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Shack Vernacular

Confoundingly simple
yet simply profound
Nicholas Murcutt redefines
the Aussie shack.

Nicholas Murcutt
Architectus
ARM
m3architecture
Philip Harmer
Lindsay & Kerry Clare



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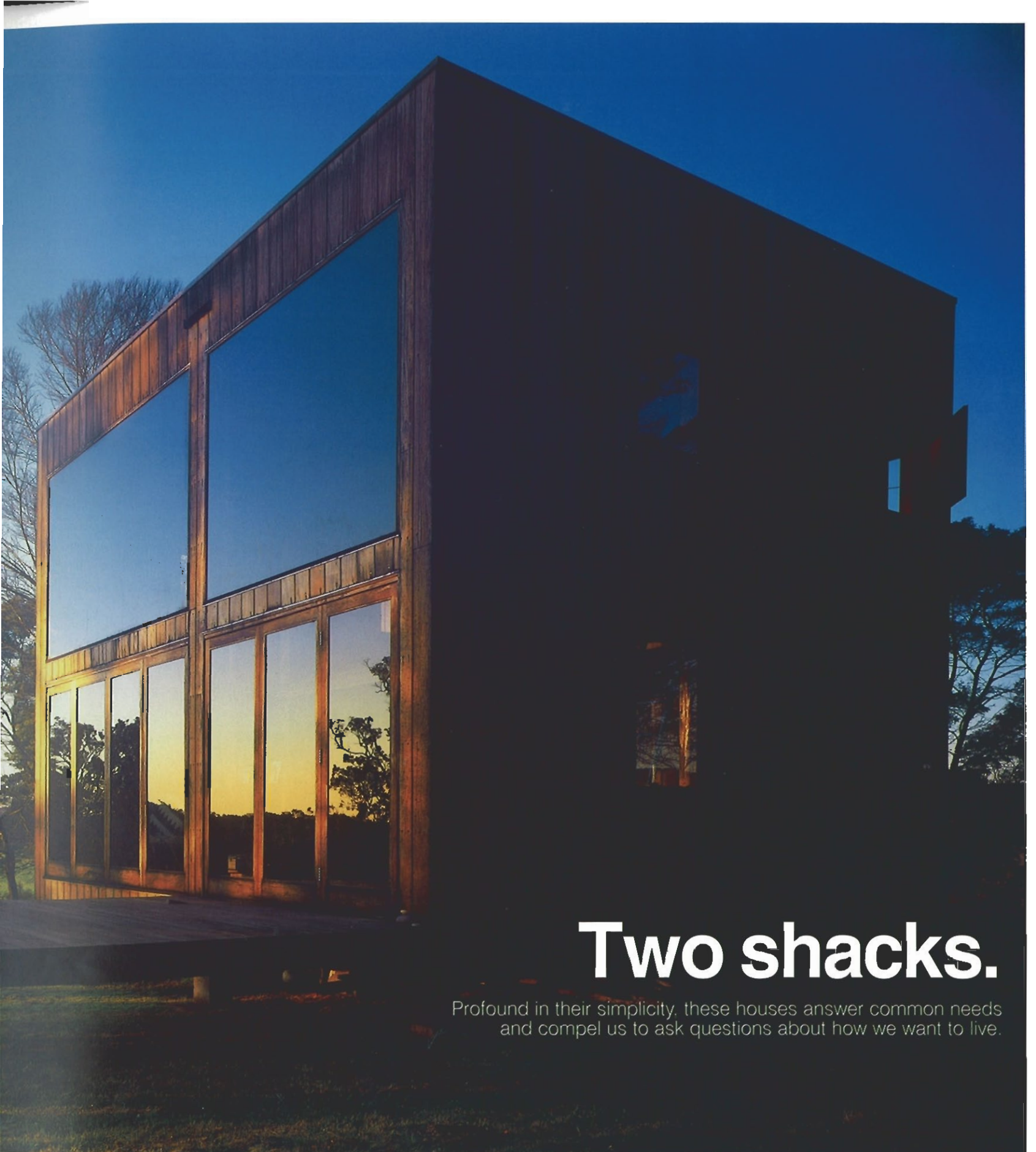
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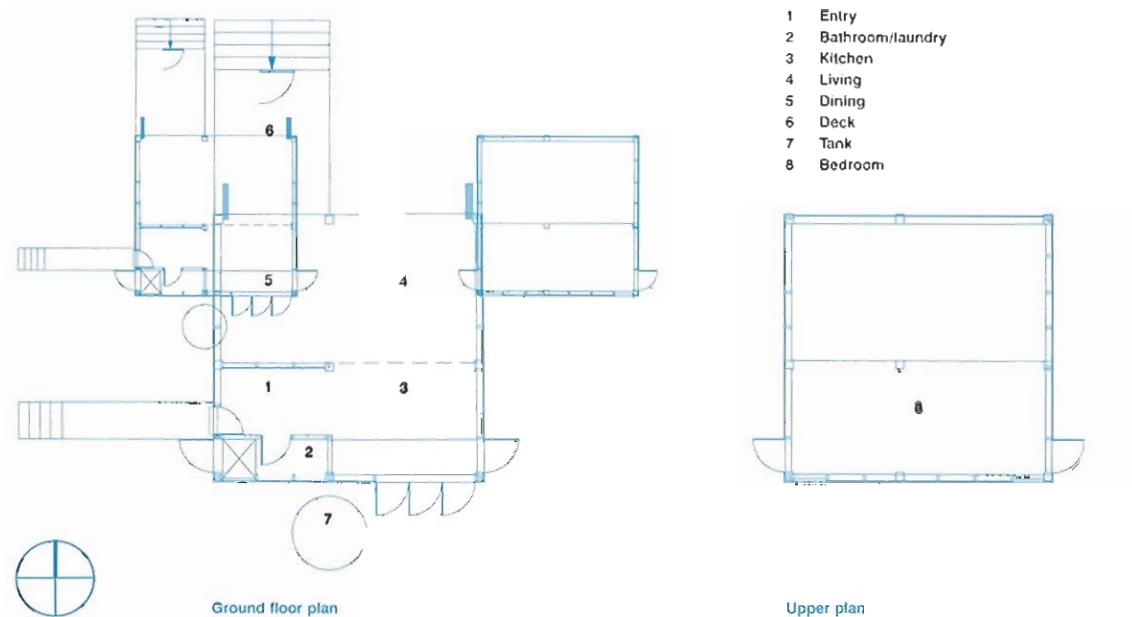
Two shacks.

