

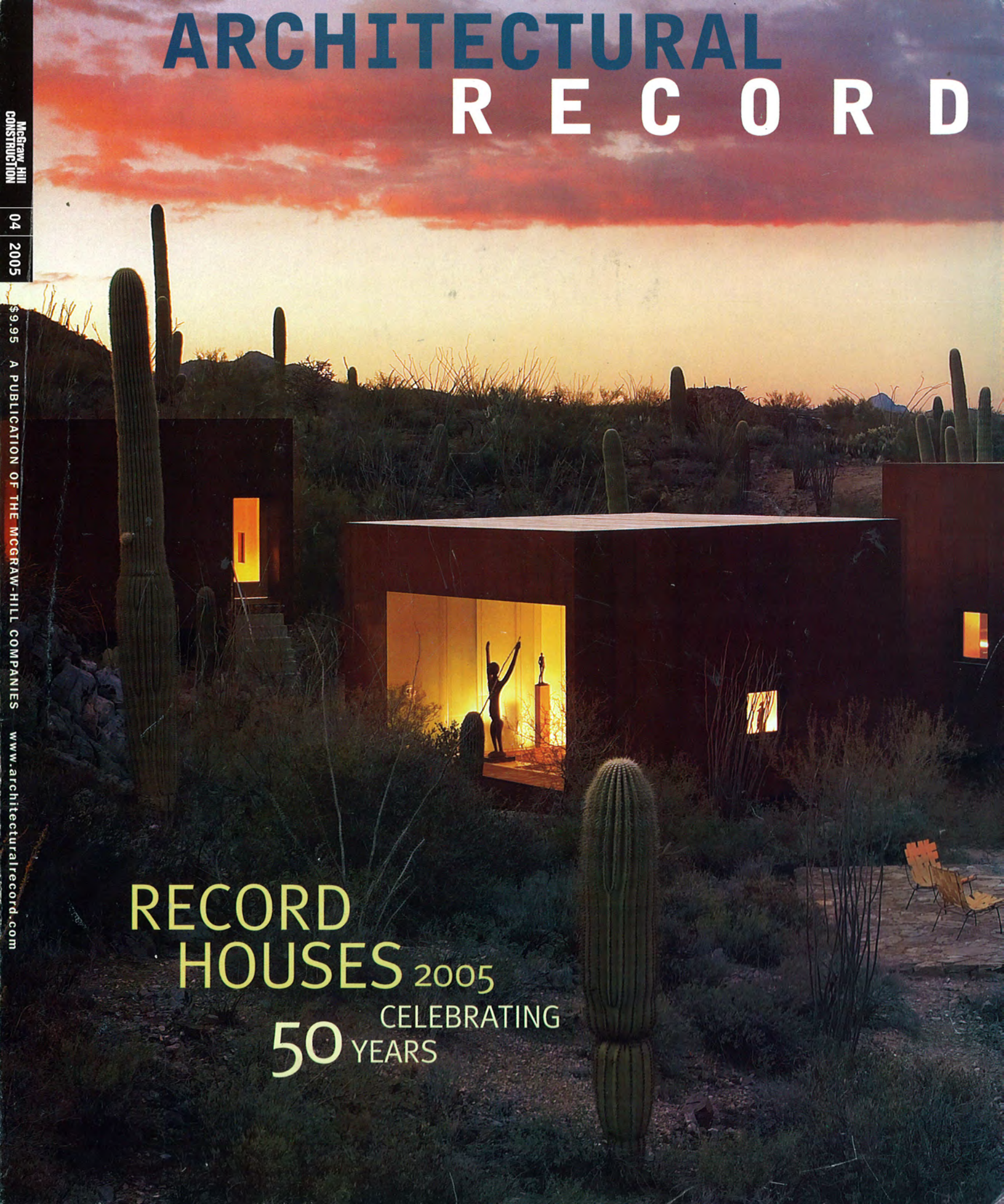
ARCHITECTURAL RECORD

McGraw Hill
CONSTRUCTION

04 2005

\$9.95 A PUBLICATION OF THE MCGRAW-HILL COMPANIES www.architecturalrecord.com

RECORD
HOUSES 2005
50 CELEBRATING
YEARS





The house is sited along a remote and craggy cove, just where a steep slope levels off into flat, grassy terrain extending out to the surf (above and opposite). The master bedroom, at one corner of the building, cantilevers off the ground. The structure also sits on a low wall of stones, collected from the site (above).

