
OCEAN HOUSE

ROBERT MILLS LORNE, VICTORIA, AUSTRALIA

Architect Robert Mills is a creature of habit. He has been coming down to the seaside town of Lorne, a few hours' drive from Melbourne, for the past nineteen years. For many summers he rented a house here, but when he saw that a piece of land had come up for sale on the very same street, he seized the opportunity and began to think about designing a new house for himself, his partner and his two daughters.

'It has been an ambition to build my own beach house,' says Mills, whose practice is based in Melbourne. 'As an architect, building your own home is when you really get to express yourself and test your ideas. When you are working for a client, your primary role is to make their dreams and aspirations come alive, but you don't necessarily get to explore your own ambitions and whims. So when you do get a chance to build for yourself, it's a real opportunity.'

For some time after buying his parcel of land overlooking Loutit Bay, Mills intended to build a timber cabin. But a tightening up of planning conditions for timber homes in the wake of a series of bush fires led to a more ambitious design for a three-storey house, made principally of concrete. This new home would have a family space on the top floor, with four self-contained bedrooms and living spaces on the floors below, which could be rented out to help subsidize the running costs.

The house is pushed into a steep hillside and runs almost parallel to the sea, capturing the best of the views. Mills's personal realm on the top floor has a fresh, fluid feel with an open-plan kitchen, dining area and sitting room placed within a pavilion and banks of timber-framed glass connecting to the seascape. There is also an elevated terrace alongside, complete with an outdoor table, as well as a breakfast bar alongside the kitchen, where a window retracts to form a serving hatch.

As well as a series of balconies and terraces, the house also features a rooftop deck complete with a fire pit; this makes for a perfect spot for evening entertaining with a view, as well as a daytime sanctuary.





The floors throughout are in polished concrete with underfloor heating; natural cross-ventilation cools the house in summer. Ceilings and bespoke kitchen cabinets made from blackbutt, a native hardwood, lend a more organic flavour, helped by the verdant greenery and tree canopy that borders the building.

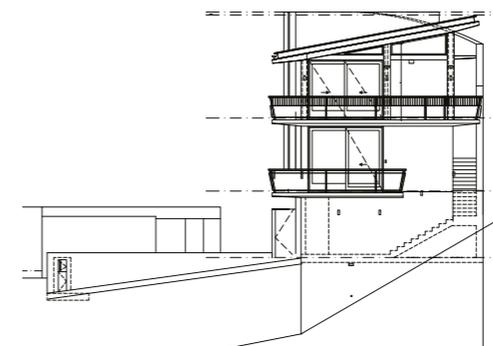
‘The house needed to be at one with the forest and the sea,’ says Mills. ‘The colours are calming, and I love to live with the colour grey. The timber is naturally a light-brown colour, but has a hint of grey in it. We put a chalky wash over it, then rubbed it down a little and left the chalk in the grain, so that it works well with the concrete.’

The curving walls of a stucco drum at the far end of the pavilion, holding the fireplace and log store, suggest a change of direction at the opposite end of the house, where the sinuous shapes recall a ship’s hull. The master bedroom is circular, and the Patricia Urquiola-designed bed sits within a relaxing space bordered with linen curtains, which hide the bath, shower and other elements contained in an outer circle. Other bedrooms are woven around this circular room, while up on the roof the rounded forms are echoed by a roof terrace, complete with a fire pit and day beds. Mills tends to come up here in the evenings and late afternoon, as it’s a spot that captures an extra hour or two of sunshine before the sun sinks behind the nearby hillside.

The character of the house is elegant but also casual, informal and relaxed. On Mondays the dining table becomes a drawing board, where Mills works before heading back to his office in the city. And unlike many devotees of Lorne – which turns sleepy and quiet out of season – Mills now comes out here all year round.



ELEVATION



The main living spaces on the upper level – including the kitchen – open out onto a partially sheltered terrace with sun loungers, a dining table and a fresh-air breakfast bar (*opposite*).

The multi-level building is pushed into the gradient of the slope and positioned parallel to the beach and the ocean, creating a long run of spaces with an open view of the water.





The main living spaces are on the top floor to make the most of the views and the light (*above*); the circular coffee tables are an Eero Saarinen design from Knoll and the sofa is from Living Divani. The kitchen is also custom-designed and made; the pendant light is by Gubi (*opposite*).





The dining table is a bespoke piece designed by Robert Mills (*opposite*), made with blackbutt timber; the dining chairs are by Eero Saarinen. The black armchairs at the other end of the room are from Hub (*above*). The master bedroom (*above left and left*) offers glimpses of the ocean via a wraparound curtain, which also lends privacy to the integrated bath.