



# CABIN CREW

A creative couple makes a tree change with a difference, building a 'bush retreat' in a city suburb with a ton of design savvy and new baby daughter in tow

WORDS & STYLING JACKIE BROWN PHOTOGRAPHY JAMES DECK

**DECK** Sliding doors create a seamless flow between the house and deck. Leather-trimmed butterfly chair, Muumuu Design. Pot and cactus, The Pot Warehouse. Sofa, Freedom.

**EXTERIOR** (opposite) The house is constructed from FSC merbau with cedar windows, doors and trims. It has a Shadowclad plywood skin, painted Dulux Domino.

## cheat sheet

**Who lives here** Architect Ava Shirley and builder Michael Hilton, director of Beach Houses Australia, with their 18-month-old daughter Una, and cats Django and Gatsby.

**Style of home** A mid-century-inspired dwelling at the rear of an existing property, nestled under two red gums on Sydney's northern beaches.

**🕒** Building the new 60-square-metre home took nine months.

**💰** The couple spent \$1.4 million on buying the property so their budget of \$250,000 for the 'cabin' was tight.





## LESSONS LEARNT

### “Collaboration is everything”

AVA SHIRLEY, ARCHITECT/OWNER

“Michael and I discussed every detail until we were both satisfied it was the best outcome based on function, aesthetics and budget. At the end of the build we had a newfound appreciation for the skills the other brought to the process. On any job like this, cultivate a co-operative nature and make sure you engage passionate people who respect your situation. Also, trust the advice of professionals and allow them to make brave or bold decisions.”



### GREAT FINDS

**FROM TOP** Skold sheepskin rug, \$349, Ikea. Eames chair, \$775, Living Edge. River Weave rug in White (1.6m x 2.3m), \$1019, Amigos De Hoy. Leander 'Linea' cot, \$860, Baby Village. Flow resin soy dish in Dark Horn, \$45, Dinosaur Designs. Pieni Unikko cushion cover, \$53, Marimekko. Eton sofa in Tan Vintage, \$2159, Freedom. Dulux Wash&Wear acrylic paint in Battle Dress, \$42.60 per 1L, Bunnings.

ADDITIONAL PRODUCT SOURCING: NATALIE JOHNSON.  
PAINT COLOUR MAY VARY ON APPLICATION

**MAIN BEDROOM** New bed linen from Cultiver looks great with cushions Ava rescued from her parents' attic. The copper wire pig is by Sophie Toupein, co-owner of High Swan Dive in Newcastle. **NURSERY** (opposite top) A vintage Parker chair slots in next to the cot. Rug, Ikea. Flower artwork by Bridie Watt. **BATHROOM** (opposite bottom) Birch plywood cabinetry features in here as well. Icon aged-brass taps, Astra Walker.



“This is also a great party house. We had more than 100 people here once. We emptied the main room and turned it into a dance floor” AVA

In fact, when the concrete slab was poured, leaves from these trees fell and cast fossils into the finish – nature literally making their imprint in the foundations of the home.

Once inside, guests feel as if they are in a treehouse rather than a regular dwelling. Surrounded by native flora, it could be a hideaway in the bush because there is almost nothing to suggest its location in a pocket of suburbia. To enhance the sense of space, many of the walls don't meet the ceiling. Instead, joinery partitions off the key spaces such as the main bedroom, and further separation is achieved via frameless glass. A subtle change in levels between the private and more public zones has been integral in creating distinct spaces under the one roof. Off the living space, large sliding doors open up completely to the deck and garden, blurring the boundary between inside and out.

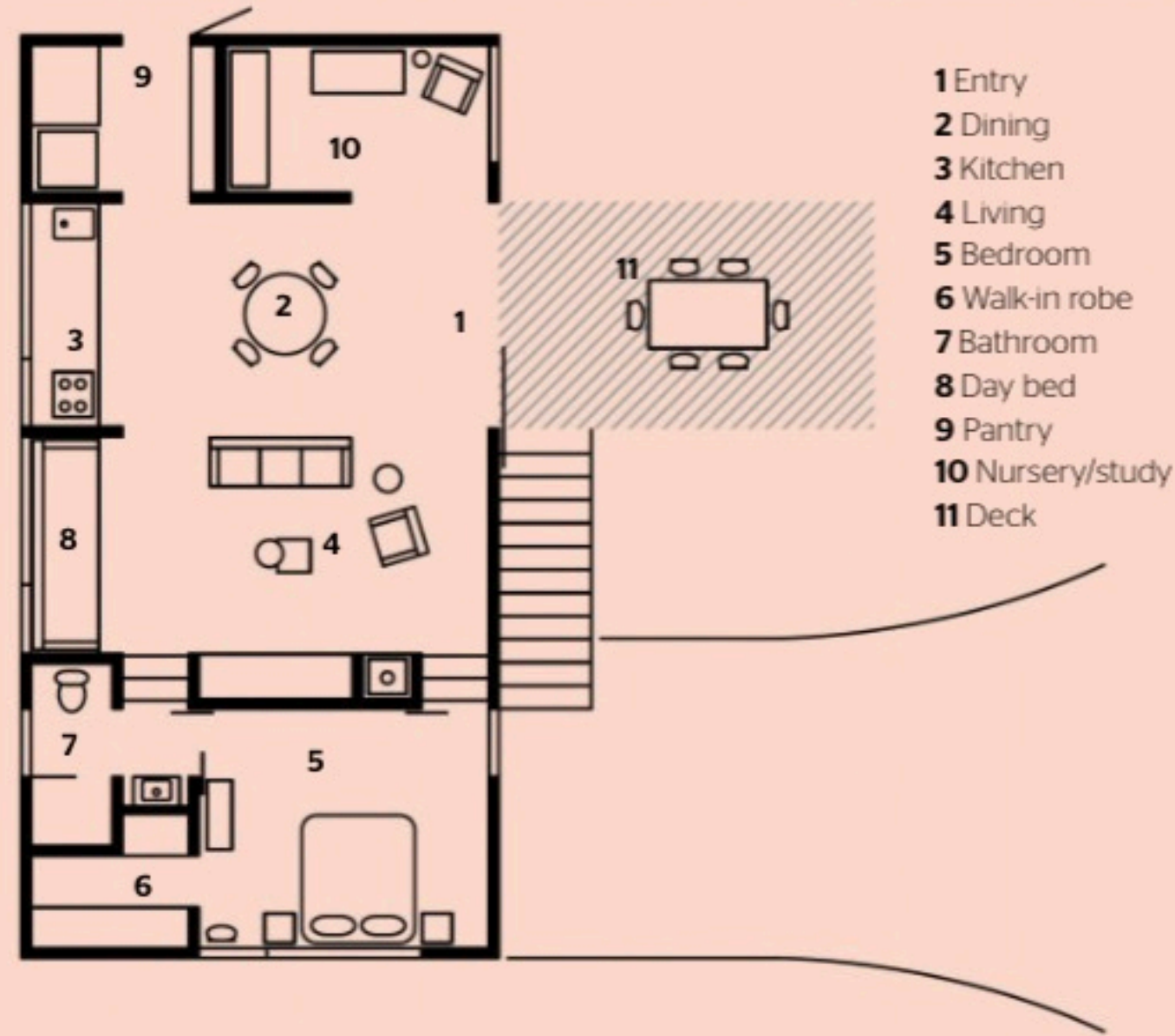
The angophora trees, which shed mottled silver bark to reveal a crimson tone and whose grey-green leaves are visible from every window, informed the home's palette. Using colour as a design tool to demarcate zones, the couple tucked their study (which soon became a nursery) behind a green sliding wall, and shielded the bedroom and ensuite with burgundy-painted joinery.