Profound in their simplicity, these houses answer common needs and compel us to ask questions about how we want to live.

01 An idyllic setting for a contemporary take on the Australian shack.

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Sitting on the warm timber deck at Nick Murcutt's 'box' house, located in the southern highlands of NSW, eating fresh BBQ-smoked prawns and salmon steak in my fingers, I found myself browsing the *Sydney Morning Herald's* real estate guide. A recently completed architect-designed 'shack' at Saddleback Mountain was for sale. The advertising blurb described a "modernist home... inspired by memories of cliff-top picnics". The photo of the interior that accompanied the advertisement - illustrating an example of hard-edged eastern-suburbs chic - brought to mind images of gleaming white *Belle* helicopters trawling the south coast, dropping in mercy packages of white Swan chairs and Vola tap fittings, in the hope that there might be a cliff-top picnic going on. Somewhere.

And so, with the replacement of the ungainly fibro cottages that once dotted our holiday destinations with highly wrought holiday houses, or, at worst, examples of mock-federation suburbia, have we seen the death of the shack?

The fibro shack takes us back to a time when everyone was a handyman, summer days seemed longer and escape to an isolated beach was far easier than it is now. Most importantly, the shack provided a built record of a different Australia than that suggested by the suburbs where the shack dwellers came from - of one where irony, invention and generosity flourished - a magical world far from the demands of city existence.

In the mid eighties, Glenn Murcutt's iconic house at Bingie Bingie announced a new type of holiday retreat: a precisely detailed steel and aluminium enclosure that suggested the redundancy of the comparatively rabid fibro concoctions that had served us so well for so long. While this house and its relatives offered powerful new ways of inhabiting our landscape, the architect's quest for perfection saw the marginalisation of the humour, unscheduled complexity and inbuilt imperfection that defined a shack existence.

