

FRIENDS BY THE SEA

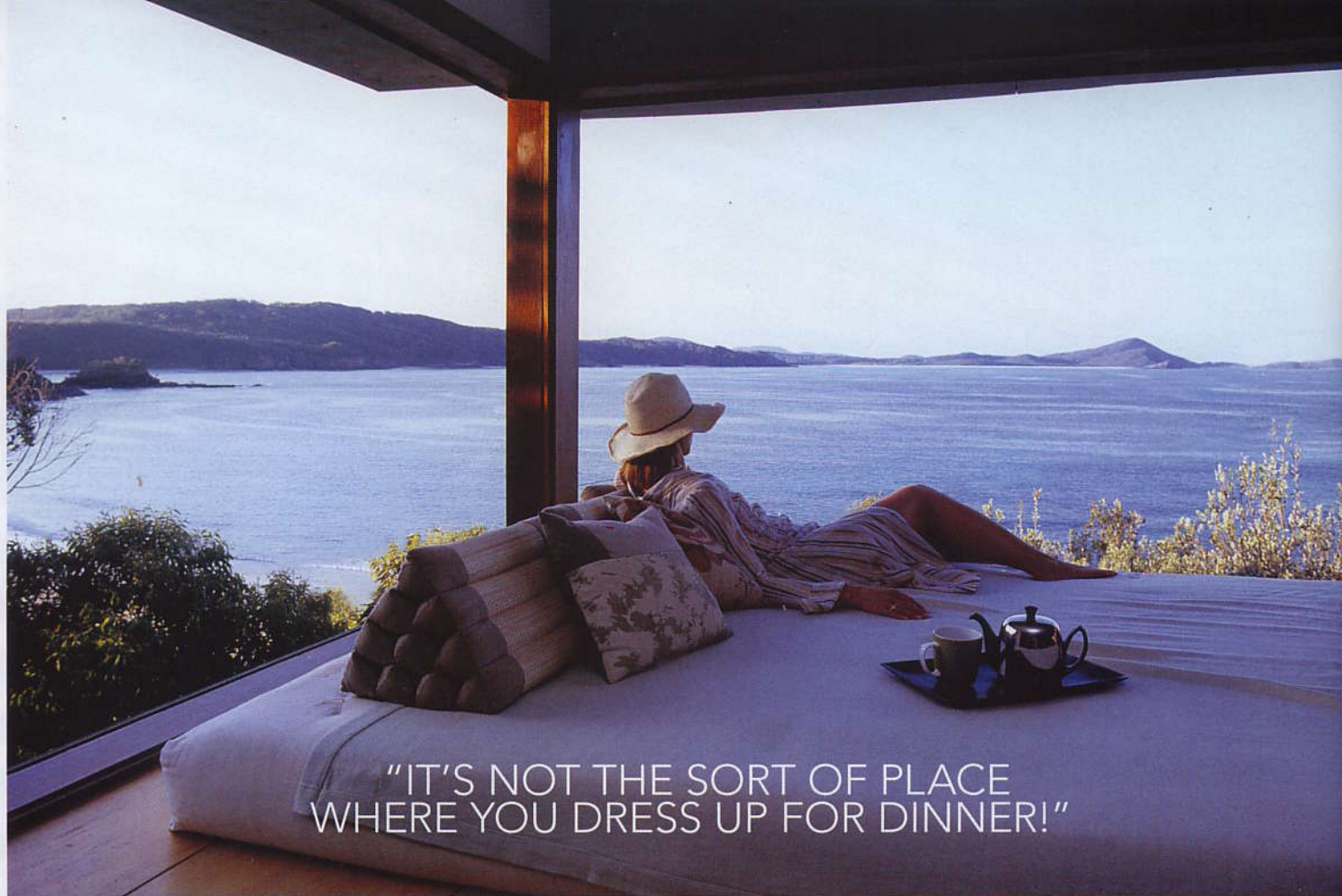
WHEN TWO SYDNEY GALLERY OWNERS TRANSFORMED A FISHING HUT, THEY MADE SURE IT COULD WELCOME A STEADY STREAM OF VISITORS.

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Surrounded by the 'shark fin' bronze sculptures of Belgian artist Koen Wastijn, a lone surfboard by the front entrance stands ready for the first sign of waves. **FACING PAGE** The concrete workbench in the kitchen area is one of the house's focal points.



"IT'S NOT THE SORT OF PLACE WHERE YOU DRESS UP FOR DINNER!"

