

Accessible only by boat, the bach was designed with simplicity of both building and occupation in mind. Here, the children enjoy the view of Cherry Bay from the deck.

Bach Physics

Blair and Amanda Gibbs' family bach by Jeremy Smith in the Marlborough Sounds allows maximum decompression in minimum

time. Text Matt Philp Photography Paul McCredie

The “drama of arrival” is a phrase you’re more likely to hear in reference to grand manors with gated entrances than a board-and-batten New Zealand bach. But it perfectly captures the experience of drawing up to the holiday home of Amanda and Blair Gibbs at Cherry Bay on Queen Charlotte Sound. That’s not due to any flashy architectural gestures – on the contrary, great care went into making the house recede into its bush backdrop – but rather the fact that you reach it by boat, not so much paying a visit as making landfall.

It was the location in the outer Sounds, so off-putting to some potential buyers, that caught the attention of the Blenheim-based couple in 2006 when they went hunting for somewhere to build a bach for themselves and their young children, Henry (11), Max (9) and Amy (7). Keen fishers and divers, the thought of being within a short boat blast of Cook Strait immediately appealed. And when they saw the property, with its views out to Blumine Island, 14 hectares of native bush and – a rare treasure in the

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Marlborough Sounds – a flat building site, they knew they’d found a location that could sustain their vision of a bach that gets passed down through generations.

Finding the person to design it was even easier. Jeremy Smith, of Nelson’s Irving Smith Jack Architects, was an old friend and, says Blair, “obviously a very good architect”. The clincher was that Jeremy, like Amanda, grew up spending holidays at a family bach in the Sounds and knew all its vagaries of weather and climate.

Given the boat-only access, whatever was constructed had to be what Jeremy calls a “carpenter’s house”, easy to build using a limited palette of materials, easier still to maintain. Cedar board-and-batten was chosen because of the way it holds shadows, and together with the layered nature of the building’s faces, it helps the house to recede into the landscape. It’s also, Jeremy says, “old-school and easy”.

Briefed to design an open house with easy flow to the sea in front and bush behind, Jeremy also knew that, contrary to reputation, the Marlborough Sounds can get gusty and wet. Hence the house is raised a metre, and the covered decking that connects the living and sleeping spaces continues around the back of the house to form a courtyard, where the family can enjoy the late-afternoon sun sheltered from the sea breeze.

The potential for cabin fever during a long, wet week also explains the oversized living space, with its window seats and nooks. The Gibbs regularly have friends to stay, and the bach caters for those moments during any communal holiday when you just need a space for retreat. “You might have three families hanging out

FAR LEFT The bach’s board-and-batten cladding was selected not only for the ease of getting it to the site by boat, but for its recessive qualities that help the building blend into the bush. **LEFT** Blair and Amanda with the children on the deck behind the living area. **ABOVE** A covered walkway separates the living and sleeping areas of the building. The deck is sheltered from afternoon sea breezes, but still has views to the water through the living spaces.

The kids and friends take time out from the beach. Much of the furniture in the bach is from Dunedin's Port Chalmers Design Store, including the kitset lampshade by David Trubridge. The tiki clock is by Josh King and the dining table was originally owned by Amanda's grandparents.



here,” Jeremy says, “so there have to be enough corners and spaces so everyone can find a little place out of the action.”

But you only have to see the kayaks pulled up on the beach and the kina shell mobiles hanging on the deck to realise that in this particular holiday spot any rest is only a brief interlude between bouts of activity. And with its easy external circulation and decking from which you can dangle your feet or jump to the clearing below, the bach encourages movement in all directions.

Jeremy says raising the floor level a metre off the ground has encouraged rather than hindered fluidity. “You get a lot of oversized steps that become seats or jump-off points, and that again helps its looseness.”

For Amanda, one of the most pleasing aspects is the freedom the bach gives the children to play outside independently. Unlike her own childhood holidays, when her parents would have to come down from their hillside home to supervise any water fun, at Cherry Bay she and Blair can watch from almost anywhere on the property as

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the kids explore the rocks or splash about in the dinghy. Even from the back courtyard, floor-to-ceiling sliders on either side of the living space open up a view to the water. Additionally, this and other expertly deployed view shafts also help to link the sea to the bush at the back.

In other words, this is one holiday home that abides by the first law of bach physics, allowing its users to achieve maximum decompression. Blair, whose job as General Manager of Spy Valley wines means he travels often, jokes that it takes him “at least three minutes” to unwind when he finally noses the boat back into Cherry Bay.

Simple detailing helps. There is the cheerful red rubber flooring in the kitchen and bathrooms; the ply wall panelling; the pegs at the entranceway for wet towels and parkas; the butcher-style basins and steel splashbacks – everything is functional rather than fussy, as Jeremy explains. “It was never about particular furniture or arrangement,” he says, “but creating a vessel to collect family memories and to foster activity and fun.”

On that count, Amanda hopes that the freedom the children enjoy now will keep them coming back when they reach the age of Saturday night parties. “We want to make this a place where they continue to come and spend time with us.”

How could they not? With the Sounds sparkling and birdsong coming from the bush, this is a place you have to tear yourself away from. But now the boat back to Picton is bearing down upon the bay.

“Let me show you to the front door,” says Blair, opening a slider at the kitchen’s edge and leaping to the grass below. Seems there can be drama in departure, too. •

FAR LEFT Architect Jeremy Smith also designed the kitchen’s ply cabinetry. LEFT The bunkroom can be closed off behind sliding doors. ABOVE Having fun indoors as well as out. The green painting was a gift from a former guest at the bach, Tom Sladden. The cushions are all sourced from Dunedin’s Port Chalmers Design Store. The bean bags are from Coast.



Jeremy Smith

IRVING SMITH JACK ARCHITECTS

A holiday home built to foster good times “whether full to capacity and sheltering for a second day from a storm, or just you and a never-ending good book”.

HOME New Zealand:
How do you differentiate a holiday house from one that is occupied full-time?

Jeremy Smith: A holiday home allows you to move, think and converse differently to life at home, so it needs to facilitate a different set of activities. You need good communal areas but also quiet places for withdrawal.

This site is only accessible by boat – how did that affect your design? The wharf is your front door, so we set viewing angles to welcome arrival from the water. These remote buildings need to be robust and easy to maintain.

Holidays aren't as fun if you need to make a special trip to get a fancy lightbulb.

Your own family has been holidaying in the Marlborough Sounds for generations. What makes the area special, and did your knowledge of it make the design process any easier? The Sounds are a huge waterway, remote, unpredictable in weather and simply beautiful. I can remember many family holidays where it has rained and blown for a week, yet activity continues. So we like to set up a range of spaces and environments that foster good times.



ABOVE The house features simple detailing such as cheerful red rubber flooring throughout the kitchen and bathrooms. **BELOW** The original model and sketches for the Gibbs' bach.

