

{PROJECT}

SEAGRASS HOUSE, TATHRA

{ARCHITECT}

WELSH + MAJOR ARCHITECTS



BELLEVARE

Welcome to Building with Belvedere: Insights.

In this edition, we hear about an excellent house in Tathra.

Owners Paula and Drew had fond memories of building with Belvedere in the 80s so it was obvious who to call when it came to building their new project, Seagrass House. Designed by Chris Major of Welsh + Major Architects, Seagrass House sits atop a steep slope, exposed to coastal elements and potential bushfires. Belvedere's Steve O'Ryan worked closely with Paula, Drew, and Chris to produce an outstanding house they are all proud of.

We hear from owner Paula Newitt and from Architect Chris Major about their experience working with Steve and the Belvedere team.

We hope you enjoy their stories.

As always, we welcome any questions, feedback, or opportunities to discuss your next project.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'John Fielding', written in a cursive style.

JOHN FIELDING
AND THE BELVEDERE TEAM







This was an interesting project for us. Tathra is four hundred kilometres from our studio in Sydney which meant it was always going to be a challenge logistically. Before we started, we visited a few times and stayed overnight to get a sense of the location and understand what the site was all about.

Once we were ready for construction, we needed to find a builder that was going to be able to set up and work there. It had to be someone we could trust in terms of quality and detail as well as someone who was able to bring in good tradespeople from different areas. Because we weren't going to be on site as often as usual, it had to be the kind of relationship where we knew that the builder would ask the right questions when they needed to.

The clients, Paula and Drew, had built a house in Canberra with Bellearde back in the 80s and had fond memories of the experience of working with John Fielding. Site Manager, Steve O'Ryan, has a lot of connections down in that part of southern NSW and the fact that he knew the locality and he was used to working in country areas was another important part of the decision to choose Bellearde.

It's a steep block and very exposed to the coastal elements. The little cottage that was there previously had been in Paula's family for some time. There was a lot of emotional attachment to the house itself and to how the site had been used in the past. One of the key things for us was taking the elements that they loved about those experiences and working out how

we could embody them in a new house that was able to deal with the slope, the bushfires, the height limits and the proximity to the sea. All of those considerations, that one might consider restraints, we saw as the opportunities. They inspired us to work hard on the design—to find a design that could encapsulate a thoughtful response to all of those things simultaneously.

Paula and Drew wanted to have a single level that they could live in most of the time without having to deal with stairs. That set the program of the place being effectively a single bedroom house on one level. We were elevated out of the ground so we could get the views and level access but that also gave us the opportunity to cantilever that upper floor into the tops of the trees, like the prow of a boat—an almost intuitive response to the location. Then the extra spaces were created on the lower level where guests can stay and grandchildren can camp out in the bunk-room downstairs.

There are two buildings. The main house is made from brick so it's very protective and deals with all the fire constraints. I know that both Steve and John were bricklayers early in their careers. John even came down to go through the bricks with us. The bricklayers were exceptional and did an absolutely superb job. The bricks that we chose are very beautiful but not particularly regular in their shape. That might have presented a problem but Steve and his team anticipated all of the issues that might arise and managed it thoughtfully and skilfully. The results are stunning.

The second structure is a services building. It's a lighter-weight construction with corrugated cladding on the upper sections and contains the garage, workspace, laundry, and storage. It has some big timber doors that open up to become an undercover/outdoor space. The doors themselves were partly inspired by the timber doors at the local wharf in Tathra which is an iconic building in the area. The carpentry crew were fantastic. They took our designs and produced some work of very high quality, not only on the doors but throughout.

As architects, we don't always make it easy for builders. Steve deserves a lot of credit for being across both the big picture and the fine detail from the moment he started. He was constantly pushing us for detail and resolution early so that he could make sure things were done well. It shows.

The remoteness of the site and the fact that much of the work was completed during lockdowns presented some issues but we always felt the building was in safe hands with Steve and the Bellearde team. The whole build process was expertly undertaken and the workmanship is immaculate.





There was a hundred-year-old beach cottage, casual and cosy, that was originally bought by my parents forty years ago. Family and friends had loved it there. When it came to sadly but necessarily knocking over the old place, we wanted to include some of its flavour and atmosphere in a house that would be around for the long term. Something our sons could inherit from us. It needed to fit into the natural bush environment and make clever use of minimal space.

John Fielding built our first house in 1985 and it was a wonderful experience. I loved it. I must have been a test to John, turning up to site so frequently, but he and the guys always made me feel welcome and always encouraged my input and comments. It was like working with a good friend and it was the same this time around with Bellearde's Steve O'Ryan. I was thrilled when Bellearde agreed to build our house at Tathra. It was just the best outcome.

