi-fold doors in the living room exaggerates the feeling of looking out to sea, and the museum window exaggerates the experience of looking inwards; it focuses it down even further. You only see it when you're sitting at the table, being there."

For the Londoners, who plan to spend three months of the year enjoying it, their house in the trees is the perfect counterpoint to the freneticism of the UK. "It's an opportunity to live a different life – like having two contrasting existences in parallel," says Carr, who has been busy planting new trees and trying to engage his Totara Ave neighbours in an asparagus weed blitz. "Just this morning I've seen gannets fishing off here. I saw a flock of shags swimming above a shoal of fish. I saw a stingray with probably a five-foot span just 20 metres off the beach. All within the space of half an hour."

How can he go back to England? "With difficulty," he says. "With great difficulty."

STORY MATT PHILP

PHOTOGRAPHS PAUL MCCREDIE

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