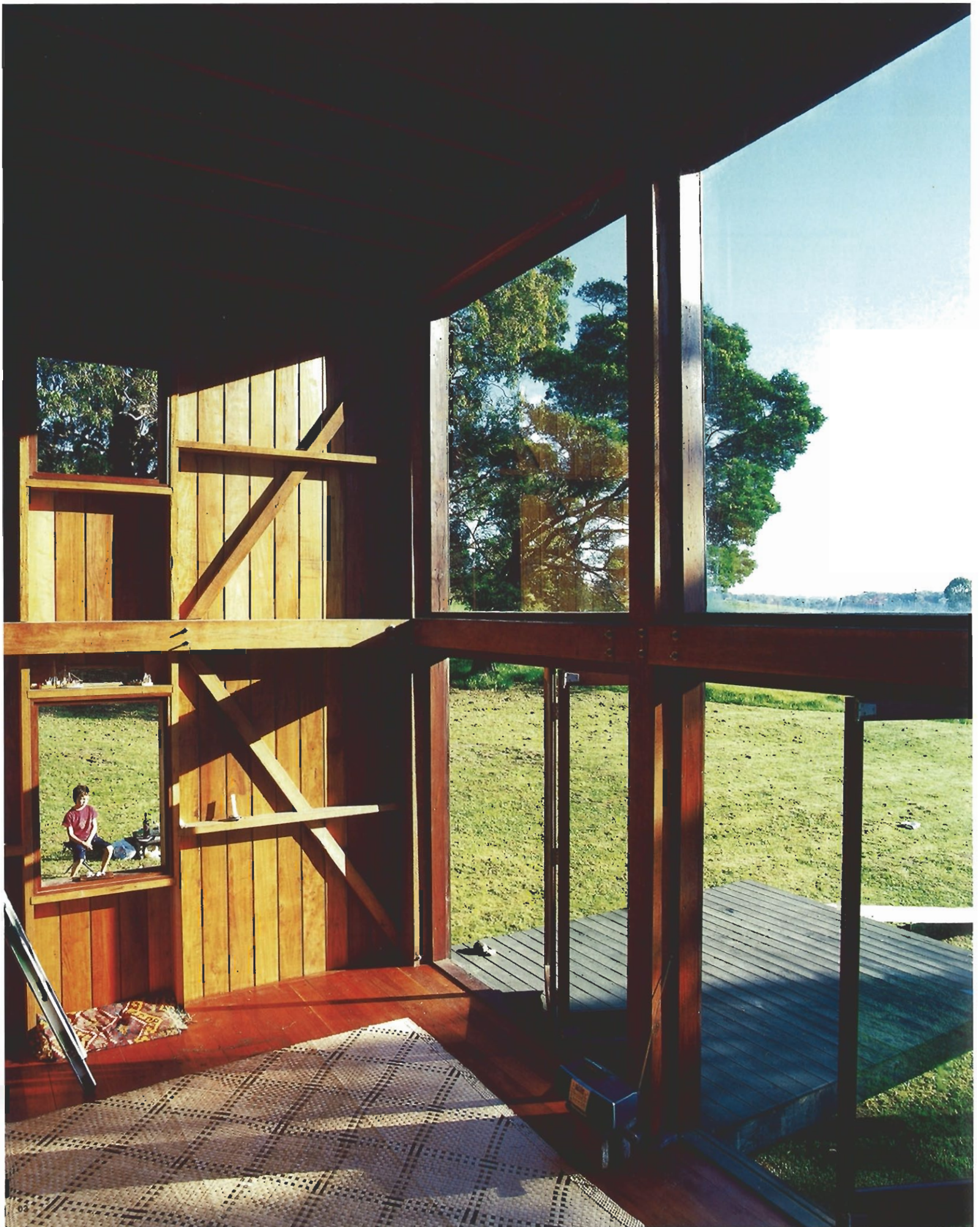
Given that the high points of Glenn Murcutt's career have occurred in a series of iconic holiday retreats, it is of interest that investigations into the nature of the shack as an idea have permeated a number of projects in his son's practice over the past few years. For Nicholas Murcutt - a highly sociable character driven by an addictive curiosity, sense of inquiry, and prodigious ability to extract a sense of 'occasion' from the most mundane circumstances - the commission for a 'shack' set into train a complex and highly layered series of speculations into the nature of both this building type and of the social conditions that underpin it.

