



LIVING

Anna Johnson  
and Richard Black

IN THE

LANDSCAPE

Extraordinary rural  
homes in Australia and  
New Zealand

Thames & Hudson





**Pirates Bay House**

Distance from primary residence: 101 km

Overall floor area: 102 sq m

Latitude: 38.967°S

Longitude: 144.777°E

Annual rainfall: 605 mm



Above: Timber clad and carefully detailed, the bathroom becomes a jewel-like box in which to experience the immediacy of the landscape and native tea-trees.

Opposite: Simply clad with timber and adopting elegant and simple geometric architectural form, this house is a gentle addition to its contextual surrounds.

Blairgowrie is a coastal suburb on the Mornington Peninsula, 87 kilometres south-east of Melbourne. Set among tea-tree woodland and sandy tracks, Blairgowrie has the feel of a village rather than a suburb. It's an intimate landscape devoid of a horizon line and characterised by tea-tree-lined dusty roads massed together and filtering the distant views. 'Typically, when people build here,' says Stephen O'Connor, director of the Melbourne-based O'Connor and Houle Architecture, 'they buy a block, bulldoze it and then flatten it.' But his practice did the complete opposite. Annick Houle fell in love with the tea-trees and their 'Leunig-like' thin stick trunks and tufts of foliage. And so, retaining as much of this existing vegetation as possible, O'Connor and Houle made a building that adjusted to the site's gentle gradient. Now weathered and silver, the house is almost invisible from the street. Its two timber rectangular forms are veiled beyond layers of tea-tree as the house recedes further into the woodland.

The house is comprised of two buildings connected by a deck forming an L-shaped block. One holds sleeping, bathing, living room and kitchen, with a studio and additional sleeping areas in the other. Together, they form a perimeter type arrangement. By pushing the building as close to the side boundary as possible, the middle of the site is left open – an arrangement that allows for a porous and considered relationship between dwelling and landscape. The most significant aspect of this arrangement therefore is not the building, but the exterior space framed as a consequence. Specifically not called a courtyard, O'Connor and Houle refer to it as 'an external space or room that is referenced by the building and becomes the focus for the house'. This weaving landscape and building together results 'in a more satisfying domestic environment'.





Left: Between the two volumes that comprise the house is a framed landscape with a simple deck extending into the native garden.

Above: A large, white-tiled island bench defines the kitchen and contrasts with the house's interior timber cladding and joinery.

The relationship begins from the street frontage. A track passes through a dense clump of tea-trees and arrives at a stepped timber platform that then wraps the perimeter of each building and marks the threshold between building and landscape. Underpinning this architecture is this curated sequence – a journey from the road, in and out of landscape and building, and ending in the constructed world of the interior.

The architectural language continues O'Connor and Houle's very careful detailing and elegant simplicity of materials, form and space, and is influenced by their interest in Japanese architecture. The houses of Shinohara and, more broadly, the work of Kengo Kuma are important. In particular, O'Connor and Houle enjoy the way these architects bring together traditional building systems and formal languages with contemporary explorations of abstraction and modernism. They are also very drawn to what they see as Shinohara's 'intense or hypersensitive perception of the dimension of things', the result of the compression and scarcity of space in Japan. As O'Connor observes, 'These houses were so modest in scale but had a sequential adjustment – a zooming in – everything was catered for, nothing was missing, and space was simply implied, borrowed or miniaturised.'



Above: The children's playroom has its own operable doors and allows for a mode of living that directly engages with the exterior and landscape.

Visiting Kuma's Nezu Museum and the Asakusa Cultural Centre in Tokyo, O'Connor and Houle noted Kuma's insistence on a language of fabrication that critically and thoughtfully worked from a highly constructed Japanese vernacular. As they observed, 'The outcome is not traditional or abstracted, but is simultaneously both.' And in Pirates Bay House the form and details oscillate between the local building references and abstraction. Humble beach dwellings – timber framed and simply clad – are brought into play with more geometric moments of spatial abstraction. Into this system openings then work to frame, edit, separate and, alternatively, join the building with its setting. The landscape is brought into the home in a diversity of ways.

Juhani Pallasmaa, Finnish architectural theorist, describes windows as 'being the fragile eyes of the house.' The outside is brought in, while the play of morning and afternoon light animates thresholds and space. In this way, openings are taken beyond the functional and alternatively anticipate seasonal change and the movement of light. Windows, doors and passageways structure relationships between inside and out, building and landscape, and through these, the passage of time,

the presence of a tree, or a slice of ground or sky, is intensified.

The house is a site of memory, of past events and experience, and this house speaks to O'Connor's childhood spent on the Mornington Peninsula and recollections of his family holiday house, carefree beach shacks and watching the construction of nearby boathouses. Learning from the very precise and carefully crafted Japanese timber construction and the more robust local examples, the design of this house – from construction through to carpentry – is treated almost as a joinery solution. Interior spaces are defined by the framed views of the outside but also the elegant and crafted timber surfaces and joinery. One edge of the living room is an exposed wall frame that doubles as a shelving system, while the ceiling and walls are lined with tallow wood and make opportunistic use of available timber pieces and their dimensions. There is an elemental clarity and order evident in the design of wall frame, rafters, hearth and material surfaces that again recalls Shinohara and projects of Kengo Kuma. This is architecture that reconciles local particularity with a lineage of architecture grounded in thousand-year-old Japanese construction systems and contemporary domestic Japanese spatial abstractions.



Above: The rear south-facing boundary wall of the living space features built-in shelving and display shelves that define the rhythm of this otherwise simple volume.

