

# HEAVY DUTY

**Asked to design a hefty private lodge in Northland, architect Pip Cheshire wrestles with the question of what is right for such a one-of-a-kind site. Text Pip Cheshire  
Photography Patrick Reynolds**

**The lodge is located at Mountain Landing, a private development on a former farm at the northern end of the Bay of Islands.**





I have been coming to Mountain Landing for about a decade, driving through the bamboo-sheltered fruit fields out from Kerikeri, north-east towards the coast, then turning south along the shingle road toward this northernmost enclosure of the Bay of Islands. In those early days the farm was undeveloped runoff grazing, broken fences, broken streams, and rough-formed farm tracks through land with a big history of early Maori settlement, and of the earliest European settlement.

I have been part of the land's repair: the formation of wetlands, the enormous planting program, the location of infrastructure, the identification of building sites, the formulation of building guidelines, the composing of planning consents and the making of buildings on this special ground. Of these, this lodge is only the third to be constructed.

The chance to design for people new to the country who had instinctively chosen one of the farm's best sites was a great though somewhat daunting opportunity. The brief was big: a large occupation for distant owners who arrive en masse with friends and extended family. The valley is small; an intimate wetland that could easily be overwhelmed. In land of this nature, how do you make a big house?

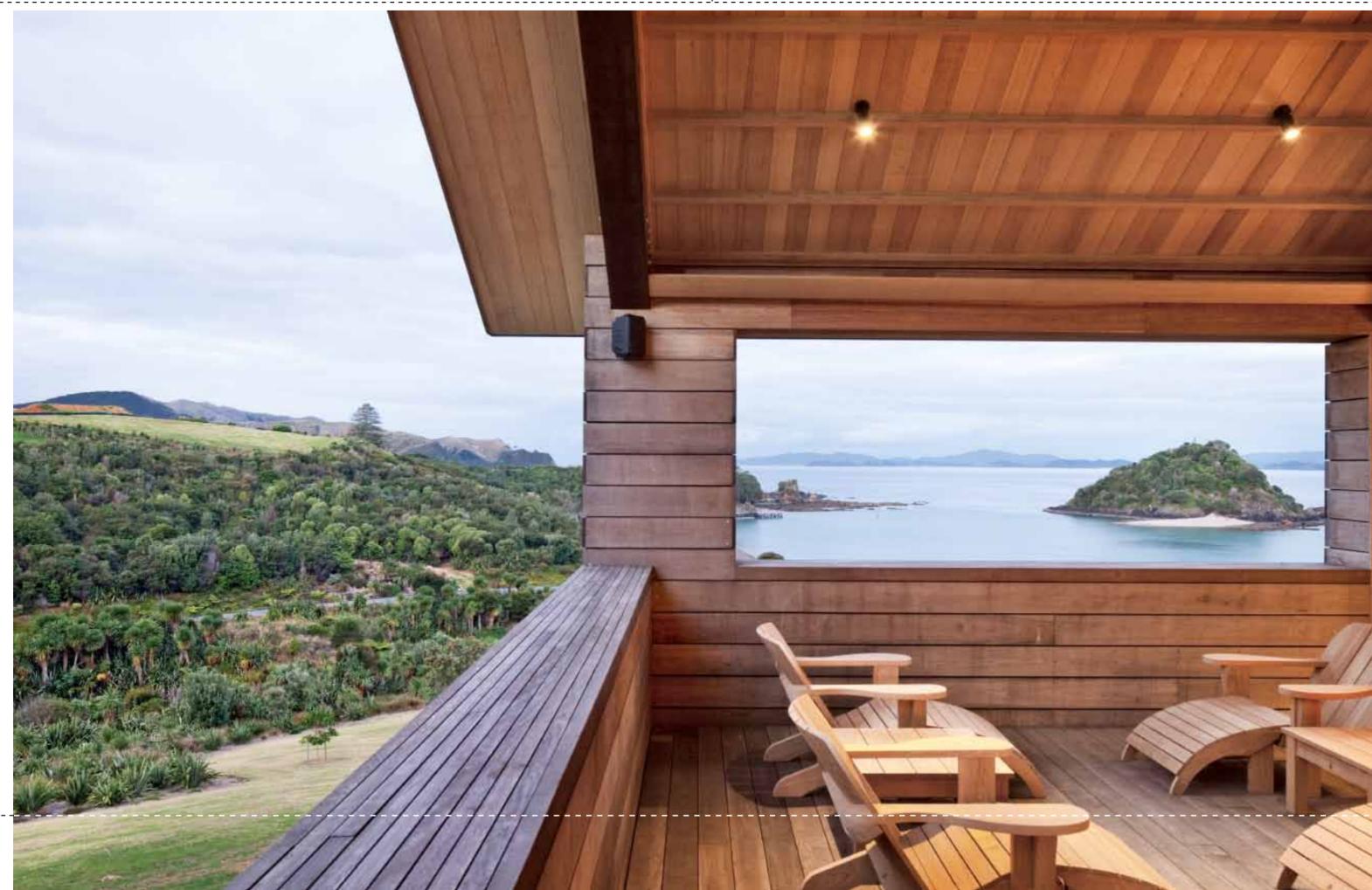
The farm's predominant landscape of scattered pohutukawa with open grassland, rolling right up to the building with only the slightest of household