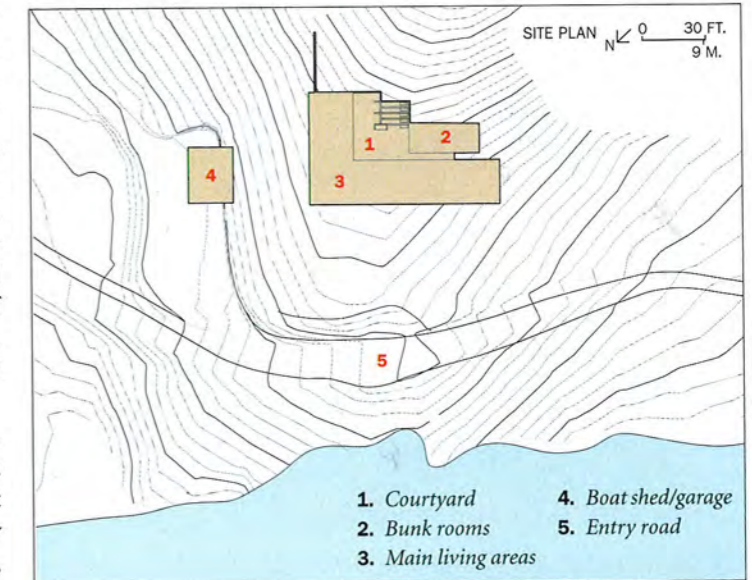
On a rugged island in New Zealand, **Fearon Hay** crafts **SHARK ALLEY HOUSE**, designed to peel back its skin to let the landscape flow through

By Sarah Amelar

To make the journey to Shark Alley House, you travel by boat or light aircraft some 56 miles northeast of Auckland to Great Barrier Island (also known as Aotea), New Zealand. Then, after a spin on the island's serpentine main road, you need tides low enough to let your four-wheel-drive vehicle continue over sand dunes and splash right across an estuary. With only 900 permanent residents and no electrical grid or public water-supply system, this mountainous, 110-square-mile landmass remains mostly rugged and untamed. Its dense bush, rare fauna and flora, and spectacular white sand beaches are "still quite undiscovered even by New Zealanders," according to Jeff Fearon of Auckland-based Fearon Hay Architects, designers of Shark Alley House. Even the house's owners, he adds, found their 30-acre site on an isolated cove "a bit by mistake."

The clients, a civil engineer and his wife, both in their 50s, chanced on the property during a sailing excursion from their home in Auckland. Though recreational sailors sometimes stop over on Great Barrier Island (no relation to the Australian reef), Aucklanders typically spend their leisure time on the islands closer and more accessible to them, where each homeowner doesn't need to provide an independent power source. Besides, as the Hauraki Gulf's barrier to the Pacific, Aotea tends to take hits from prevailing winds and weather systems, especially on its exposed east coast, where Shark Alley House stands. But the island's challenges, its vulnerability and remoteness, also contribute to its natural splendor—the formation of dramatic coastal dunes and bluffs, as well as the survival of native forests, deep bush, and Maori archaeological remains—making it an extraordinary place for hiking, diving, surfing, animal watching, and merely basking in the pristine landscape. So, on that fortuitous visit, the clients got a glimpse of the site and fell for it.

Their architects, when invited to see the parcel, also found its rare beauty striking—inspiring them to find ways to incise a house subtly into the terrain while keeping the occupants in close contact with the landscape. In the end, Fearon Hay took the Miesian dictum of "less is more" to its logical extreme, designing a glassy, Minimalist, one-story structure with thin floor and roof slabs, as well as exterior walls that slide completely open, essentially vanishing, in calm weather. But the strategy



PHOTOGRAPHY: © PATRICK REYNOLDS

Project: Shark Alley House, Great Barrier Island, New Zealand
Architects: Fearon Hay—Tim Hay,

Jeff Fearon, principals
Engineer: Markplan Engineers
General contractor: Offshore Builders





Kitchen and dining areas (above) flow into the living room and courtyard. With all the glazing and storm shutters retracted, the master bedroom turns into a sleeping porch (opposite, bottom) and the main living spaces become an open veranda (above and opposite, middle and bottom). The steep, shrubby hill rising behind the kitchen and dining areas (above and opposite, middle) is part of the owners' 30-acre property.

also made allowances for harsher conditions by including metal storm shutters and a central courtyard, sheltered from high winds.

Protectively, the architects nestled the 2,800-square-foot vacation/weekend house into the base of a hill, just where the grade levels off from a steep, shrubby slope to relatively flat, grassy terrain (long ago cleared as a pasture) that extends out to the surf. This siting gave Fearon Hay expansive land in the house's foreground. "When you have 30 acres, the luxury of space," says Fearon, "you don't want to feel pressed against an edge."

An unpaved driveway through this meadow leads up from the dunes to the house. Along the approach, the building comes into view as a crisp composition of thin, cleanly articulated forms: floor, roof, columns, and a few wall planes. The formal precision and absence of extraneous lines owes much to the architects' deft editing and concealment of potential clutter. Though the house generates its own power from solar cells, for example, the architects hid these panels amid hillside vegetation, rather than bulk up the sleek roofline. And the designers not only removed the parked automobile from this idyllic scene, but also took care to tuck their freestanding garage/boat shed almost imperceptibly into a natural berm.

The house itself, quite modestly scaled, defers to the magnificent setting, but discreetly holds its own. Comfortably grounded, it gestures expressively with one end, containing the master bedroom, cantilevered off the land. When the house's glass exterior walls all slide away behind aluminum storm shutters on tracks—leaving little more than the building's fine bones—the place comes into sharp focus as an open pavilion.

