

A Betty's Bay dreamscape

The Sea House

Johannesburg-based architect Sarah Calburn has strong ideas on the philosophical meaning of architecture, and her visceral approach to creating uplifting and exciting contained spaces for her clients is evident in the Sea House.

By: Nicky Vermeulen – staff writer

Sarah Calburn's buildings are always tailor made to their sites. Her motto is "Never give the client what they want; always give them more." That after all, is the responsibility of an architect: to listen closely to the most non-spatial desires of a client, and then translate them into a physical and material space they may only have dreamed of.

For the Sea House project, the client who commissioned Calburn's skills is a couple living and working in Cape Town whose main requirement from their weekend retreat house in Betty's Bay was privacy, peacefulness and total connection to the environment. They don't have children, and although it is a weekend retreat, the house will probably become their home. The husband and wife duo have a large operation in Cape Town making sails for international yachts. They work long hours, have a busy life and are truly connected to the ocean.

Calburn says: "The 6 000m²-site they have is blessed with the most amazing views over the ocean and Betty's Bay's enormous mountain panorama. As is usual in the Cape, light comes from the mountains, but the spectacle comes from the sea."

"One of my architectural intentions is always to heighten the experience of the particular landscape where the building is taking place. If you think about it simply, architecture involves framing views. If you think about it in a more complex manner, then architecture is able to influence the ways in which perceives the world." The Sea House frames both the sea and the mountain side, and responds differently to the scales of each.

Calburn explains how the house works:

"The house is sunken off the arrival plane, and you can see over and through it to the enormous surface of the

sea beyond. The roof is planted with low coastal plants, and it has a decked walkway concealing a large box gutter. Once on it, the roof uncannily blends with and loses itself in the wider landscape. The sea-facing side of the house, which can only be seen by those at sea, responds to the sublime scale of the 1800-ocean-panorama. The curvature of the earth is felt on that wide, flat horizon, and so the building curves smoothly along its front in response to this smooth and open plane of ocean. This building wouldn't have been designed like this on any other site. This building was designed to fit its location.

The site had a retaining wall and the remains of an old house that dropped down into the steep slope of the site, which in turn careens steeply down to the ocean. On arrival, my intention was the creation of a constructed promontory, under which the predominantly glass-walled house would live, sort of hanging in space below a planted plane. Essentially I took the plane of the land and stretched it over the building.

The house literally tucks in underneath that plane. After arrival, descending into the house via a staircase, you are encased in a series of smaller curving spaces under the giant, free-floating roof. While not yet inside, there is a sense of entrapment in a kind of hiatus between the sea, the weather, and the calmer, more stable backing of the mountain. The sea view is framed behind glass. Landward, the entrance courtyard carves back into the hillside with a series of planted, stepped terraces and a walkway that curves and flanks right around and opens up the view severely towards Kleinmond.

Once into the open spaces of the living, dining, and kitchen area, it is easy to be transfixed by the scale and prox-



imity of the ocean below. Tracing left towards the main bedroom suite, the vast, curving sea-side glass wall has an uncanny effect of cranking the view open wider and wider along the path. The bedroom occupies the corner, which is a calm yet free glass-walled eyrie. The two wings of the house are divided by a wall-to-wall infinity pool wedged between the flanks. The pool's horizon wall is glass and has an effect of feeling uncannily half inside and half outside the pool; caught between the sea, the mountain, living room and deck. The second wing of the house encases a large book-lined study and a guest bedroom as large as the main suite. The wing is rectangular as it wedges itself firmly against the landscape, less steep at this point, and focuses views away from the western neighbour and out to sea.

When you open the doors and step out along the curving sea edge of the house, the building is in a constant slide away from your body, so you're constantly thrust into the view. It's

extremely atmospheric in that sense. The narrow balcony is lowered by half a metre from the internal floors so that the sense of vertigo is not lost from the interior, and the balustrade never imposes on the eyes, even when seated.

It's designed in a way that when you're in the pool and you look back through the house, it frames the mountain. The view is the sea to the south, but the sun comes in from the back behind the mountain. It works well because in summer, there is wind blowing from the sea side and in winter it blows from the mountain side. As long as either side can alternate between open and closed, the house can always keep responding.

The land side of the house responds completely different to the scale of its earthy surrounds. It cuts in and out of courtyards, in smaller and more intimate experiences which allow direct contact with the tiny and beautiful scale of



fynbos and plants, and everything is tangible as opposed to the untouchable plane of ocean. The scale of human experience is different here, on the sunny side of the house. There are fantastic symmetries between floor and roof, which create almost fishbowl views, framing the world. The roof formation surprised me after it was built. Standing on it, I realized that in a way, the scalloped land-side edge was literally making beachy coves. I like these kinds of realisations that must, absolutely, have been part of the design concept, but only became available later, once the object is revealed. To me, these kinds of readings create a kind of poetry. I see rock-pool octopus lazy tentacles in the attenuated curves of the landward side. The 'post reading' of work is vital to the consciousness that is irrefutably created in a body of work. Buildings are as much for clients then, as they are for me. The colour palette, which includes grey-to-green shades, blends in with the surrounding landward environment. They're gentle, tranquil colours. Cal-

burn contrasts them with the way in which many Cape houses still sit white against the landscape. The house sits on tall, slender columns, recessed below the outer plane of the curve. The area under the house has been densely replanted so once the coastal thicket has come up again, the underbelly of the house should disappear.

Dynamic

"The kind of architecture I aim for is very feel good and simultaneously commands the calmness and tranquillity of elegant space, and the excitement of the body in space and time," says Calburn. The house is strong; its leading lines clean and smooth, unapologetically bold, yet it all adds up to intimate space. It's brave, simple, raw, and organic through its varying scale of curves. The smaller-scale curves present more intimate and organic spaces – such as the beach-like coves of the courtyards. The larger the curve scale, the bolder the space. This is clear along the front of the house."