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE Enjoying the superb view from the day bed; the open-plan kitchen area; roadside signs provided by a former lighthouse keeper. FACING PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT Another angle on the living room; sculptures and totem poles turn the back garden into a gallery; retracting windows open the living area.



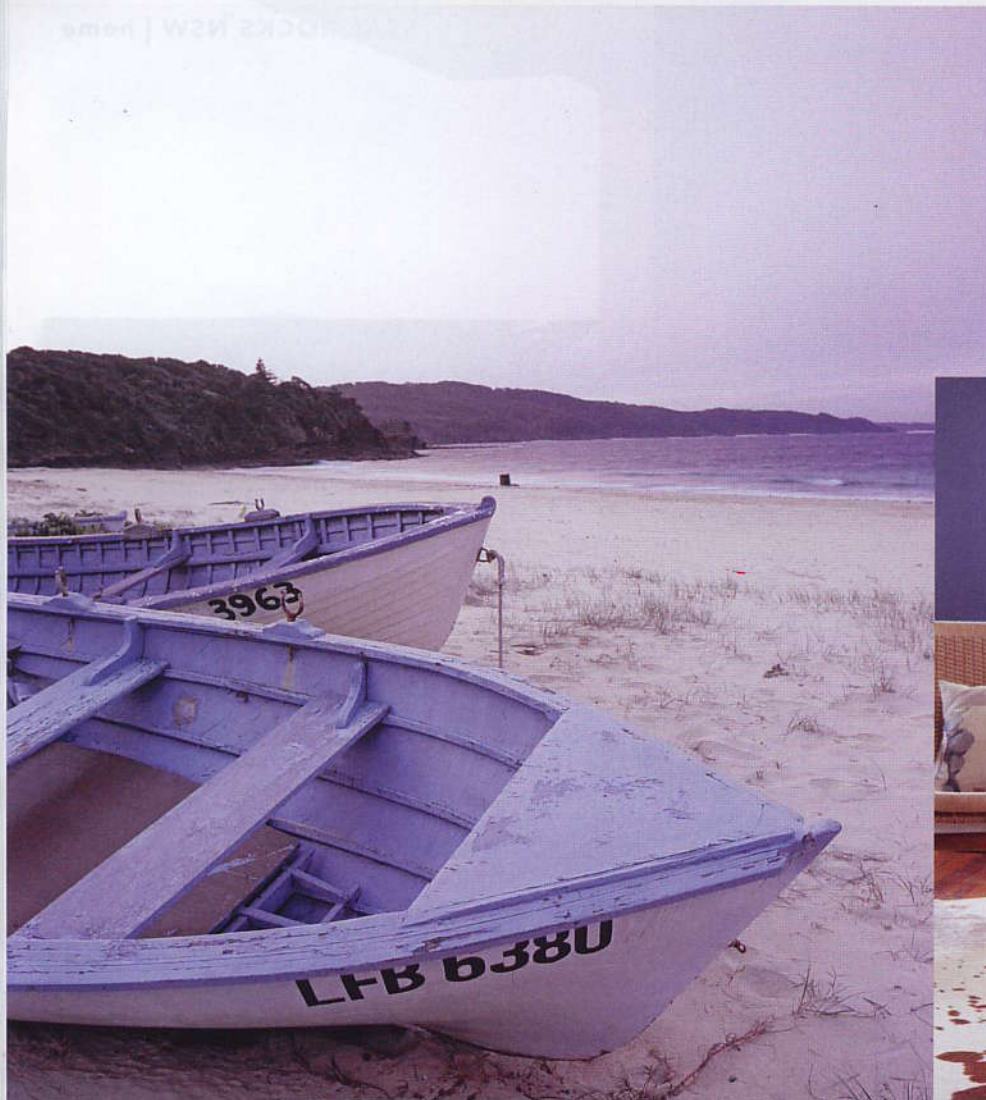


SEAL ROCKS GETS a mention on the ABC several times a day; as one of Australia's most easterly points, it forms a convenient dividing line for weather reports on the NSW Central Coast. But other than the warnings for sailors and surfers, the outside world doesn't hear much about this tiny beachside community some 90 kilometres north-east of Newcastle — and that's just fine for those who spend their weeks or weekends here. One shop, a few ancient fishermen's shacks and a daily routine that at its most frenetic is still best described as 'peaceful, lazy and unsophisticated'.