With its skin peeled back, the entire L-shaped interior turns into a breezy veranda, merging indoors with out. Just as the architects intended, the inside spaces—a modest program of two bedrooms, a fluid living/dining/kitchen area, a courtyard, and for the owners' grown children, two bunk rooms—become viewing stations oriented toward the panorama of sea and sky, with distant land formations silhouetted on the horizon. Freed of its glass enclosure, the cantilevered master bedroom, a corner perch, turns into an open-air sleeping porch (from which to glimpse Shark Alley's reputedly harmless sharks). Similarly, the dining area gets its own entirely open corner. When nearly wall-free, the architecture invites you to cast off most of your own garments and pad around barefoot in a bathing suit.

In moderately windy weather, of course, the setup changes. With all the glass panes closed, the 646-square-foot courtyard—complete with a fireplace and views through the house to the ocean—provides a protected outdoor living room, even through the winters, which tend to stay fairly warm, even when strong winds whip up. In a true hurricane, the structure would become a closed box, with storm shutters drawn.

Though Shark Alley House may appear delicate, especially when scantily clad, it's surprisingly robust. Designed for such harsh climatic conditions as salt, wind, and storms, the building relies on concrete block and local stones as a solid base, anchoring the steel structure. Durable materials—including poured-concrete floors and reinforced-steel window frames—continue from outside in. "There are no finishes: What you see is what you get," says Fearon Hay partner Tim Hay. "Everything had to be sturdy—practically bulletproof."

And though the elegant formal language of Mies van der Rohe permeates this house, Fearon Hay did not aspire to the polished, ultra-refined materials of his work. Even where the team—in a seemingly Miesian manner—consistently articulated steel columns separately from windows and walls, the architects offer a pragmatic explanation: The well-sealed pillars needed to stand inboard from the glass for protection from corrosion.

A range of local conditions presented Fearon Hay with challenges they had not encountered in their previous experience with primarily residential work. Building on a remote island meant shipping in nearly everything—even on the house's rather modest budget. "And while can-





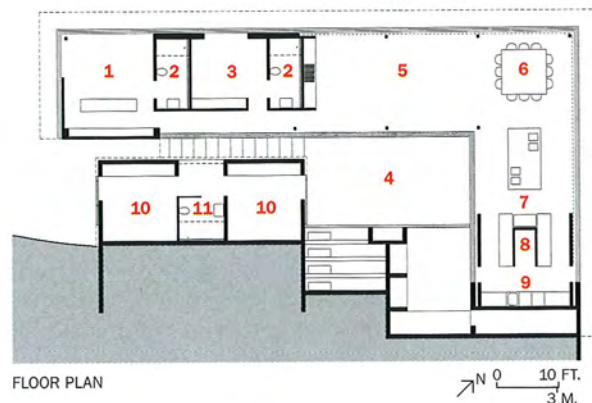
tileriving the master bedroom seemed like a good idea in design,” recalls Hay, “it later became clear how impractical it would be to ship in precast concrete. So we had to trust a local builder, one we hadn’t known before, to pour the entire concrete structures on-site.” Miraculously, on an island where the typical house is far less ambitious and made of timber, the architects found a contractor who was not only willing to take on their Modernist concrete, steel, and glass project, but also able to execute it skillfully.

Word of the success traveled, and another Great Barrier Islander has already commissioned a Fearon Hay house (which, incidentally, will include much more timber). With clients, as with contractors, says Fearon, his firm tries to “work with people who are sure of what they’re after and willing to push the limit.” ■

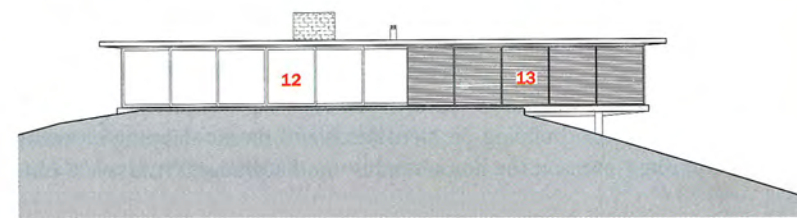
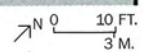
Sources

Curtain wall: Vantage Aluminum

Concrete masonry: Firth



FLOOR PLAN



FRONT ELEVATION

- 1. Master bedroom
- 2. Bathroom
- 3. Bedroom
- 4. Courtyard
- 5. Living
- 6. Dining
- 7. Kitchen
- 8. Storage
- 9. Laundry
- 10. Bunk room
- 11. Bunk room
- 12. Glass panels
- 13. Storm shutters



The courtyard, with its fireplace (opposite, bottom) and ocean views (above), serves as an outdoor living room. In windy weather, exterior glass panels shelter this patio. But with the panels open, it merges with the living/dining/kitchen area (opposite, top right). Bunk rooms border this courtyard (opposite, top left).