Building here with Steve was absolutely joyous. He is such a nice guy and we've got a new friend in him. He's practical and intelligent and genuinely valued our involvement in the project. He made us feel that his reason for being was to give superlative form to the design created by our architects and he did so in a way that's resulted in this refined little gem of a house. Steve promised that everything would be done to an exemplary level and he delivered.

I soon gathered that the guys on his team had been together for some time and knew each other well. They're a very cohesive group and all very professional to deal with. It was clear that they have a long-established culture of working to a very high standard. They couldn't have been nicer or more accommodating, so it was an absolute delight to work with them.

The build was not without its challenges. There were many restrictions that impacted on design, construction, and materials. It's a block with some 30 degrees or more of slope. It's very difficult to access for vehicles. It's only fifty metres from the sea so there's a very salty atmosphere. And this area is rated "flame zone" which had a big effect on everything. The Bellearde team took it all in their stride.

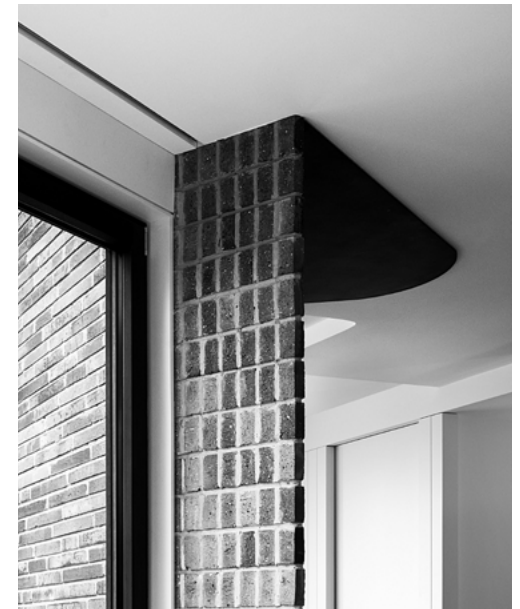
We had chosen these hand-made bricks from Krause Bricks in Victoria. They're beautiful but they do vary a bit in size. Steve works hard to ensure everything is precise and perfect so we wondered if these bricks might throw him. We needn't have worried. Steve and the bricklayers did a superb job.

I was particularly impressed with the hours the team spent working through innovative solutions for some of the key architectural elements—like the superlative joinery solutions in very tight spaces and the brickwork on the ceiling under the cantilevered bedroom. We wondered how it would be possible to lay bricks that would hang out there, in space, without obvious support.

Steve and the guys used a method new to them involving steel rods through the bricks amidst a complicated steel framing arrangement. Very finicky. Steve got the trowel out and laid some himself and it's stunning.

Then there were two walls that called for some unusually thin, sharp wedges of bricks. Again, the team came through and the outcome is amazing. I think it deserves to win an industry award—absolutely exceptional work.

To go from the architect's design to the finished building, there has to be a journey through the detail of how each element can actually be built. We wouldn't have got to where it is without Bellearde being able to interpret and realise the design to such a high standard. The finish is outstanding. We always knew it would be, from our previous experience, and our confidence was reinforced all the way through the process. I couldn't imagine any other building or leadership team accomplishing this design to the level that Bellearde did.







