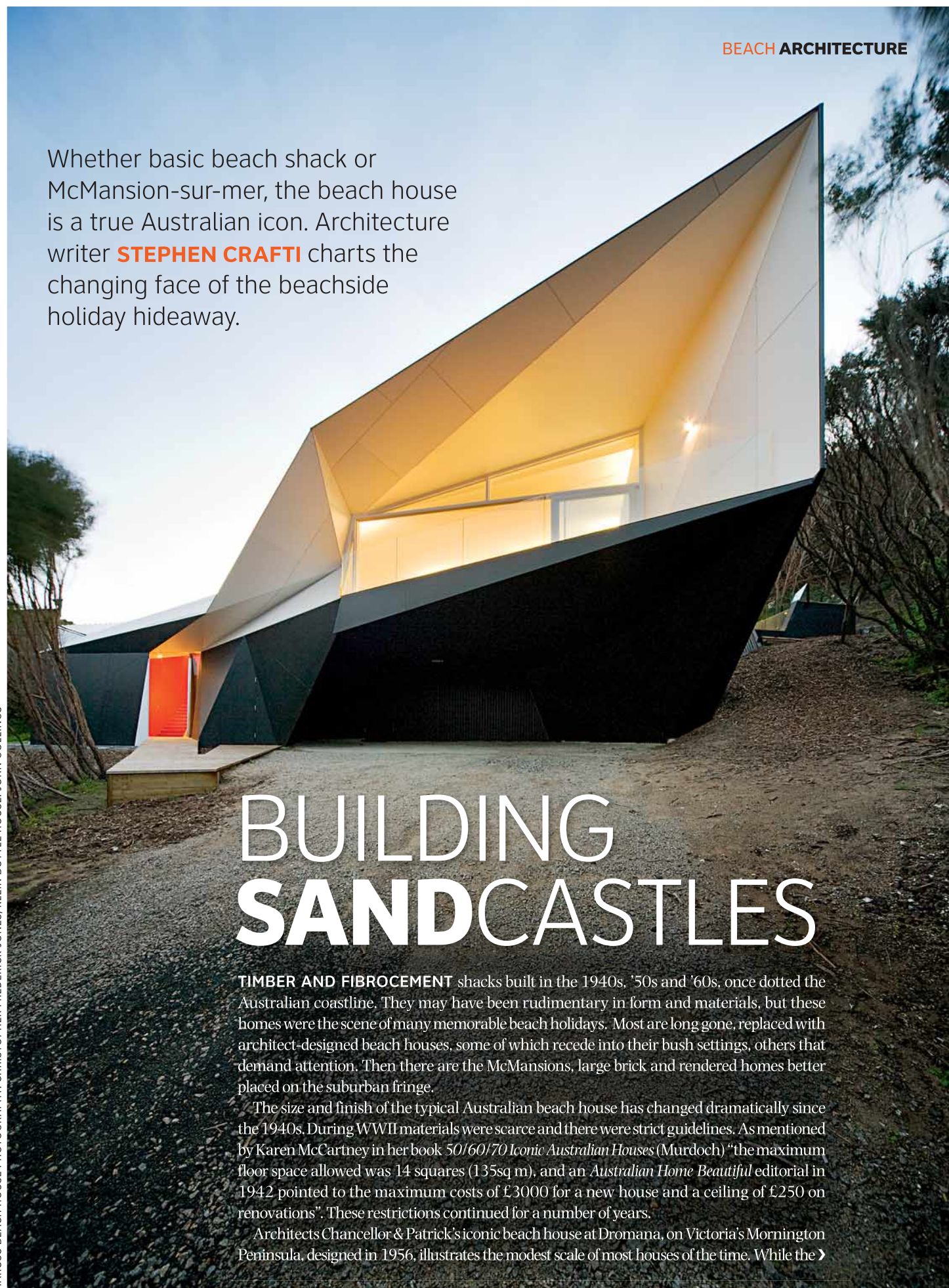




Marcus Beach house,
Queensland; Klein Bottle
house, Rye, Victoria
(opposite)

Whether basic beach shack or McMansion-sur-mer, the beach house is a true Australian icon. Architecture writer **STEPHEN CRAFTI** charts the changing face of the beachside holiday hideaway.

MARCUS BEACH HOUSE PHOTOGRAPHY: CHRISTOPHER FREDERICK JONES; KLEIN BOTTLE HOUSE: JOHN GOLLINGS



BUILDING SANDCASTLES

TIMBER AND FIBROCEMENT shacks built in the 1940s, '50s and '60s, once dotted the Australian coastline. They may have been rudimentary in form and materials, but these homes were the scene of many memorable beach holidays. Most are long gone, replaced with architect-designed beach houses, some of which recede into their bush settings, others that demand attention. Then there are the McMansions, large brick and rendered homes better placed on the suburban fringe.