Which is just the sort of feeling that attracted Stephen Grant, a property developer, art collector and owner (with his wife, Bridget Pirrie) of the GrantPirrie gallery in inner Sydney's Redfern. Visitors are a constant — "Friends, family, acquaintances, artists, filmmakers and writers share or take the beach house in turns with us," Stephen says. But before any of this cavalcade could kick off their shoes and wander down to the beach, an old shack had to undergo a comprehensive makeover.

This beachside structure spoke to something intrinsic in Stephen's past. "I'm a country boy and for some reason it reminded me of shearing sheds," he says. The boy who had grown up on a Tamworth farm knew that such buildings — simple constructions of corrugated iron and asbestos sheets, with rough wooden floors — wouldn't stand idle outside the few weeks of the shearing season. Apart from anything else, they were needed to accommodate sudden floods of visitors — "the shed was always the centre of activity".

After buying the property in 1996, Stephen went looking for someone to transform the shack into a modern evocation of the shed that had always been a hospitable heart to his boyhood home. He found the young architectural partnership of Rachael Bourne and Shane Blue, and gave >



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE Boats await the next fishing trip; the many casually displayed artworks include this 'starfish-ball' by Colombian artist Maria Fernanda Cardoso; Vietnamese buddhas guard the courtyard. **FACING PAGE** The corrugated iron cladding is in keeping with the home's fishing shack origins.



them a simple but all-encompassing brief: "We want a life that revolves around food, family and friends." In other words, a carefree and simple retreat that fostered easy entertaining and relaxing with a sympathetic feeling for the environment and the people that live there.

First, all the toxic asbestos had to be carefully removed. This left the bones of the building, a square box in which living, sleeping and cooking areas were all squashed together. A bathing area was added, its roof stretching back to the main building and creating a covered entrance area. Sleeping pavilions are in the rear, with all rooms opening to an inner courtyard that's planted with frangipani, cycads, gardenias and agaves. Three stone buddhas from Vietnam protect the courtyard and the surrounding buildings.

Stephen had experienced beach-house living in Bali and knew that it was important to maximise ventilation for comfortable summer living. But since 'breezes' on the Seal Rocks promontory can be the stuff of weather warnings, it was important to also create a protected area where one can sit outside, sheltered from the wind.

The living area in the main building has an open kitchen at the front overlooking the beach. A shelf carries an ever-changing collection of small artworks, left by artist friends to their generous hosts like 'thankyou' notes.

"It's not our house only, but our friends' house too, so they leave their artworks like they would in their own house," explains Stephen. A bemused expression flickers across his face... "At some point we had to ask them to stop leaving things because we were about drowning in art!" >





CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE A sail-shaped awning shields the outdoor dining area; hand-painted signs advertise a peaceful lifestyle; in the bathing pavilion, a big laundry basket holds fresh towels for guests. **FACING PAGE** Bedrooms are rigorously uncluttered, except for pretty essentials like the mosquito net.



Large sliding windows and folding industrial glass doors have replaced traditional opening fittings, creating a large, open and light-filled space, that can be made more or less open to the weather while always maintaining superb views to the beach and the ocean beyond.

That view is also accessible from the master bedroom — “We see the bush on one side and the sea on the other,” Bridget says. This, like all the sleeping quarters, is a deliberately simple space. The rooms are furnished with centrally positioned beds, under mosquito nets — essential when louvres and doors are kept open. Beneath each bed are large box bases — there are no wardrobes or dressers, so all you need to store has to fit in there. A couple of corner ledges are used as bedside tables, while a basket may hold casually tossed T-shirts, sarongs and shorts.

“It’s not the sort of place where you dress up for dinner!” says Stephen, laughing. A tub from the former laundry stands next to the bathing pavilion and behind the wall that divides the shower rooms from the inner courtyard. “It’s as unpretentious as the rest of the house and it’s great for brushing teeth, cleaning vegetables and fish — and sluicing off your wetsuit,” Stephen says.

The bathing area recalls the iconic change rooms of Australian beach culture. A simple construction of concrete walls, corrugated awnings and fibre-cement partitions, it has two lavatories and two showers, a highly desirable set-up when accommodating a large number of guests. Solar panels on the roof provide hot water, a septic tank recycles waste for the garden and rainwater is saved in two large tanks.

The house is designed to sit lightly in the environment — and to age gracefully with it. As the architects testify, “Stephen understood... it should become mossy and fade — and gradually recede into its surroundings.”

But before any fading there’s plenty of happy seaside life to enjoy.

“The beach house has turned out really well,” Stephen says. “You can feel comfortable in it on just your own — or with 15 people!” *

“FRIENDS, FAMILY, ACQUAINTANCES, ARTISTS, FILMMAKERS AND