

GREAT SCOTT

TUCKED AWAY IN NATIVE BUSH NEAR
HOKITIKA, A CRIB DESIGNED BY THE LATE
JOHN SCOTT IN 1974 KEEPS GETTING BETTER
WITH AGE. TEXT MALCOLM WALKER
PHOTOGRAPHY PAUL MCCREDIE

Bruce and Estelle Martin built the crib themselves. The living area is on the upper level, up the stairs in this photo. The wall scroll was created by master potter Sanyo Fujii, who worked with the Martins in 1983.

OPPOSITE The building process was facilitated by a balsa-wood model crafted by Bruce.





LEFT AND ABOVE Upstairs, the crib is one largely open-plan room, with a sleeping area neatly separated from the living room by the stairway and a dividing wall. **RIGHT** Tim Main, a family friend, in the living area.

THE LIVING ROOM IS BEAUTIFULLY SCALED, MAKING IT FEEL AS IF YOU ARE BEING LIFTED INTO THE BUSH

In 1974, the noted potters Bruce and Estelle Martin, who already had two John Scott-designed buildings – their home and its neighbouring pottery studio in Hawkes Bay – decided they would like to build another. This one was to be a bush bach near Ruatapu, just south of Hokitika. The Martins had first passed the suitability test that locals put to outsiders and were allowed to buy 10 acres of regenerating bush, a legacy from the wholesale clear-felling of the area some 50 years earlier. There was no lakeside position, no stream, no surf, no vistas, just bush – and very nice it is too, the Thoreau romance without Walden Pond, and with throwing clay instead of hoeing beans. I still recall an exhibition from many years ago of the Martins' beautiful pottery work scattered through the bush, the studio open to the sun, coffee at the ready. It almost made me want to roll up my sleeves and take up potting.

Bruce and Estelle first struck up a friendship with Scott when they commissioned him to design their Hawkes Bay home in 1970 (Scott died in 1992). By this time, Scott had already been lauded for the design of Wellington's Futuna Chapel, among other significant works, but he still designed many houses,

particularly in Hawkes Bay. Bruce and Estelle's Hawkes Bay studio is made from fibrolite sheet laid over immaculate, exposed dark-stained framing, with concrete block work single-skinned and left uncoated. Only the Hawkes Bay climate would be kind enough to allow this construction, and today any building bureaucrat would have a hernia just thinking about it. And yet, 40 years later, it is still a beautiful and practical building, just fine at keeping weather and earthquakes at bay.

At the bach on the West Coast, you can see how carefully Scott read the change of circumstances. Hawkes Bay and Westland couldn't offer more different environments, but John knew the coast and had visited a disused mountainside quarry nearby to select the serpentine floor for the Futuna Chapel. Rumour has it he attempted the climb in bare feet but soon discovered that the terrain is in charge in this part of the country. An environmental lesson.

The Martins' crib is completely hidden, with an unassuming driveway curving into a clearing, where the building backs up to the bush on the east and opens to the north and west. It is clad in corrugated iron, the material that covered 'luxury' buildings constructed during the gold rushes of the area. Like the buildings of the gold rush, the crib's form is simple. Scott made the wise decision, given the dampness of the situation, to elevate the living area and fit the studio and spare bedroom below – no easy Hawkes Bay indoor-outdoor flow here. No minimal cladding here either, as everything is thoroughly insulated. The ground-floor slab, tiled and heated, drifts warm air up through the building, keeping the dampness of the bush at bay.

It is comfortable now, but the building process wasn't necessarily so. Bruce, Estelle and their three sons built the bach with the aid of a balsa-wood scale



Frances Martin and her father Craig in the crib's living area. They are the second and third generations of the Martin family to use the bach. Pottery by Bruce and Estelle, along with work by other New Zealand potters, lines the open shelves in the kitchen.