The size and finish of the typical Australian beach house has changed dramatically since the 1940s. During WWII materials were scarce and there were strict guidelines. As mentioned by Karen McCartney in her book *50/60/70 Iconic Australian Houses* (Murdoch) "the maximum floor space allowed was 14 squares (135sq m), and an *Australian Home Beautiful* editorial in 1942 pointed to the maximum costs of £3000 for a new house and a ceiling of £250 on renovations". These restrictions continued for a number of years.

Architects Chancellor & Patrick's iconic beach house at Dromana, on Victoria's Mornington Peninsula, designed in 1956, illustrates the modest scale of most houses of the time. While the ➤

ARCHITECTURE BEACH

WHILE THE SIZE OF MANY BEACH HOUSES CONTINUES TO EXPAND, INTEREST IN RECYCLABLE MATERIALS IS ALSO INCREASING



house, known as the McCraith House, features a generous terrace on the first floor, the children's bedroom consisted of bunk beds in what would now be referred to as a small single bedroom. The nearby beach was the focus. It didn't matter that children were crammed into one bedroom and that the toilet was somewhere out the back. Personal privacy? Forget it. The beach shack was more akin to camping out.

In the 1960s, as materials as well as finance became more accessible, beach houses increased in size. A second living area, often termed the rumpus room, was designed for the children. While children were still encouraged to play outdoors, there was sufficient space in the rumpus room to keep the ping-pong table up permanently. As the beach house expanded, so did accommodation for cars. By the 1970s it was common for beach houses to have double- or even triple-car garages or carports.

While the size of many beach houses continues to expand, there has been renewed interest in sustainable design. Architect Jon Clements, a director of Jackson Clements Burrows (JCB) Architects, has seen this interest translate into recent briefs. "Many people are opting for solar hot water, double glazing (thermal control) and rainwater retention. Interest in

recyclable materials and plantation-grown timber is also increasing," says Clements. In keeping with sustainable design, the house of 2010 is well ventilated, with air naturally channeled throughout the house and less reliance on air-conditioning. Although the use of recycled materials doesn't always reduce the budget (labour costs are often higher), there's greater awareness to reuse rather than simply replace. Architect Walta Barda, for example, regularly uses recycled materials such as recycled blackbutt. "These materials create an aged patina, as well as being responsive to the environment," he says.

While many architects are designing sustainable beach houses, some new homes along the coastal roads scream for attention. Large reproduction Victorian and Edwardian-style homes, often built in urban fringe housing estates, are also noticeable. Sometimes they're rendered blue or sand-coloured, while others are pristine white, trying to emulate an image from a European postcard. "Transposing a large faux-period home to the coast is unsympathetic to the natural environment. They say nothing about the location or our present culture," says interior designer Debbie-Lyn Ryan, co-director of McBride Charles Ryan Architects & Interior Designers (MCR).

AVALON POINT PHOTOGRAPHY: SIMON RODRIGUES; CAREEL BAY: SIMON KENNY



In contrast, MCR's Mornington Peninsula beach house at Rye is not only contemporary, but responds beautifully to its dense moonah-treed site. Recipient of numerous awards, the Rye beach house also received the World Architecture Festival Best House Award last November. Its design was partially inspired by the Klein Bottle, a model of a surface developed by German mathematician Felix Klein (1849-1925). "It's like a doughnut, you can twist and distort it, but it will only change topographically if it's cut. In a sense, there's no beginning or end," says architect Rob McBride, MCR co-director.

The house, designed for a family with three children, is made of compressed cement sheets with a black metal roof that folds down in part to form an external wall. "We wanted to evoke a sense of the fibrocement beach shacks in the area. We didn't want to make the house feel too precious," says McBride. A front door clad in cork creates an unusual entrance, alluding to a cork stuck in a bottle. When the "cork" is removed, a bright red staircase and walls appear. Inside the house there are no distinct levels. Instead the rooms splay off the staircase around a central void. As you ascend the staircase, a large flexible space functions as a rumpus room. To maximise light as well as the views over

the trees, the open-plan kitchen and living areas are located at the top of the stairs. "Each room pinwheels off the staircase. There's visual connection, but acoustic separation," says Ryan, who sees a shift towards zoning areas in beach houses. "The house has to cater for the family coming together, while still allowing for individual spaces."

Architects have ingenious ways of referencing the bush shack of old. Another beach house on the Mornington Peninsula, at Cape Schanck, resembles a burnt-out log. It also features a 9m cantilevered wing. "We wanted to capture the entire vista over Port Phillip Bay," says Jon Clements.

The form of the house evokes a log, or two branches when both wings are seen in profile. Using one of the covered dunes as an anchoring point, the house extends in two directions. One wing comprises the kitchen and living areas, the other, containing the main bedroom, ensuite and study, is perpendicular to these spaces. Supporting these two wings is a base containing two guest bedrooms, bathroom and second living area.