Murcutt understands the shack as fundamentally 'non-essential' in nature. Crude, unfinished, and encompassing a disarming sense of humour in the way it is located, made and embellished - by those delightfully insane contraptions invented by Grandad to solve seemingly simple problems - the shack exposes an informal sensibility that flourishes in the unguarded 'holiday' context. For Murcutt, this non-essential quality is a means of connecting with the ungraspable magic inherent in the works of architecture to which he is drawn, such as Aalto's lyrical fireplace at Villa Mairea, Le Corbusier's snorkel-like skylights at La Tourette, or, more recently, Shigeru Ban's dramatic billowing facade in the Curtain Wall house. In each case, the embrace of the 'non-rational' propels these works to their seminal stature.

Murcutt is acutely aware of what drives him in his work, harbouring a strong belief in self-knowledge as key to the practice of architecture. "You must know what moves you... what things in architecture, and life, really hit you in the stomach." This knowledge translates, at an architectural level, to a deep interest in the nature of architecture itself, in its own history, references, techniques, and solutions. He notes, "there is a tendency to position architecture within general/pop culture as opposed to within its own culture... as a result architects may not always understand the particular weight, time, and culture of their own profession, and therefore find it difficult to express in their work."

As an emerging architect, one finds a highly exposed sense of exploration in Murcutt's buildings, thus offering a far greater variation in output than normally occurs in a more mature, consistent and edited oeuvre. The two projects featured here, designed simultaneously for very different clients, budgets and locations, encapsulate a series of contradictions and similarities that offer a rich space for further speculation. These buildings do not just 'solve' problems, but ask questions about our own values and how we want to live.

Murcutt's first shack, completed in 1999, is simply known as 'the box'. A blunt object located in the hills behind Tathra, NSW, 'the box' was designed as an economical enclosure for an artist couple and their son. Murcutt designed the building, without having seen the site, as an almost prototypical object, a six metre by six metre by six metre timber cube, the perfect Rossi archetype and Rouseau primitive hut rolled into one, via a geometric tweak from John Hedjuk. 'The box' is literally a timber crate, in both its form and construction, built by a local builder from local hardwood throughout and with traditional construction, detailing and bracing techniques that can be found in rural locations from the Norwegian fjords to Tasmania's Huon Valley.





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Project Summary Box House ■ **Principal architect** Nicholas Murcutt ■ **Project team** Nicholas Murcutt, Temara Ripamonti ■ **Consultants** ■ **Engineer** Andrew Marshman and Associates Pty Ltd ■ **Builder** Colin Jack ■ **Size** 50sq.m ■ **Time to complete** 6 months ■ **Council** Bega Shire ■ **Materials** ■ **Walls** Select north coast stud frame ■ **Wall linings** Exposed boards; dressed studs ■ **Cladding** Woolley Butt ■ **Roof** Galvanised iron ■ **Guttering** Galvanised iron ■ **Paint** Feast watson clear oil ■ **Windows** Tallowood ■ **Doors** Woolley Butt ■ **Glazing** 6.38 laminated clear, 10mm toughened, slightly tinted ■ **Hardware** Henderson sliding tracks ■ **Heating/cooling systems** None, fire outside ■ **Interior materials** ■ **Ceiling** Clear-finished ply and exposed rafters ■ **Internal walls** Woolley Butt ■ **Glass** 6.38 laminate ■ **Lighting** Candles; gas lamps ■ **Flooring** Select north coast hardwoods ■ **Surfaces** Hardwood ■ **Hardware** Lockwood deadlock wide throw hinges.

03 The simplicity and precision of the structure is married with the tactility of the raw timber.

04 & 05 Secluded sleeping quarters - with vast or framed views of the landscape.
06 & 07 Candle light sets the box aglow and, in the absence of electricity, illuminates it beyond dusk.