{18—19}





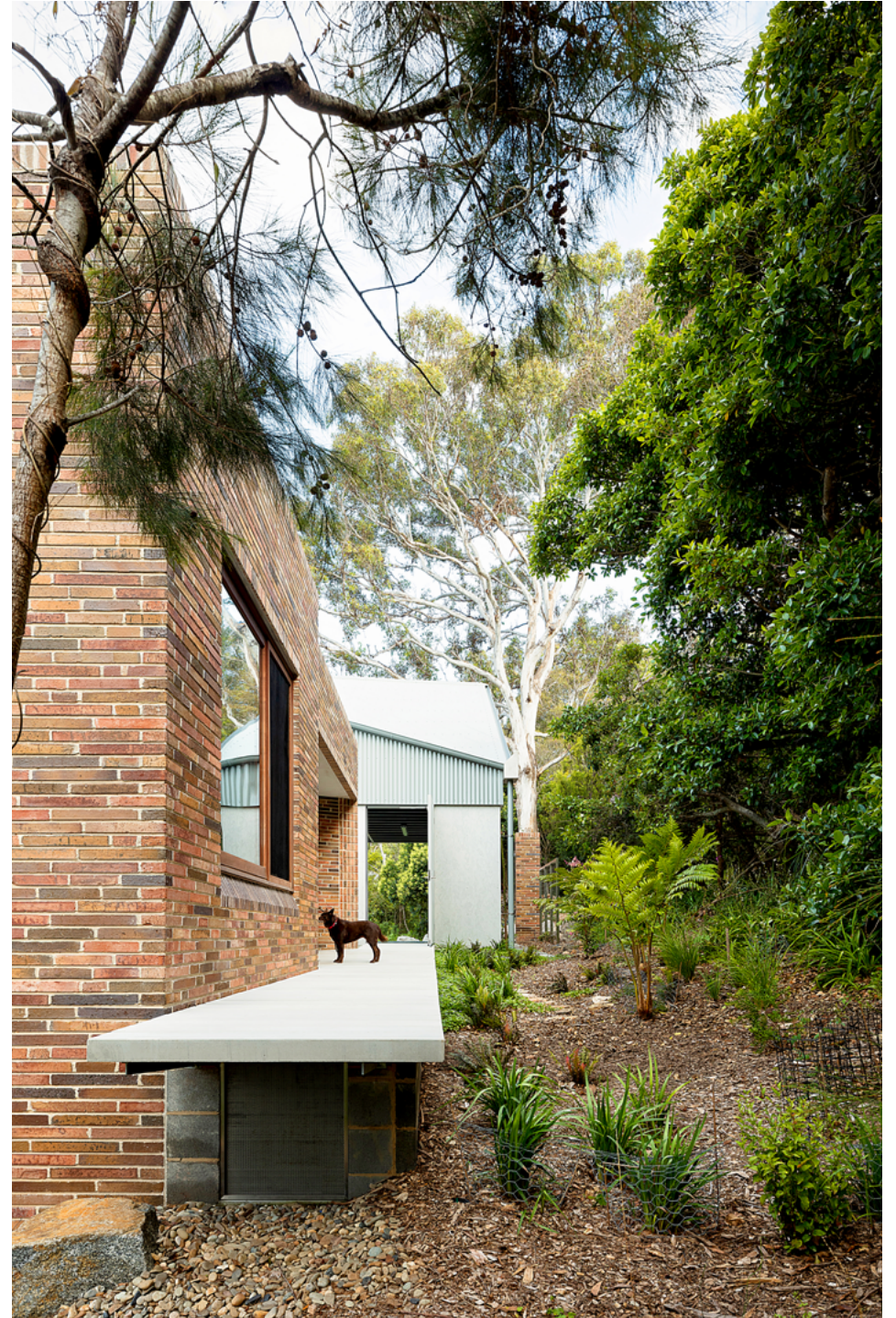


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{24—25}





At Belvelarde, we have four principles that have served us well in ensuring we maintain standards across every job.

{First Principle}

FIND THE BEST PEOPLE

It is about searching until we find the people who share our love for building houses as well as they can be built.

That's what Belvelarde is—a team of us who just want to build extraordinary houses. It is an attitude that can't be driven or constrained by external factors. It's innate.

We employ apprentices to artisans and experienced site managers—the rest are tried and trusted contractors. Many of our people have been with us for over 20 years and a few for more than 40.

{Second Principle}

KEEP ON LEARNING

Everything we have learned in building some of this country's most complex and challenging houses is formalised in our 200-page Belvelarde Construction Manual.

It details step-by-step instructions on how best to perform every critical task.

It is on every site and is constantly reviewed and updated as our knowledge grows and as building techniques, materials, equipment, and technologies, evolve.

We visit completed builds and catalogue the best of each project to continually improve and refine our methods. We also keep a library of our favourite architecture and building publications to stay informed of the latest developments and learn from others.



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{Third Principle}

FORM A BUILDING TEAM

It takes three key players to create a great house: owner, architect and builder. That is why, on each site, we form the building team headed by our site manager who lives the project start to finish. The trio meets regularly to review, discuss, and guide every aspect of the project. This ensures everyone knows just where we are, where we are going next—and ensures that the team make the best decisions.

It is the best way to deliver an extraordinary house that only ever costs what it should cost, and brings great joy to all of us.

{Fourth Principle}

MAINTAIN THE HOUSE

This came from listening to owners. They asked us to take care of their houses as well as we built them. So we formed our own specialised Belvelarde Maintenance division. It benefits from access to all information about the build. Plus we can often call on the very tradespeople who built it.

Each new home has its own maintenance manager, who thoroughly understands the house and cares deeply about maintaining it to the highest standards.

According to owners and architects, we deliver the most efficient and skilled post completion care they have ever worked with—indeed several have asked us to take care of other properties we didn't build.

We welcome any questions, feedback or opportunities to discuss your prospective projects.

{Construction}

2020—2021

{Interviews}

Hamish Spencer

{Design}

Pidgeon Ward

{Photography}

Clinton Weaver

{Paper}

Colorplan, Knight Smooth

{Printing}

Adams Print

