

MODERN LOVE

Mid-century design takes centre stage in this bold beach house on the Victorian coast, with earthy colours and textures perfectly complementing the setting.

PHOTOGRAPHS DEREK SWALWELL WORDS JENNA REED BURNS



THIS PAGE The Mornington Peninsula National Park starts beyond the sculpture of stacked limestone rocks, created by New Zealand artist Chris Booth. Fiona Brockhoff, the property's owner and landscape designer, treats this side of the garden as an extension of the national park. OPPOSITE PAGE Vertical cedar siding, stained dark with organic oil, clads the exterior of the home, recalling creosoted mid-century beach houses.



THESE PAGES In the living area, floors are lined with recycled kauri pine boards that came from a Melbourne warehouse. A focal point of the room is the copper fireplace hood, which rests on a shelf displaying a mix of indigenous art and artefacts. Hanging above it is a painting by Uta Uta Tjangala and a pair of Wunda shields from Western Australia. The Hans J. Wegner armchairs were bought at auction, then reupholstered in fabric from Cloth. The sofa is by Pierre and Charlotte in Melbourne. The laminate and blackwood coffee table was designed by a friend.





IT'S A TEXTURED, EARTHY INTERIOR WITH A STRONG SENSE OF DESIGN. "I CHOSE A LOT OF THE COLOURS TO RELATE TO THE HUES IN THE GARDEN, AND TO BRING IN WARMTH," EXPLAINS THE OWNER, FIONA BROCKHOFF.



This simple yet striking beach house in Sorrento, on Victoria's Mornington Peninsula, echoes the topography, as if shaped by the elements – just like the wind-shorn vegetation behind it. From its rooftop deck there are views across the seaside township to the glistening waters of Port Phillip Bay. In the far distance, Melbourne's skyscrapers appear as small blips on the horizon. In the other direction, the choppy navy blue waters of Bass Strait can be seen above a tangle of vegetation that is Mornington Peninsula National Park. "The view towards the city is lovely," admits the house's owner, landscape designer Fiona Brockhoff, "but the other way is special. I prefer it because it's a wilder view. However, living on top of a dune is windy and noisy, which is why the exposure in this south-westerly direction is quite minimal and the house opens to the north."

The extensive use of locally sourced and recycled materials reinforces the sense that the house and garden have grown out of their surroundings. Craggy white limestone walls buttress the front and rear terraces, folding back into the split-level house to separate the living area from the entry corridor below it with a shoulder-height wall. Old pier timbers form a solid palisade retaining wall edging the driveway, and the shell and pebble aggregate in the entry paving was collected from the beach.

Inside, the house is warm and inviting, with 50s vintage furniture sitting beside custom-made items. A collection of older pieces of Aboriginal art share the same natural aesthetic as the hand-printed fabrics by Cloth that cover armchairs and cushions. It's a textured, earthy interior with a strong sense of design. "I chose a lot of the colours to relate to the hues in the garden, and to bring in some warmth," explains Fiona.

She designed the house almost 15 years ago with her friend Tom Isaksson, a NSW-based architect. "Tom and I have similar tastes in architecture, but what really appealed to me was that he was both an architect and a builder. He moved down to Sorrento for 10 months and we designed the house together very quickly and got it through council. Then off we went."



THIS PAGE Fifties style, limestone walls and Aboriginal artwork (by Boxer Milner) create a warm feel in the dining room. The German table and chairs were bought second hand, and Fiona had them restored. OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT The kitchen at one end of the living area has recently been refitted with faux bamboo laminate joinery from Gunnarsen and Canadian rock maple benchtops. Painting is by Anatjari Tjakamarra. The home's terraces are buttressed with walls of local limestone built by Fiona's partner, David Seaman, a landscape contractor and stonemason whom she met when the house was first being constructed. An outdoor view from inside the freestanding bungalow, built a short distance from the main house.



SPEED READ This home on Victoria's Mornington Peninsula clearly demonstrates the owner's passion for mid-century style, and her feel for tone and form. Her wish to incorporate natural elements that occur in the landscape into the building's design has resulted in an architecturally sensitive beach house that blends well with its surrounds.



It was obviously a happy process, as Tom has gone on to design renovations to Fiona and partner David Swann's house in Melbourne. "The house is a collaboration of Fiona's vision and my work," confirms Tom. "I'm not a particularly doctrinaire architect, and I don't impose any style on my clients. I like them to bring me their preferences. Fiona has a very strong aesthetic – she likes modernism and the house has worked out really well."

Sitting on the block's highest point, the three-bedroom timber house reads as an assemblage of boxes. Basically U-shaped in plan, its longest side faces north-east to take in the sun, with the living area opening onto a terrace overlooking a small vineyard. Popping up above the raked copper-clad roofline is the main bedroom, ensuite and a dressing room, with a ladder leading to the rooftop deck. Downstairs, another wing to the east – beside a newly added playroom – contains the children's bedrooms, a powder room, a bathroom and a laundry.

For 12 years, this eco-friendly house, complete with composting toilets, rainwater tanks and solar-heated hot water, was Fiona and David's permanent home. Around two years ago, however, they made the decision to spend their weeks in the city to be closer to their two girls' schools. But most weekends and holidays they head straight back down the coast. With an orchard and vegetable garden, a chook shed and vineyard, it's a busy, productive lifestyle that sustains them. And, of course, there's also a much-photographed garden (often opened in summer as part of Australia's Open Garden Scheme) to tend.

"The idea was to make the garden an extension of the national park for aesthetics and habitat," says Fiona. "As you move closer to the house, the plants are more tamed."

Locally sourced granitic gravel links all the spaces, wending around topiaried she-oaks and moonah trees. "I can't see the point in growing something that doesn't do well here," she continues. "That's why there are a lot of indigenous plants, some other Australian natives, plus a few exotics around the front of the house – it's nice having some large-leaved plants for variety and contrast."

The garden also features some elemental and totemic sculptures. "I'm really interested in sculpture in the garden. I think it's a nice drawcard to have something that you discover which is an unexpected surprise." A little like this beach house. 15



"THE HOUSE IS A COLLABORATION OF FIONA'S VISION AND MY WORK," SAYS THE HOME'S ARCHITECT, TOM ISAKSSON. "IT HAS WORKED OUT VERY WELL."

THIS PAGE The front terrace is partially paved in exposed-aggregate concrete pavers featuring locally collected shells and sea-worn pebbles. Outdoor setting from Bakka Design in Melbourne. OPPOSITE PAGE, FROM TOP A few selected hardy exotics provide a contrast of form and texture. BOTTOM Pathways of fine granitic gravel and craggy limestone walls link the garden's spaces, as well as connect them to their coastal surrounds.