

# California dreaming



BEFORE  
& AFTER

Moving from California to Auckland's Takapuna beach, an American family continue their love affair with the sea in an elegantly updated 1980s house overlooking the

water. Text Margo White Photography Patrick Reynolds





**ABOVE** The home is shaped around the sea views and a north-facing courtyard. The black door at the entrance opens to a long corridor with a glimpse of the sea at the end. A key move in the renovation was relocating the stairwell that connects with the lower level to the main hall (it was previously tucked away in another part of the house), which makes the home's levels feel better connected. The main living areas – the dining and sitting room, and the kitchen – are on the upper level, along with the study overlooking the courtyard (at right in this photograph).

Peter and Stephanie Smillie migrated to New Zealand three years ago from California, looking for a better place to raise their 10-year-old twin sons. More specifically, they came from Malibu, a city most famous for its sandy palm-lined beaches and for its unusually high population of celebrity residents. “We wanted to come to the real world,” says Peter. “And Malibu doesn’t really qualify.”

The Smillies previously owned a commercial production company, but they now describe themselves as retired. “I wanted to be able to spend more time with my kids,” says Peter. “There’s more to life than sitting around making commercials.”

When they decided to move to New Zealand it was always a given that they would live on the beach. The family is used to being near the ocean, having always lived in beachfront properties and having spent a lot of time in boats. In fact, they sailed to New Zealand from Italy, although it took them several years to get here as the journey involved some long-term stopovers en route, including lengthy stays in the Caribbean, Mexico and Panama.

They ended up buying one of the few dozen houses located right on Takapuna Beach, on Auckland’s North Shore, where the waves roll in at the bottom of the garden and the outlook is over sand and sea, Rangitoto Island and Tiritiri Matangi. “I’m a

sailor and surfer, and I can sit and watch that view all day,” says Peter.

The house was originally designed by Fairhead Sang Carnachan in the late 1980s and while it was a handsome modernist structure, it also reflected the fashions of the decade in which it was built. “There were a lot of walls and a lot of marble,” says Peter.

Initially they planned a major reconfiguration of the house, which would have included shifting the kitchen and dining room downstairs. This is where they imagined they would spend most of the day, on the same level as the pool, the courtyard, the garden and the beach.

However, as Julian Guthrie (of Auckland’s Godward Guthrie Architects) began to develop suitable renovation plans, it became evident that there wouldn’t be much of the original house left. By then the family had been living in situ for some months, and had decided they liked the fundamental layout after all. “The bones were here,” says Peter. “It was just the finish and materials used that were ’80s. So we literally just expanded on that. Basically, we took out walls, windows and doors, and added more light.”

Both client and architect agreed on the governing philosophy: it was about breaking down boundaries between rooms, between the outside and the inside, between the upstairs and the downstairs. The transformative effect is evident from the moment you step across the threshold.



**ABOVE** Existing pillars were retained at the entrance, as were the distinctive white-painted brick walls; the cross is an antique Irish road marker from European Antiques. **BELOW** Stephanie in the upper gallery/hallway. A wall at the end of the corridor was removed to allow a glimpse of the glorious sea views. Stephanie and Peter’s son Travis, and his friend Rainer sit below in the enclosed courtyard. A second living area at the bottom of the stairs contains a TV and allows access to the pool outside, and the lawn leading down to Takapuna Beach.



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**ABOVE** The view across the pool and out to sea from the lower deck area, which opens off the lower-level living area. The decking – made of Vitex, a sustainable hardwood – was built around existing plants. **BELOW** The upper living area features treasures collected on the owners' travels, including a cabinet from Morocco and a wall hanging from Africa. Peter and Stephanie are enthusiastic collectors of photography: The photograph above the elephant figure is by Steve McCurry, and the photograph of Ray Charles is by Norman Seeff.



**ABOVE** A new staircase connects the upper and lower levels. The passage downstairs features built-in bookshelves and doors opening to the sheltered courtyard. The photograph of James Belushi is by Norman Seeff. The guest room is at right in this photograph, and also opens onto the courtyard. **BELOW** The view over the sea towards Rangitoto from the living areas on the home's upper level. The protected pohutukawa lost one of its central branches in a storm. A gate at the bottom of the property opens onto Takapuna Beach.

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Both architect and client agreed on the governing philosophy: it was about breaking down boundaries between rooms, between outside and inside, between upstairs and down. The result is a transformation.

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Peter and Stephanie's twin boys Travis and Luke, and their friend Rainer, leap into the pool. Landscaper Scott Humphreys supervised the planting of large palm trees amongst existing natives. The pool is edged with lava rock matching that used for retaining walls along the beach.





**ABOVE** In contrast to the sea views out the front, the kitchen windows open southwards and look out onto cool, lush bush on the boundary of the property. The kitchen was designed to accommodate a busy family, with room for several people to move about easily. The wide benchtops can handle plenty of culinary action while guests watch from the high stools. They can also choose to turn around and focus on the action on the beach.



**ABOVE** The study is a peaceful retreat that still has a connection to the rest of the house via views across the courtyard to the living areas. A stand of native plants outside softens the building's lines. **BELOW** The master bedroom is located on the lower level with a deck out to the pool and beach. The impressive four-poster bed is from Bali. Crisp white wooden shutters add a casual feel to the room and provide privacy from the beach.

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Previously, when you arrived at the front door you saw a wall at the end of the hallway. The idea was that the best things about a house could be revealed gradually—the exceptional vista was the surprise you got after rounding a corner. Now that the wall between the rooms at the northern end of the house has been removed, along with the wall at the end of the hallway, a tantalising view of the Hauraki Gulf confronts you from the front doorstep.