The palette of materials used in the kitchen and living areas shows different aspects of the hollowed "trunk". The graphic black-and-white kitchen was treated like a cube, with joinery >

Avalon Point beach house, WA (and opposite); Careel Bay beach house (left and below)





Marcus Beach house (and opposite far right); McCraith house, Dromana, Victoria (top right); Klein Bottle house (right)



WALKING THROUGH THE MCCRAITH HOUSE SOME 50 YEARS AFTER IT WAS BUILT STILL CREATES AN ADRENALINE RUSH MANY NEW BEACH HOUSES FAIL TO DELIVER



MARCUS BEACH HOUSE PHOTOGRAPHY: CHRISTOPHER FREDERICK JONES; MCCRAITH HOUSE: PETER WILLE/STATE LIBRARY OF VICTORIA; KLEIN BOTTLE HOUSE: JOHN GOLLINGS

appearing to be carved from a solid form. In contrast, the lounge room features warm materials such as spotted gum around the fireplace and a cedar-lined wall.

The unique local context was also the inspiration for a beach house created by Bark Design. Located at Marcus Beach, south of Noosa in Queensland, the focus of the beach house is a Moreton Bay ash. “The Moreton Bay was in the middle of the site. It had been there for more than 100 years. We thought it was important to integrate it in our design,” says architect Stephen Guthrie, who designed the house with Lindy Atkin. “We wanted to create an oasis around the tree.”

The clients wanted two separate zones for themselves and their children. The prized tree, a local species, takes pride of place in the courtyard separating the two zones. Inside, the tree casts shadows onto a polycarbonate and timber wall that encloses the living area’s striking staircase, as well as on the living room walls. “It’s a way of bringing the landscape inside,” says Guthrie.

Walter Barda was keen to pay homage to the original beach houses of the area when designing his own beach getaway at Palm Beach in NSW. Rather than pull down the original 1940s timber home overlooking Pittwater, he remodelled it. “There was a certain directness about the house. Even though it is relatively modest by today’s standards (about 120sq m), it was well-orientated,” says Barda. He used a palette of simple materials to renovate the house. Recycled blackbutt and

shadow-clad ecoply, a renewable and plantation-grown timber, for example, features extensively.

McMansions, he says, tend to overwhelm a site instead of responding to coastal scrub. “There’s no room left for planting. They’re more appropriate to an urban setting.” Barda sees local councils becoming more concerned with the lack of separation between these large beach houses. “There’s no recognition of the original homes in the area, but generally, local guidelines reflect a more urban typology.” He laments the demise of the more modest beach houses of the 1950s and ’60s, and sees a further problem with people building larger beach houses. “When I take on a brief, I advise clients of their long-term goals. They might presently have four children, but there is a time when they’ll be empty nesters and the house will be far too large.” He suggests including spaces that are multifunctional, living rooms doubling as a study or guest bedroom. While it may be shunned today, Barda sees no problem with shared bedrooms for children. “And you don’t need an ensuite attached to every bedroom.”

Odden Rodrigues Architects’ brief from a couple with three children was for a simple and sturdy house an hour’s drive south of Perth, overlooking Avalon Point with views of the Indian Ocean. “One of the owners spent summer holidays in the area. They wanted something quite robust, like many of the homes built in the 1960s and ’70s. They didn’t want a townhouse on

the coast,” says Simon Rodrigues, now director of Rodrigues Bodycoat Architects. While the house isn’t made of fibroceement and perched on stilts like many homes of that period, it is relatively simple, both in form and materials. Made from concrete tilt panels, galvanised steel beams, concrete floors and a steel roof, the house extends over three levels. Part of the ground floor is nestled into the sand dunes, with half this level almost submerged. This bunker-like area includes storage for rubber dinghies, fishing gear, a pool table and car parking. Craypots and surfboards are also housed in this area.

The Avalon Point beach house has a strong industrial aesthetic. Floors are concrete, as are many of the walls, with some of the doors made of steel. “The owners found many of the fittings in second-hand yards,” says Rodrigues, pointing out the stainless-steel basins in the bathroom. He prefers to design more modest beach houses, but has also noticed the McMansion

encroachment. “Beachside properties are expensive and the more affluent are replacing the simple beach houses,” he says. These large homes may contain all the mod cons, but many don’t respond to their context or the sunlight. “In the west, it’s a mistake not to understand the severity of the afternoon sun. It can make the most idyllic view fade.”

The simple postwar fibroceement shack still exists in many parts of Australia. In less expensive areas along the coast, these homes still provide pleasurable getaways. However, says Ryan, “the cost of a large project home is often difficult to beat. Enlightened people who want an architect-designed beach house that responds to its setting are outweighed by those driven by price”. Even if the original beach shack may be serviceable, the price of land in many areas induces people to build McMansions commensurate with land cost. Ryan feels architects are often marginalised when competing with large-scale coastal developers, but are still well represented.

While sustainable principles are encouraged, the question of size remains. A 40sq beach house primarily used by a couple with occasional guests isn’t a sustainable outcome, even if the house is made from recyclable materials with water tanks, solar power and the best insulation. The McCraith House doesn’t have ensuites or a rumpus room, but walking through it some 50 years after the house was built still creates an adrenaline rush many new palatial beach houses fail to deliver. 🌐