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**This page** The Pakawau  
bach faces east, looking  
out over Golden Bay.

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**Right** In the beachside  
main bedroom a  
'Halford' bed by  
Simon James sits  
on *Eucalyptus saligna*  
floorboards.

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A new bach in Golden  
Bay steps carefully  
around the trees.

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TEXT / *Matt Philp*

PHOTOGRAPHY / *Paul McCredie*  
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# tread —ing lightly





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Determined to leave as many trees on the site untouched as possible, architect Min Hall designed the home as a series of modules winding through the bush.

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The idea was to break the house into modules set above the forest floor – one for the living area and kitchen, another for the main bedroom, and a third wing for guests – and connect everything with covered walkways.

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This entry off Totara Avenue marks the beginning of the journey from the street to the beach. The bach's three modules are accessed via covered walkways comprising Purple Heart timber decking and Colorsteel roofing. The baseboards are tinted with a dark stain, which makes the building appear to hover above the forest floor.

**Arriving at Richard Carr and Ailsa 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's 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 coastal totara forest. According to Richard, it is one of only three sandspits anywhere with totara, 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 Min and her team at Nelson-based 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 set above the forest floor – one for the living area and kitchen, another for the main bedroom, and a third wing for guests – 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 size of the modules.



**Below left** With a view to the "Tree Museum", a Simon James 'Hawk' table is accompanied by seating by Marc Zuckerman and a smaller 'Uma' bench by Chad Heays. On the windowsill are a trio of candles gifted by builder Frank Byrne.



**Below right** Richard sits on the deck beneath a large spreading pohutukawa. His and Ailsa's low-key lifestyle in Golden Bay provides a welcome respite from the pace in of their lives in London.



**Right** The couple paired living room furniture sourced by interior designed Karin Montgomery with a coffee table bought in India made from windows rescued from a Kerala palace. The sideboard, kitchen cabinetry and the built-in office in the right-hand corner of the room were designed by Caroline Marshall of Arthouse Architecture.



For Min, now based in Auckland, the plan immediately appealed to a long-standing desire to spend more time working 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 Avenue. The living module is vertical cedar boards, echoing the trunks of the forest, while the main bedroom beyond is clad in cedar that runs horizontally. The total effect is to lessen 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 Min. Arthouse has designed three other houses on the street and Min owns a property at nearby Onekaka.

Inside, the aesthetic is simple and spare – there are only two pictures in the entire house, says Richard, 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 walkthrough wardrobe as a link from the master bedroom to the ensuite help keep things uncluttered.

Nature is the star here, providing all the contrast and complexity. Heavy bifold doors open to the deck

and the sea, so close that at high tide you could almost throw in a line. Meanwhile, beside the dining table, a box window frames a view through to a little inside/outside cloister of bush created by the sheltering angles of the three modules. Min calls this the "Tree Museum" and likens the box window to a vitrine, or glassed display case.

"It's about exaggerating the experience," she says. "Having those huge bifold 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, the 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 Richard, who has been busy planting new trees and is trying to engage his Totara Avenue neighbours in a blitz on asparagus weed. "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 they go back to England? "With difficulty," he says. "With great difficulty." 📍



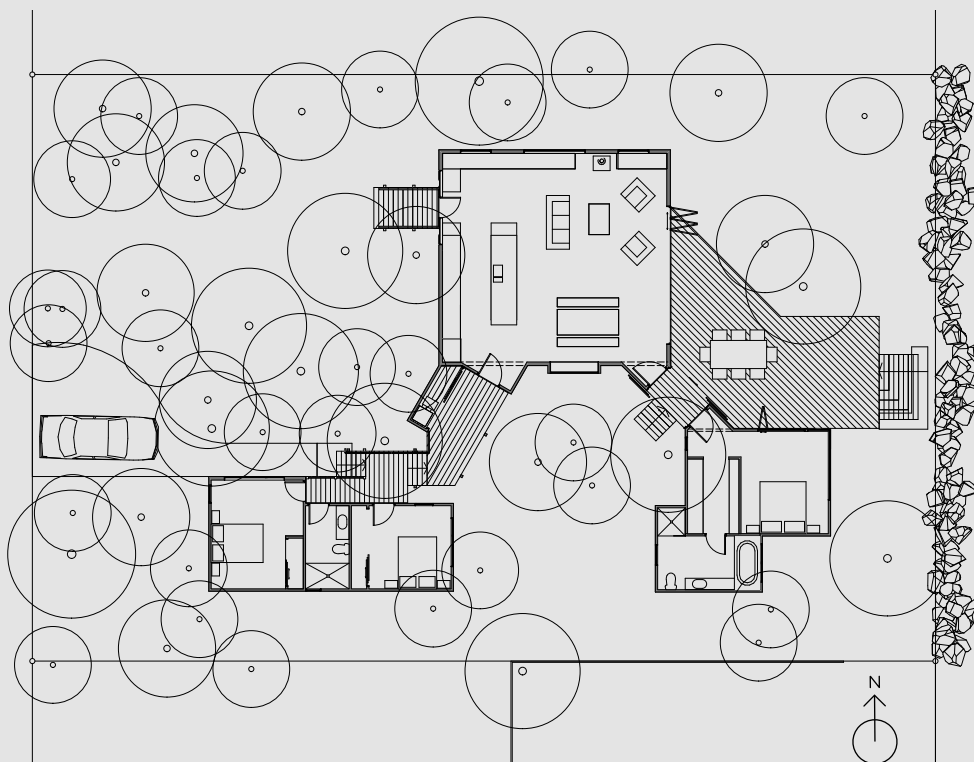
**Right** Tucked away beside the boardwalk, the laundry hides behind sliding cedar doors that conceal appliances, a tub and storage units.

**Far right** A view of the house in the trees from the shore at low tide.

**Centre** 'Hawk' bar stools by Simon James provide seating beside the kitchen island, which has a Caesarstone top and Victorian ash base.



**Below** Min Hall, and (right) a site plan detailing where the bach's various modules sit in relation to the trees.



## DESIGN NOTEBOOK

*Q&A with Min Hall*

The Auckland-based architect describes the creation of this home beneath the boughs.

**What part did the trees play in generating the design of this home?**

They were the major design generator for the project. In order to retain as many trees as possible we looked for gaps between them that were large enough to take a room or rooms. Richard and Ailsa wanted one large living space, three bedrooms and bathrooms, so we matched

combinations of these spaces with the three gaps. It all fell into place pretty quickly and we just massaged the original concept design rather than making fundamental changes to it. So the trees dictated the way the house was planned and consequently how daily life takes place within it. To be here means living in a forest – you have to go out into the trees and come back in again to get from bedroom to living room. This is quite a different experience to one you might have if more trees had been removed to accommodate the house as a single block. If that was the case then your only journeys outside might be arriving and leaving.

**Were there times when you wished you'd tried a different approach?**

Never! In saying that we had already tried to design the house as a single

block but it was impossible to do so without removing quite a number of trees. As soon as Richard and Ailsa agreed to us taking a fresh look with the idea of keeping the trees, the brief became flexible and gave us the freedom to look at a different way to inhabit the site.

**What do you think is the most successful element of the home?**

I'm particularly pleased with the entry off Totara Avenue, which is the beginning of the journey from roadside to beach. It's not a grand entry – you have to sidle round a tree to get to the steps – and it's quite in keeping with Totara Avenue, which has a fairly loose hierarchy of public and private zones. Fences are rare. I'm also very pleased with the lightness of the interior spaces, which are a welcome relief from the darkness of the forest.