Shifting the staircase to the middle of the hallway was a key feature. Previously off to the side, it may have been more discreet, but had the effect of dividing the house – Julian compared it to living in two separate apartments. What a difference a prominently placed stairwell can make: it invites you to come on down to the internal courtyard or to the infinity pool, to the garden or the beach.

As mentioned, much of the renovation has been about getting rid of what Peter describes as “80s horrors”, such as marble and terracotta tiles and steel balustrades, replacing them with a more simple, uncluttered aesthetic. “It was one of those houses, the more you took away, the better it looked,” says Julian. “And that’s what Peter wanted, to put as little as possible back.”

Steel railings on the front deck have been replaced by glass banisters, and a series of smaller glass doors opening onto it have been superseded by the largest glass doors money could buy. “It’s about

creating a sense of the place as being breezy and beachy,” says Julian.

Julian describes Peter as “one of the best clients I’ve ever had” and also one of the most involved, whether the subject of debate was windows, plumbing or the particular shade of white. It could have driven some architects nuts, but Julian enjoyed working with someone so enthusiastic and informed about design. (Peter had gone through the process of building a house three times before he arrived in New Zealand. “I think I’m a frustrated architect,” he says.)

Besides, architect and client tended to agree on just about everything. The longest debate occurred over the floorboards. Peter wanted a light floor, but anything too rustic would have clashed with the contemporary aesthetic of the house, while many of the more contemporary finishes looked fake. To cut a long story (which involved about 20 floor samples) short, they settled on American oak; using long, wide planks that were then finished with a white oil that bleached out some of the yellow tones of the wood. Being matt, it allows bare feet to still feel the grain of the wood.

The renovation hasn’t interfered with the original structure. “It’s a timeless, classic, modern structure,” says Julian. “That’s what appeals. It would have been tempting to change it completely, but by simply working around the existing structure, it will remain a timeless, classic, modern house.” •





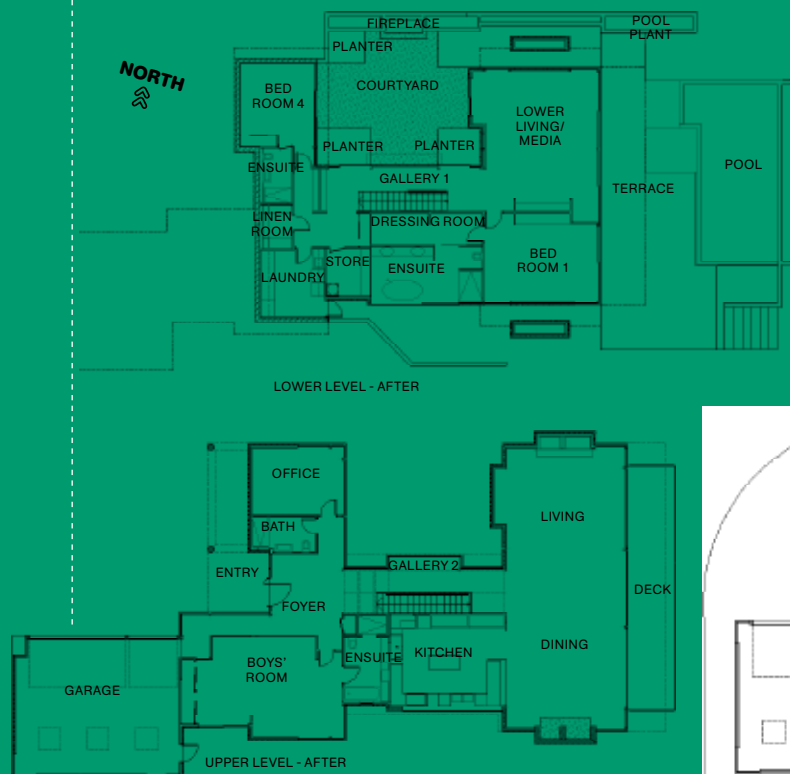
# Julian Guthrie

**GODWARD GUTHRIE ARCHITECTURE**



Auckland architect Julian Guthrie had to take a 1980s classic designed by Fairhead Sang Carnachan and update it, without losing the essence of the original structure he admired. "Working from someone else's design has

its challenges, but there is also a great satisfaction in revealing the 'silk purse' hiding within and the enormous impression that the most subtle changes can make," he says. Julian's design was largely about dissolving boundaries and celebrating the architecture of light. "In complete contrast to renovating a villa, an architecturally designed house may have a strong original design intention, which must be either adhered to or fought against," he says.



## Living room

All the living areas (above) were on the top floor with bedrooms below and the owners were keen to swap this around, but after living in the house for 18 months they decided to stick with the house's original configuration, but with some much-needed changes.

## Courtyard

The house was built around an enclosed courtyard (below) and this concept was retained in the new



layout, along with the existing plants. Decking was laid over the paving to provide a seamless transition between inside and out. Wider doors and windows enhanced the connection with this area, while extra tropical and native plants were added to make it more lush.



## Hallway

The existing hall (above) at ground level now accommodates a staircase to the left, which originally divided the house in two. It now provides a vertical link between the upper and lower floors.

## The gallery

The entrance hallway (below) before the main staircase was shifted into it. The other end of the hall now provides a glimpse of the amazing views of the Hauraki Gulf, thanks to the



removal of a wall. "The original architects saw the view as something to be discovered once you travelled through the house. We saw it as something to exploit in the nicest possible way," Julian says.

