

# Gimme shelter

TUCKED AWAY ON THE NORTH  
COAST OF TASMANIA, WHERE  
THE TAMAR MEETS THE BASS  
STRAIT, LAGOON BEACH HOUSE  
IS A COMFORTABLE, PRIVATE  
RETREAT DESIGNED WITH A  
SOCIAL SPIRIT IN MIND

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**THIS PAGE:** The ground-floor family room opens onto the protected courtyard, with a roof deck and upstairs dining room overlooking.

**OPPOSITE:** Light enters the house into the void above the stair.

Looking back from Lagoon Bay Beach in northern Tasmania, a passer-by can just make out a large timber box suspended in the boobyallas and tea trees, its reduced palette blending seamlessly with that of the twisting coastal trunks and branches.

Set where the Tamar River meets the Bass Strait, the sheltered beach offers reprieve from the Roaring Forties winds that recently sucked a steel door in the area from its frame. Nature and the elements are the main protagonists here and the owners of the ‘timber box’, Steve and Leonie Gordon, would have it no other way.

Their brief to Birrelli art + design + architecture was for a multifaceted structure, part sophisticated residence for retirees, part basic weekender for extended family, built around the basic tenets of Tasmanian beach shack life familiar to them for almost four decades. The structure had to be comfortable, low-maintenance, sustainable and designed around the life of the community and the environment.

The subsequent design has the modest upper level, with its long views to the estuaries and the Heads, as the Gordons’ core residence, and a lower level as secondary, self-contained accommodation for visitors. Water harvesting, photovoltaic panels, passive solar and other thermal benefits make the structure almost cost-neutral to run.

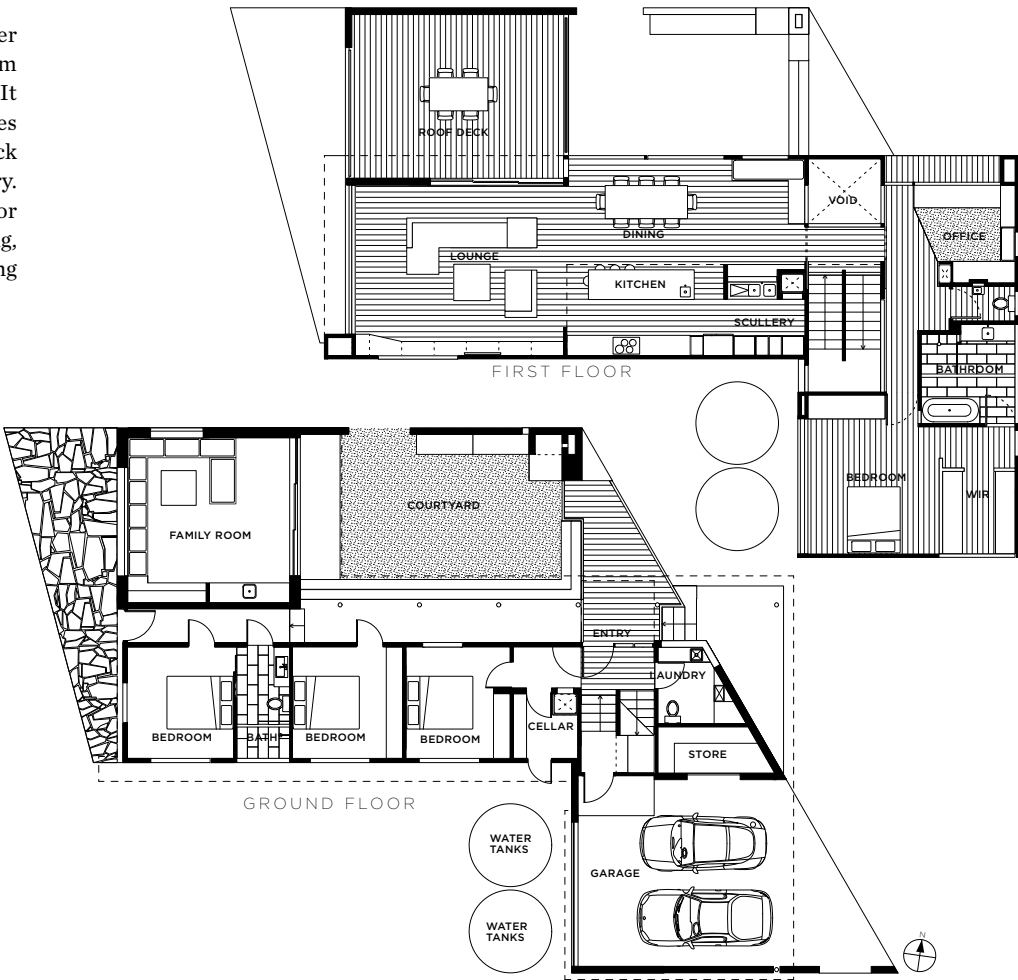
The house is situated within a cluster of shacks and humpies owned by long-term friends and family members of the Gordons. It is a wonderful, motley collection of structures nestled among native scrub, with one shack dating back to the early nineteenth century. There are also the essential dedicated outdoor areas for gathering around a fire in the evening, cleaning fish, hanging wetsuits and housing

driftwood collections – in strict adherence to the Tasmanian shack code.