THE BACH IS NOT A COLLECTION OF ROOMS, BUT AN ARRANGEMENT OF SPACES, EASY AND COMFORTABLE

model Bruce made of the building frame, an indication of the care that they and John put into this place. "Trying to clear the gorse from the building site was hard work," Bruce remembers. "We started with a curved slasher, which was useless. Then we bought an axe-bladed slasher and broke the handle the first time we used it. We ended up buying a chainsaw which was just as well, as some of the gorse branches were around 20 centimetres thick. We had a wonderful series of bonfires and gathered the ash for making glazes for our pots." They camped on the site before and during the house construction. "My building experience when we started was a chook house, a shed and two garages," Bruce says. "Only on the West Coast at that time would a council allow such an inexperienced person to build a two-storey dwelling." Fellow potters helped out: Peter Stichbury, on holiday with his family, cut and nailed planks, and Len Castle drove in a ceremonial nail. It took nine weeks to lay the foundations and put up the frame, roof and cladding. The West Coast weather was unusually cooperative: the Martins only experienced two small showers in all that time on site.

Inside, it is the way the plan is organised that really matters. The place is small so getting these things right is important, and here Scott's planning is a joy. The living room is beautifully scaled, making it feel as if you are being lifted into the bush. Windows are carefully placed. Views are selected; no monstrosity of the bach's exterior with sliding glass walls goes on here. This is not a structure pretending it is not there, in the manner of many contemporary holiday houses. You never forget you are in a building that is sheltering you.

The bach is not a collection of rooms, but an arrangement of spaces. The bathroom is democratically set off the stair landing, neatly separating the

LEFT Frances Martin, Bruce and Estelle's grand-daughter, in the bach's sleeping area. **ABOVE** A vase by the late Estelle Martin on the wall. **RIGHT** The crib nestles into the regenerating native bush on the site.

ablutions from being an intrusion into the small living space. It is a nifty piece of planning and also adds spatial complexity within the simple plan. Upstairs, the bedroom is part of the living area, separated by the stairway and ingeniously planned and screened to be private. Finishes are typical Scott – exposed rafters, sarked timber ceilings and clear-finished ply walls, all locally sourced. Everything feels easy and comfortable and, for a small building, roomy.

After 35 years, it is still the family bach. Bruce has continued to regularly visit from Hawkes Bay since Estelle's death in 2001, and members of the extended family, which now includes seven grandchildren and a new great-grandchild, regularly gather there, too. It is clear that the bach is "designed", in the best sense of the word. There is no showing off here, just the clear hand of an architect who knew what he was doing, and the joy of something that is right. Scott's buildings are about context, scale and space, all of which are three-dimensional events.

The experience, the feel of buildings, was his particular strength. That is the joy of architecture, and there is plenty of that undefinable essence of commodity and delight here. •



The Martin family bach

DESIGNED BY JOHN SCOTT

After designing Bruce and Estelle Martin's Hawkes Bay home and pottery studio, John Scott designed this crib for their property near Hokitika in 1974, which Bruce, Estelle, and their three sons built themselves. Bruce, now in his 80s, still visits from Hawkes Bay, and the bach is also used by the extended family, including Bruce and Estelle's son Craig (right) and his daughter Frances (far right). Scott, who also designed Wellington's Futuna Chapel and many other notable homes and public buildings, died in 1992.



The build

Bruce and Estelle built the bach themselves (with assistance from their three sons) over a nine-week period in 1974 (Bruce and Craig are on site in the image below), relying on Scott's drawings and a balsa-wood model of the frame. Bruce says his



only building experience before they started was "a chook house, a shed, two garages and some furniture. Only on the West Coast at that time would a council allow such an inexperienced person to build a two-storey dwelling," he says.

The bedroom

The main bedroom (right) is cleverly separated from the living area by the stairwell and a dividing wall.



The bathroom

Scott's plan located the bathroom on an intermediate level between the bach's two floors (above). Above the sink are tiles by Charles Holmes.

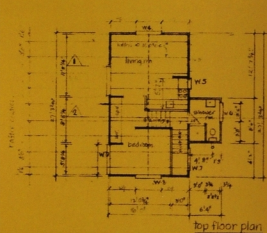


The details

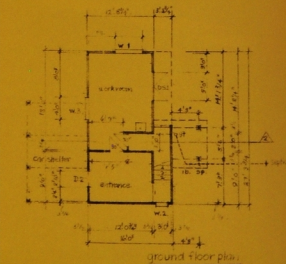
On the exterior, the window frames feature splashes of intense colour: orange, yellow and green. Scott advised Bruce and Estelle to "use the colours of beech leaves under water", and they have followed his advice to perfection.

Plans

Scott's highly detailed drawings were of vital assistance in helping Bruce and Estelle build their bach.



top floor plan



ground floor plan