planting, would place the building in the wider valley structure rather than its immediate lot boundaries. A simple contained form, somewhat ambiguous as to scale and partially buried at the lower level, would diminish the apparent bulk. Materials would be installed in the raw, not requiring painting, and be left to weather back to the silvery-greys of the trunks of the coastal trees around them. These strategies, I hoped, would soften the building when seen from afar.

I was bothered, too, by the enormous and insistent view to the south-east. It is hard to imagine crafting a better outlook: sandy beach and gnarled trees in the foreground, sheltered water and pleasant little bush-clad islands in the midground, and a far view across the bay to layered ridges and a glimpse of open ocean to the east. Yet there is another prospect just as enticing inland, to a soft green valley with ponds and planting, giving onto ridgelines stacked up in the afternoon haze. Skewing the house to the slope, at an angle to the beach, filled the strip of windows that open from the main living area with this big, watery view. The sea is thus a sort of given within the daily communal activities of the house's inhabitants, while the smaller spaces and rooms are turned back toward the more intimate pastoral views.

I wanted too to make a building with 'tooth', to dig in with mass and excavation, to make solidity and a strength of structure define the house's character. This is, after all, a land of hand-dug pits, trenches,

**ABOVE** The team from Cheshire Architects made a field trip to the house for our shoot. **From left, Sean McLean, project architect Stephen Rendell and his son Harvey. ABOVE RIGHT** A detail of the home's cedar exterior. **ABOVE FAR RIGHT** Cheshire Architects' Ian Scott in the library. **RIGHT** The view of the bay from the terrace.

