

# THE LOCAL PROJECT



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# BUNKEREN

## JAMES STOCKWELL ARCHITECT

Words by Alex Brown • Photography by Tom Ross • Styling by Atelier Lab • Architecture by James Stockwell Architect  
Build by Ledbury Constructions • Furniture Supplied by Spence & Lyda





The earth-filled concrete plates of Bunkerren are balanced carefully on a coastal site within the unceded lands of the Awabakal people in Whitebridge, a southern suburb of Newcastle. The project is an incredibly photogenic study in concrete textures and form, containing subtle nods to the kinds of architectural references one might expect from a collaboration between experienced architect James Stockwell and Danish-Australian clients with an eye for design. Yet the building is far more than just finely crafted details and dramatic concrete cantilevers. At its heart, Bunkerren attempts to actively dismantle the object qualities of the architecture in favour of ambiguous, landscape-driven spaces of discovery and inhabitation.

Bunkerren is underpinned by an appreciation of – and set of connections to – the work of Jørn Utzon, as well as the concrete architecture of coastal bunkers. As James recalls, the figure of Utzon loomed large from the very first project meeting on site. “When we first met and as I walked into the existing house, on the wall right in front of me was the most beautiful drawing of the Sydney Opera House in pencil,” he recalls. “That moment was quite magical and it just kind of introduced the project for us.”

Building on initial discussions about the use of concrete in the Opera House, the architect and clients also discovered a shared fondness for bunkers. “You can’t really suggest to someone to do a house like a bunker,” James explains, “but we both realised – and it was a bit of a watershed moment – that we really loved them and all thought it was a great idea.” James was drawn to memories of the ruins of military fortresses in his hometown of Albany, while his clients remembered time spent around decaying World War II bunkers along the Danish coast. These influences are powerful, personal touchstones, and they infuse the project – registering not just in its material palette and exterior form but in deeper decisions about the siting and interior experiences.

The use of concrete and the bunker precedent also provided the basis for a practical response to the threat of severe weather and bushfires that affect the area. The challenge was to design for a high degree of resil-

ience without creating oppressive or cramped interior volumes that shut down connections with the surrounding landscape. Yet, while Bunkerren is clearly shaped by its context and the specific interests and needs of its occupants, it also extends a series of existing threads within James’s body of work. Over the last 20 years, and while resisting a singular architectural style, his practice has interrogated the idea of building as landscape and the thermal and experiential dimensions of partially buried space. In this sense, the grown-over bunkers of Bunkerren continue the geologically-focused approach of projects like the Miura Fold House in Wanaka and the Croft House near Inverloch.

At the same time, the project’s location on a dramatic sloping site with spectacular bushland and ocean views also provided a unique opportunity to challenge more conventional massing strategies. This was achieved by prioritising connections to the immediate landscape, something James sees as respecting a set of existing flows through the site. “Often people just build bang in the middle of a site and then across the contour to see the view, and that blocks off the natural systems. The way we set up this plan is really to allow passages of water and wildlife through and around. The building is partially dug-in, but the idea is that – if you’re on a steep site like this – there’s a journey to be made by animals, yourself and by water. It also gives you the ability to go from inside to outside on level ground. When people build up high to look at the view, they can’t easily make use of the spaces behind and in front of the house.”









The Kim Bench by De La Espada from Spence & Lyda sits quietly within the space.

Nestled into the hillside, traces of the building are almost completely camouflaged from the street, save for a small volume containing the entrance and main bedroom. Though it has been barely a year since the project’s completion, the gardens held within the concrete plates are already beginning to fulfil their role as shrouds that stitch the building together with the wider landscape. As James understood from his initial visits, while the site’s coastal aspect exposes it to some of the stronger winds and rainstorms that move across the region, its situation between the headlands offers some protection. “It was evident when I visited for the first time that things grow well here,” he says.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, during the more recent colonial history of the area, the fertile microclimate of the gully was exploited with the development of Mr Bull’s Garden – a large botanical garden containing imported plants from across the globe. Providing “an intro-

duction to the landscape and not the house” on approach, Bunkeren recalls the experience of a descent into a garden, taking its cues from local flora and fauna in order to extend the existing ecosystem over the house’s concrete structure. Mirroring the surrounding bushland, the roof gardens contain local species such as Allocasuarina, prostrate banksia and Xanthorrhoea.

