

BETWEEN SEA AND SKY

The 2011 Home of the Year, designed by Michael O'Sullivan for former Waitakere City mayor Bob Harvey and his wife Barbara, makes a soulful connection with the breathtaking landscape of Kare Kare beach. Text Jeremy Hansen
Photography Patrick Reynolds

Bob and Barbara Harvey asked that their retreat at Kare Kare "in no outward way be ostentatious", so architect Michael O'Sullivan designed it to nestle into the bush. In this photo, the home's long living room windows reflect the sky at dusk.

From down on the black sands of Kare Kare beach at dusk, the Home of the Year 2011 is invisible but for a slot of sky reflected in the long horizontal windows of its living room. So far, so predictable: there is nothing wrong with architecture designed to blend into its landscape, but there is nothing new about this idea either. What elevates this small home from standard-issue deference to a one-of-a-kind achievement is what lies behind its dark-skinned camouflage: a magical series of interior spaces coiled around an inviting courtyard, an arrangement as singular and muscular as the arresting vista outside. It is a house designed not for looking at – in fact, it is so well-concealed in the bush that it is almost impossible to get a decent fix on it – but for looking from, a place that deftly executes a deep bow to the landscape while simultaneously daring to presume it can make a great view look even better. Somehow, the marvel that is this West Coast beach becomes even more marvellous when viewed from within.

Views are the blessing and the curse of many New Zealand homes. Our remarkable landscapes command attention, but many of our homes cower mute and inexpressive in response. In different hands the home on these pages, by Michael O'Sullivan of Auckland's Bull O'Sullivan Architects, could have cowered in just this manner. Its owners, former Waitakere City mayor Bob Harvey and his wife Barbara, asked Michael for "a house that must not in any outward way be ostentatious". They went on to demonstrate the depth of their democratic instincts by not only consulting neighbours on the design, but asking Michael to change aspects of the house that elicited negative remarks (Michael's original design featured a cantilever that allowed the living room to project a little off the edge of the hill; the cantilever was removed and the living area made smaller after a neighbour objected). A lesser man might have walked away from such a consultative muddle or seen his original vision for the home slip from his grasp. But as well as possessing a determined streak, Michael knew that if he could successfully navigate the process, Bob and Barbara's strong, warm personalities and deep attachment to Kare Kare offered him the opportunity to create a soulful, highly individual piece of architecture.



The south-facing site means winter sunlight is limited, so Michael pushed the house away from the shadow of the hill and created a sunny courtyard closely connected to the living spaces.



OPPOSITE PAGE A view through the living space to the kitchen. The cedar weatherboard ceiling gives way to glass roof panels near the windows. Michael made the dining table from leftover steel and kauri; the chairs are by Mario Bellini from Matisse. **TOP LEFT** Bob Harvey on the home's 'jetty', made from reclaimed wharf piles. **ABOVE LEFT** Stairs from the courtyard lead to the main bedroom. **ABOVE** Kare Kare falls, a short walk from the house. **LEFT** The view from the living area, looking south towards the beach. The platform bench is by George Nelson for Herman Miller. **BELOW** The house is tucked into the ridgeline at right in this photo.

Besides, Michael had actively sought the job: he first happened to meet the couple on the site when he was going for a run at Kare Kare with a rugby club mate who knew Bob and Barbara and had dropped by the property to say hello. At that stage Bob and Barbara had only recently purchased the place, which was then occupied by a small, damp 1940s brick-and-timber home (the couple and their five kids had previously spent decades of weekends and holidays in a bach further up the valley). Michael marvelled at the site and later wrote the couple a letter offering his services. "I told them that if they were interested in building a warm, nurturing home I would be honoured to do something for them," he remembers. Two years later, despite knowing a host of other architects desperate to design something for them on a site like this, Barbara called and asked if they could talk to Michael about what they might build on the property. Why him? "We knew he got us, and he got the site," Bob says simply.





couple, who still own their family home in west Auckland, told Michael they wanted a retreat, a place to spend their retirement immersed in the landscape they love. Michael has been a member of the Kare Kare Surf Lifesaving Club for 20 years, is currently chairman of the council-controlled organisation Waterfront Auckland; Barbara, a former model, is now a celebrant. "[We wanted it to] be a private space that has been a very public life," Bob says, "a place to sit and read and write and think. And for the chance for us to have time we have with our children."