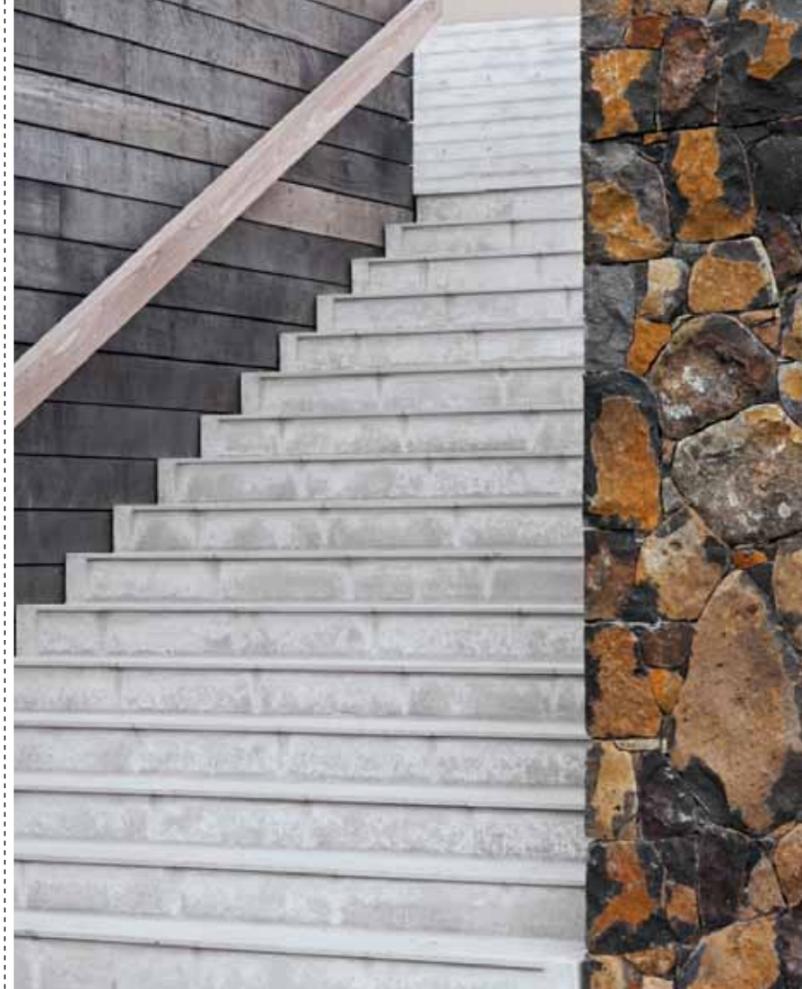


**The seaward form enfolds a singular volume with the dark and textural richness of timber, concrete and fine joinery.**



The home's main living spaces are contained in a large gabled volume divided by a concrete fireplace and chimney. The interior decoration is by Beverly Hills-based James Radin. The red blanket on the chair is from Auckland's Cavit & Co. RIGHT Dajiang Tai from Cheshire Architects helps with the lunch preparations.





ramparts and terraces, not of touching the earth lightly. Thus the skewing across the slope generates imposing retaining walls, terraces and lookouts, while the massive, roughly cast concrete chimneys are like anchors to the land and the silvery wood cladding seems a tightly drawn cloak giving little away.

The building is formed of two rectangular gable-roofed boxes slipped past one another in plan, the landward one split open in the middle to form a courtyard carved from the mass of the house and nestled against the fall of the hillside. Here we are able to sit sheltered from sea breezes, sun coming down across the paddocks to the northwest, sheep a few metres upslope, and yet still be in close contact with beach, boats, islands and Cape Brett beyond through the living, kitchen and dining room glazing.

The house balances the experience of being part of the large Bay of Islands landscape and the creation of composed opportunities for quiet relaxation. Much of this is played out along the central passageway, a path that embodies many of the lodge's motifs: the sea at one end, grazing sheep at the other, a path at times inside and at times out, a compression of height and width, but opening on alternate sides to high, enclosed living spaces.

Where this central passage is compressed, the rooms under the pitched roofs are anything but. The seaward form enfolds a singular timber-lined volume. Insertions of concrete fireplace, cooking bench and

pantry box mediate cooking, dining and sitting zones. The linear arrangement of side windows and the view out over the bay offer an intimate and captivating engagement with the outdoors. This is balanced by the height of the room and the dark and textural richness of timber, concrete and fine joinery detail above; subdued, static pools in a dynamic composition.

The lower floor enfolds a much more enclosed sequence of spaces, arrived at via a deeply buried passageway of boxed concrete giving access to a lower floor living room, mud room, laundry, bathroom and so on. Light levels are low, the walls are mass concrete and the weight of the floor above seems to bear down and create a quiet apartment, far from the more active spaces above.