Entering the house on the upper level, a curved concrete wall screens the main bedroom, ensuite and walk-in robe, guiding visitors down the stairs to the ground floor. Unfolding gradually down the sloping site, in truth Bunkeren is a series of ground floors that simultaneously register as both on the ground and within it. This is deliberately so. “I really like the idea of making the ground plane ambiguous,” James explains, “so you’re sort of half in the land and half on it and, in time, that becomes even more ambiguous and more blurred.”







The Elliot Dining Table and Chairs by De La Espada from Spence & Lyda provide a place to congregate.









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The concrete walls convey a sense of being dug into the slope of the land.



Designed for a couple and their four young children, as well as to accommodate regular gatherings and meals with close-knit extended family in the area, Bunkeren is a relatively large five-bedroom home and studio. Part of a generous, L-shaped plan, the project's main kitchen, dining and living spaces stretch out towards the ocean views from the bottom of the entry stair. To the left, tracking along the contour are the children's bedrooms and bathroom. At the intersection of these main wings of the home, an adaptable sitting room or study can be generated through sliding panels or left open to soften or buffer the circulation paths between private and communal spaces. Tucked behind the kitchen are a series of smaller storage and study spaces, leaving a set of communal spaces with an uninterrupted view of Dudley Beach, which is afforded by a sunken balustrade that creates a hidden channel 900 millimetres below floor level. This channel, currently functioning as a popular hidden passage for children's games, has been imagined as another planted "moat".

Across the generous, uninterrupted spans of the building that allow the communal areas to take in sweeping views of the coastline, a delicate field of pendant lights have been used to generate warm pools of light that reinforce the domestic scale of the project and its function as a family home. Selected by the clients, the fittings include Peter Zumthor's *candela di vals*, as well as lighting designed by Utzon and Poul Henningsen.

Breaks are incorporated into the plan to allow the landscape to flow throughout the project. Accessible from the north terrace, surrounded by landscape, is a raised concrete pool that separates the main house from a self-contained guest studio, which comprises a bedroom, sitting room and bathroom. Along the southern edge of the plan, prior to stepping down into the sunken lounge space, an unassuming narrow stair connects the kitchen to the lowest part of the house – yet another connection to the ground that Bunkeren sits within. The back of the stone room is, as its name suggests, carved directly from the sandy conglomerate rock that runs through the site.













Direct connections to the immediate landscape are prioritised.

Throughout the spaces on the main level of the house, the beautifully crafted concrete walls and plates appear to hover just beyond the edge of the hillside, carefully separated by a narrow glass “moat” that washes the retaining wall in light filtered through the roof landscape. In the lower space of the stone room – a cellar and room for special family dinners – these refined walls come to rest completely on rock and earth. The room feels almost like a secret space that, upon discovery, reveals the inner workings of the project and the extent of its entanglement with the earth.

As James notes, the rock was an important initial consideration. “We observed on the site early on that the conglomerate rock, which is almost like concrete in itself, had a certain kind of shape to it and that if we could carve into the rock a bit, we could make a cellar and a room that was half-rock, half architecture – part-landscape and part-building.” Working with the form of the rock allowed it to find its way into the stair treads and define the threshold of the space as the project progressed. The result is a volume that is subterranean but diaphanous, where rock seems to burst through the glazing with its precisely configured frame.

The life of this project, James explains, is closely connected to a kind of open-endedness that makes way for multiple forms of occupation and use. “I do like the idea of architecture being not so contrived, in that it makes itself all complete and finished. I like an unfinished quality to things – a sketchiness, if you like – because it means that it gives room for people to inhabit and invent. If all the decisions have been made and everything is in its place, all neat and worked out, then it’s kind of dead. That’s part of the reason to try to make labyrinthine spaces in plan so that you get these journeys through space.”

It would no doubt be possible to talk about a project such as Bunkeren and never get beyond the marvellous post-tensioned roof slabs that do so much work here cantilevering and carving out, allowing the spaces to float and fold under the ground all at once. Yet to stop there would be to misunderstand the role that structure and materiality play in this project. As much clarity as there is in the impressive concrete frame of Bunkeren, its job is also to choreograph unfolding experiences of ambiguity and complexity. In addition to being a much-loved family home, Bunkeren is both a sketch and a ruin, slowly becoming more finished at the same time as being gradually reclaimed by the flora, fauna and flows of its site.









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