Michael knew what they wanted the house to feel like, but the old look was a completely different matter. To help Michael, Michael created three very different models that he showed simultaneously. The first, a rather conventional design, was dismissed by Barbara as "looking too much like a larger, flashier proposal got binned because it looked like a wanker mayor in Auckland would own"; the second, which Michael always preferred, was admired for its intimacy and given the go-ahead. The governing principle, Michael says, is that the house "is the residue of a found sand dunes".

A great challenge of the design was getting light in: the courtyard towards the south, while the hill to the north meant the site got no sun at all in the coldest months of the year. Michael sited the courtyard of the new home to roughly follow the footprint of the original dwelling, allowing the living area to fall away from the shadow of the hill towards the north. He designed the ceiling to rake steeply towards the north to get the most sun as far inside as possible and make the courtyard feel like an integral part of the house, a gesture that



TOP LEFT The view along the south wall of the house towards the beach. **ABOVE** Looking down over the marble kitchen island towards the floor, which Bob and Barbara wanted to resemble Kare Kare beach's black sand. To achieve this, Michael wheeled barrowloads of sand up from the beach and spread thin layers of it across the concrete floor, bonding each layer with an acrylic polymer.

ABOVE The window seat looks towards the beach. **ABOVE RIGHT** Black mosaic tiles on the stairs. **BELOW LEFT** The nook for a desk in Bob and Barbara's bedroom also holds a historical photograph of the West Coast. **BELOW CENTRE** The carving was presented to Bob by Te Kawerau a Maki, the tangata whenua of Waitakere. **BELOW RIGHT** Bob and Barbara commissioned Rewi Spraggon to create this wall carving.



forces the perspective of the view to the beach into a tight horizontal slot. The ceiling's cedar weatherboards are the dominant feature of the living space, but they avoid any sense of oppressiveness by appearing to fragment in places, with the boards giving way to double-glazed glass roof panels over the triangular daybed and the long, generous windowsill designed for sitting and gazing at the beach. A cosy secondary living room opens onto the courtyard and can function as a spare bedroom, while Bob and Barbara's bunker-like bedroom offers shelter in a southerly storm.

Some of these features will seem familiar to the close observer. Around the time he was designing Bob and Barbara's house, Michael was building his own family home in Mangere Bridge, a finalist in our Home of the Year award in 2009 (you can see shots of it on our blog, homenewzealand.blogspot.com), and a kind of laboratory for the work he would later do on Bob and Barbara's house. "As I was building Mangere, I was really just trying things for their place," Michael says. Bob and Barbara would come to observe Michael's experiments with what the architect calls "the intimacy of the spaces" (at 129 square metres, Bob and Barbara's two-bedroom house is just 12 square metres larger than Michael's own compact home), as well as elements such as the weatherboard ceiling and the black bituminous roofing membrane that clads the rear walls of Michael's house and



the exterior of Bob and Barbara's. Not that every experiment was resolved by the time Bob and Barbara's house was designed: Michael responded to their desire for a floor that looked like Kare Kare beach's black sand by wheeling barrowloads of it up from the beach and bonding thin layers to the concrete floor with an acrylic polymer.

Flashes of this DIY spirit enliven other parts of the house, creating loose moments in an otherwise tightly organised structure. Reclaimed piles from the old Cornwallis Wharf that Bob wanted incorporated in the building form a jetty that extends the pathway off the eastern side of the home into a makeshift viewing platform; the slot blade light that hangs over the black marble kitchen island was made by Michael for Bob and Barbara for their 40th anniversary.

When the house was completed, Bob and Barbara asked their friend Rewi Spraggon to create a two-panel wall carving representing the Harvey whanau. Elsewhere, they have hung historical photographs of their West Coast environs, while a carving near the door is a taonga given to Bob in 1993 by Te Kawerau a Maki, the tangata whenua of Waitakere. "[The house] is a very strong combination of past, present and future," Bob says. And while he was happy to embrace this sort of richness, he also confesses to "despising comfort - I like basic things in life and I wanted a house that was strictly functional, which I suppose goes back to my Socialist roots. It's Spartan and stoic". All that depends, of course, on how you define luxury. Out here on the coast on a wet winter's day, the privilege of perching on that long windowsill and gazing out at the beach seems like all the luxury a person could ever need. •

ABOVE The secondary living room off the hall can double as a bedroom. Like the main living space, it opens onto the courtyard. The 'PK 22' chair is a 1955 classic by Poul Kjaerholm, while the 'Ellington' sofa is by Sam Haughton for IMO. **RIGHT** Bob and Barbara's room hovers over the carport. The wall cladding is bituminous roofing membrane.

