

THE WEEKEND AUSTRALIAN 

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# Mansion

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## OPEN SEASON

Spring buyers test a changing market

By JONATHAN CHANCELLOR

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# Interiors

Mansion

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# Interiors

LUKE SLATTERY Photography DAVE WHEELER

## UP CLOSE *and* PERSONAL

*Transforming the interior of a generic bayside residence to fit the needs of its new owners called for a vision that went way beyond standard beach house style*

While a lot of dwellings are built in Australia each year – construction on 42,000 new houses began at the height of Covid-19 – relatively few are bespoke commissions designed and built from scratch to owner specifications. It's a big challenge for architects and designers. And it's the story behind House on the Bay, in Western Australia's coveted Margaret River, before the clients sought out Sydney practice Decus Interiors. "The plans had been completed and approved," recalls Decus director Alexandra Donohoe Church, "but the builders hadn't broken ground." It was at this point that the owners, who have an apartment with a view in Perth and purchased this due north-facing bayside property as a retreat and family holiday home, realised that a generic building wasn't going to cut it for them.

They needed an interior more precisely tailored to their needs. Decus was required to infuse a large and fairly unassuming structure – low-lying, with a low-pitched roof, sprawling out behind a six-foot-high wall – with a striking and anything but conventional interior of strong, often dark, tones.

"The clients' city apartment is bright, with a colourful and energetic mixtures of themes that suits the city," says the designer. "But here they wanted something different and the site, combined with their needs and our instincts as designers, called for something calmer. Earthy, tactile finishes differentiate the atmosphere of the home from typical beachfront properties, with no whitewash or bleached timbers in sight."

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*The family holiday home is set up to accommodate the owners, their daughters and their children on separate levels*





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The design blends varieties of natural stone. A grey Italian granite carries through from the exterior to the main corridor and into the central living area. Green-veined quartzite and travertine sustain the theme, particularly in the powder rooms. Adding a touch of casual and textural variety are local timber and hand-glazed tiles in eucalypt and clay tones. The dominant interior colours are grey and green. The result flags the broader approach of Donohoe Church's practice, which is fond of unexpected pairings and juxtaposing textures and materials.

"We feel there is something intangible but powerful about injecting a little tension and the unexpected into every design," says the designer, who worked at prestige firms such as SJB and Bates Smart before starting up her own practice in the teeth of the 2007-08 global financial crisis.

What makes the choice of sombre, dark colours all the more interesting at House on the Bay is that the landscape is rather scrubby and sandy, and the midday summer light invariably harsh. "Even when we picked up notes from the landscape such as the green," says Donohoe Church, "we pushed it into darker territory." The result is an interior conceived partly in sync with the landscape, and partly in contrast to it.

The building itself is very rational, with "lots of glass and lots of render", and quite typical of Western Australian coastal architecture.

A central two-storey hub is flanked by two one-storey pavilions, one of which is attached to the core by a walkway while the other is

physically connected. The central hub is given a casual, inviting air with an expansive lounge space, whose main feature is a modular Arflex Marechiaro sofa and custom pieces by the Sydney-based furniture maker Jonathan West, as well as a welcoming dining space for the whole family.

Above the dining area floats an Abacus pendant by Melbourne lighting designer Christopher Boots.

"These relaxed spaces spill out to the bayside garden, allowing occupants to take in the beauty of Margaret River's landscape and climate while maintaining protection from the elements," says Donohoe Church.

The second floor of the central hub is occupied by the parents, while the flanking pavilions are reserved for their daughters and their children. Each living space is designed around a central fireplace. Though formally plain, they are clad internally by a stacked stone sourced from Japan.

"Each living space has its own personality," says the designer. There are six bedrooms, in total across this 1000sq m dwelling, which sits on a property of roughly twice that size.

Donohoe Church's own home is designed with a bower-bird's eye for curiosities, and features sculptural works in foraged timber by Australian artist Olive Gill-Hille, as well as furniture by French designers Pierre Paulin and Eric Scmitt. Each object, she finds, "elicits an emotional response". Emotion is a key to her design ethos.

In fact, it's the practice's gift for creating



*Earthy, tactile finishes create an atmosphere that differs from that of typical beachfront properties*

interiors with distinctive personalities and identities – definable experiences – that led the clients to them. “They didn’t quite realise that they were getting a product rather than a personalised experience, so we were brought in to give the house a different feeling. We had no real say over the planning but we were given carte blanche over the interior.”

She relishes the challenge of interior design in part because of the many tools – colours and surfaces, textures and objects, light and shade – that help to orchestrate moods and emotions.

“I love how design directly impacts the way you feel through colour, materiality and texture,” she says.

The clients at Margaret River were also keen to source furniture and lighting from Australian suppliers and artisans such as Nau, Adam Goodrum, Jonathan West, Made by Morgen and Atelier. These help to “bring warmth and authenticity to all areas of the home”.

The House on the Bay is not only an advertisement for the expressive power of personalised design, it’s the realisation, in an Australian context, of a way of living that is more commonly found in the Mediterranean, where several generations typically occupy the same building.

“The separate pavilions give independence and autonomy for each part of the family, allowing each to enjoy the site,” says Donohoe Church. “At the same time it delivers zoned privacy and places to connect, with shared access to light, views and landscape. An appealing home away from home for every generation.”



“*The House on the Bay is the realisation, in an Australian context, of a way of living more commonly found in the Mediterranean*”