Much of the quality of space on both levels is generated from a balance of big, simple forms made richer and more subtle through the arrangement of refined and carefully constructed detail against robust materials used in their raw state. Thus the highly finished ash sarking and rafters of the main living volumes are set in direct contact with the fireplace's tough, boxed concrete and massive bandsawn roof trusses. This balancing of the 'raw and the cooked', fine detail against tough materials, and the energising of simple, familiar forms by the careful consideration of siting and sightlines proposes an answer to the question as to how one might make a building to match this extraordinary landscape. •

**ABOVE FAR LEFT** The home's main entry.  
**ABOVE LEFT** Cedar, stone and concrete meet on the external stairs leading up to the courtyard.  
**LEFT** The Cheshire Architects team has lunch in the courtyard.  
**ABOVE** The lodge's central passageway passes inside and out with carefully framed views at both ends.



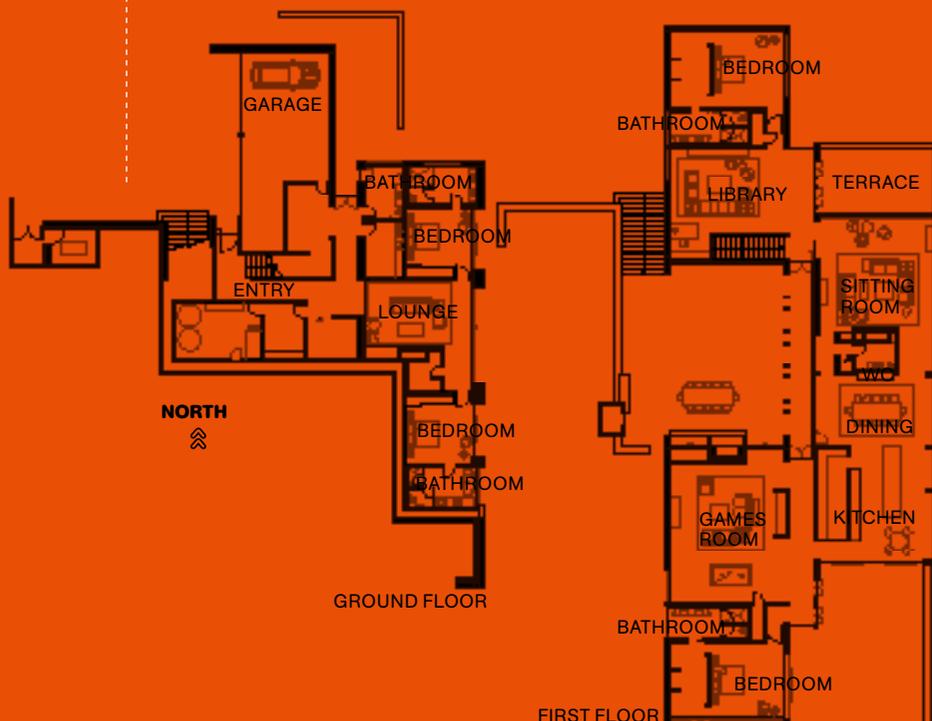
# Pip Cheshire

**CHESHIRE ARCHITECTS**

**Pip Cheshire's design for this Northland getaway blends the grandeur of a big home with warm and intimate interior spaces.**

**HOME** New Zealand: Are sites this beautiful intimidating to work on?  
**Pip Cheshire:** Yes, always. The nervousness stems from two aspects: that I might stuff up a great opportunity and a nice paddock and, more importantly, that the site is so loaded – high landscape and heritage values – that the building couldn't blink. It needed to be strong without dominating. Many architects like buildings to "touch the earth lightly", yet here you opted for a different strategy. Why? I think that line from Glenn Murcutt of touching the

earth lightly is great and certainly fits Australia's history and landscape, but we are a land of major earthworks, of trenches, palisades and ramparts. I have some lighter projects but I would usually dig in if there was some sort of slope. How do you create intimate spaces in a large house? Intimacy arises from tuning the design of spaces: slowing down movement through and around the space; not much acoustic reverberation; pools of light. The making of a great, calm and intimate space is an endangered black art.



**TOP** The downstairs bathroom.  
**MIDDLE** A view of the main living area.  
**ABOVE** The terrace. **BELOW** A view of the kitchen and dining area.