Despite its small footprint, the house was designed to work hard to accommodate the party of three. “We dedicated a lot of space to joinery and storage so everything could be put away,” says Ava, adding, “It's especially important to be tidy when you live in a small house, but I must admit, I'm pretty terrible at practicing what I preach. Michael worries about the mess I make, but I call it 'being creative'.” However, the home has been wonderful for Una, though Ava says “it possibly lets in a little *too* much natural light to be conducive to a baby sleeping”.

It may be a new build, but the house already feels as if it contains years' worth of stories. The layering of furniture, knick-knacks and art means that visitors are immediately drawn to its personality and warmth. “We've spent very little money on furniture over the years; a lot of it has been sourced at op shops, on the side of the road or as hand-me-downs. There's a healthy smattering of Ikea in there, too,” says Ava, adding that much of the art is by her, from friends or family or bought during the couple's travels, and every so often they open the home to their friends and family. “It's a great party house. We had more than 100 people here once – we set up a bar in the carport and emptied the main room, turning it into a dance floor.”

After three happy years in their couple's retreat/mini family home/party house, they're already planning a move into the large Art Deco house at the front of the property. “It needs a renovation,” Ava points out, “and we've got itchy feet again.” **10**

To see more projects by Ava and Michael, follow them on Instagram @avashirley.architect and @beachhousesaustralia; @\_woodsquared



**LIVING AREA** Custom joinery by Ava's dad, Dean Shirley of Wood Squared, keeps things tidy. The Parker chair is one of a pair found on eBay, restored by Adam Stewart at Modanest and covered in Warwick 'Plateau' fabric. Rug, Lounge Lovers. David Bromley throw, Mark Tuckey. Artwork by Emily Pwerle, through Art Mob.



“We were immediately drawn to the gum trees and took a lot of inspiration from them”

AVA SHIRLEY, ARCHITECT/OWNER

**DINING ZONE** The poured-concrete floor is sleek and practical, its darker tone created by adding black oxide. Orange-red Earnes chairs, Herman Miller. Rug, Ikea. Icon tapware in Aged Brass, Astra Walker. To the right is the nursery, screened by a door painted Dulux Battle Dress.





**DINING AREA** The table and timber chair in this space are from Organic Modernism. Bowl, Dinosaur Designs. Among the diverse artworks are a woman's face on silk by Gabriela Hirst, a school friend of Ava's; a still life Ava drew at eight; and prints sourced on a trip to Cuba.

**FAMILY PORTRAIT** (opposite) Ava, Michael and baby Una.



**T**hose who know Ava Shirley and Michael Hilton agree on one thing: the couple know how to make beautiful houses, and babies. Back in 2015, well before the latter was born, the pair was making the move back to Sydney after a stint in Newcastle, where Ava had been completing a master's degree. They had already cut their teeth on the renovation of a weatherboard cottage in Islington and now, back in their home town, they were hungry for another project.

"Whatever we bought, we wanted to capitalise on our skills as architect and builder," says Ava. As 'chief financial controller', Michael realised they could better afford a mortgage on a house than an apartment – as long as they could build a secondary dwelling and rent out the main home to supplement the repayments. Finding a site that could hold a second house narrowed the search considerably, and the pair quickly came across a property on a large, steep block in North Manly. The house was completely disconnected from the upper portion of the site (a downside for many), but the couple saw a dream opportunity. The second garden area even had rear-lane access, making it the perfect site for another home and carport.

The rear portion of the block was terraced over two levels, so Ava and Michael worked with it to design what they affectionately dub their 'granny flat'. Two large angophoras or Sydney red gums provided a beautiful canopy under which to site their new 60-square-metre home and helped inspire some ideas for the design. "We were immediately drawn to the trees and took a lot of inspiration for the house from them," Ava explains.