It went without saying that the new home would have an outdoor gathering space of its own, albeit without the rough charm of fold-out chairs around an improvised barbecue. This has been logically placed in a north-facing protected area beside the sole shared path to the beach. A quirky white masonry chimney on the courtyard knuckle gives shape and a sense of containment to the space while inviting occupation, like a town square. Polished concrete steps surround the courtyard and absorb the day’s sun, offering warm seats into the night.

Client and architect were well matched with their common interest in landscape and social life. “Birrelli houses have two key sources of inspiration – nature and people,” says Jack Birell, Design Architect and Director. “We believe that if you respect land and inhabitant, your architecture can transcend both function and style.”

Shack vernacular is further referenced by the vertical board cladding. Knotty





kiln-dried Nordic redwood is partway through its transition from coffee to silver white; its daily hues determined by moisture and light. The underbelly of the honed box remains golden and contrasts strikingly with the weathered grey boards that wrap the upper level.

“The timber is like a second cladding and underneath is basically a Colorbond shed,” says Birell. “Aside from aesthetic value, the timber acts as a screen against driving rain and strong winds. And because of the gap between the two claddings, there is a large thermal benefit.”

So why Finnish timber? “The Tasmanian timber industry is so inefficient at managing its hardwoods,” says Birell, “It is cheaper to get high-grade hardwood delivered from northern Europe than it is to get local low-grade softwood.” The timber is sustainable, legally procured and certified under the Finnish Forestry Certification System and the Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification. Thus, the house is like a piece of joinery floating in the trees.

Sunlight and views are modulated with electronic louvres and deeply recessed windows; with some windows set at foot or ceiling-height to preserve neighbour privacy, to dramatic effect. These and other rectangular apertures allow through-lines to the ocean from most areas in the house – including from bath, bed and desk. So even the smallest spaces feel expansive and connected to the natural context.

The structure never imposes above the tree line, and placement of the lower spaces – the common bunk room, bedrooms and courtyard – has been dictated by the undulations of the landscape. “The building has about three levels which fit into the natural dune,” says Birell. “The common room is set down a little, the courtyard is on grade and the lower bedrooms are a few steps higher.”

From the easterly side, the timber box seems to float above a white masonry ‘plinth’ that is angled to create a sight line from courtyard to lagoon. A series of circular perforations preserve the look of continuous timber and the overall minimalist effect while referencing Jean Prouvé’s maxim ‘elegance with less means’. They also ensure privacy and ventilation in the private – bathing and sleeping – spaces.

A dialogue between landscape and structure is animated in every corner of Lagoon Beach House’s upper form in particular and the design’s contemporary interpretation of shack culture – characterised by community, proximity to nature, simplicity and connection to the distinct spirit of the site – is its most striking achievement. ■

**ABOVE:** The kitchen and dining area is lit by the afternoon sun. **RIGHT:** The upstairs living area offers amazing views across the water to the west. **FAR RIGHT:** The palette of the Finnish timber changes with the light and will shift as it ages.



**Architect statement:**

*Lagoon Beach House, while modernist in program, is a contemporary shack referencing the Tasmanian coastal vernacular. The informalities of beach house life are contained in a highly articulated form. An elegant timber box hovers over a white masonry plinth marking the functional separation between the private accommodation for the dwelling’s two main occupants, a retired couple, above the intergenerational and communal family spaces below.*

*The residence is pragmatically organised around northpoint, neighbours, privacy, contour, wind and views. The main living spaces, main bedroom and study are efficiently planned, all on the first floor, for the comfort of two. Set carefully at a height above ground, the main living level captures westerly views over the boobyallas, looking westward towards the estuary and Heads.*

*Formed around the idea of a ‘town square’ the house has an implied semi-*

*public realm, yet the ‘positive’ pressure of the courtyard-piazza is paradoxically the intimate garden for the home. The sculptural form of this private retreat pinwheels around the focal point of the courtyard, a ‘stage for living’ where the retired couple express their individuality, connecting in varied ways the social life of the ‘hamlet’ with lagoon, beach, and interior spaces.*

*Detail is central to reinforcing the concept of the building evoking land art: exterior walls dematerialise with stacked perforations changing the view of the world outside; the building’s white plinth is sliced by an oblique wall establishing an invisible line to the nearby lagoon from the courtyard entry; solid-void shapes jigsaw about the courtyard defining it in sunlight and shadow; and larger windows are deeply recessed. All elements are detailed to animate the building’s dialogue with the genius loci of the site.*

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