

House of the Month

Making WAVES

Architect Alex Michaelis doesn't mind a challenge – and his Cornish coastal home is no exception. Welcome to the house that focuses on what lies outside...

Photography/Paul Massey * Words/Jo Leevers



HOMES/ETC

HOME PROFILE

THE OWNERS Alex Michaelis, an architect, and his partner Susanna Bell, an art consultant. The couple have seven children between them: Zac, 18; Kit and Olivia, both 16; Orlando and Ro, 14; Samb [aka Sebastian], nine; and Raffie, seven, plus Seal the Labrador.

THE PROPERTY A contemporary house on the coast in Cornwall. There is an open-plan living area/kitchen-diner, utility room, children's bunk room, snug, wet room and WC on the ground floor, plus an outdoor seating area. Upstairs there are three en-suite bedrooms.

EXTERIOR

The cool white curves associated with Alex's urban designs find their spiritual home in this clifftop setting. 'Whatever the weather app says, we usually get sunshine at some point in the day,' says Susanna. 'The bay seems to have its own microclimate.'



DINING AREA

White walls and large windows frame the outside beautifully, while furniture with classic, simple lines lets the nature outdoors provide all the drama. **Get the look** The dining table is by Heerenhuis – its SPO solid-oak design is a match. The chairs were from Ikea, but are now discontinued – the Skin chair by Archirivolto for Calligaris is a similar design. This is Ikea's Fillsta pendant.



STAIRWELL

The perfect helix of a seashell was the inspiration for the staircase, which rises up above Raffe towards a circular light well, its walls left as bare plaster. **Get the look** The artwork is *Dark Moon* by Douglas White. Find his work at Artsy.net. The flooring is Douglas Fir by Dinesen.



rchitect Alex Michaelis is known for digging down – his subterranean Notting Hill home was the design that launched 1,000 basement excavations beneath London's most desirable streets and squares. But, 13 years on, the design of his Cornish home innovates by looking in the opposite direction: up and out towards the endless expanse of beach, sea and sky. 'This house is almost a reverse image of that early project – it's all about what's above ground,' says Alex. 'But it comes from a similar philosophy.'

This time around, the innovative architecture takes the sea's horizon as its reference point, with almost every room – yes, including the bathrooms – gazing out on to it. 'There's something quite rare about this stretch of coastland,' says Alex. 'It's both soothing and reviving – an antidote to the way our senses are overloaded in everyday life.'

What used to stand on this spot was an utterly unremarkable house that nevertheless had a very remarkable view. 'Lots of older Cornish houses were originally built quite closely crammed together, up alleyways and narrow lanes that protected them against the storms,' says Alex. That's all very quaint and charming, but for him and his partner Susanna Bell, this dramatic clifftop location beat 'quaint' hands down.

However, when they bought the original dilapidated house, locals still thought the couple were completely mad. 'It had been empty for years and the surveyor said the walls were basically crumbling slate, held together with layers of paint,' explains Alex. 'If we'd started to renovate what was

already there, the house would probably have collapsed anyway.' Knocking it down and rebuilding was the best option – and it allowed Alex's architectural imagination to run loose in a refreshingly wild setting.

As one half of Michaelis Boyd, his previous landmark projects have included Babington House, Soho House (that's LA and Berlin), The Williamsburg Hotel in New York and, most recently, the remodelling of Battersea Power Station into luxe apartments. This altogether more escapist beachside project draws on what have become Michaelis Boyd signature touches in its emphatically urban projects – pure white organic curves, porthole windows and circular light wells – and releases them back into their natural habitat.

'Yes, there's a fair few porthole shapes here,' Alex says with a smile. An equally creative take on 'nautical' rises up from the house's core. 'The curved staircase is inspired by the spiral of a seashell, so it gradually tapers as you climb to the top,' he says, gesturing to the awesome design.

The central, open-plan living, eating, cooking plus 'hanging out, whatever' space is fronted and backed by glass, with the sliding doors on the seaward side kept open as much as possible during the summer months. Set away slightly from this light-filled hub is the ground-floor kids' bunk room. 'We've been known to cram up to 12 in there – it's like a big dorm-sized sleepover party sometimes,' says Alex. 'But because the "grown-up" bedrooms are upstairs, you can't hear a thing.' The three

double bedrooms on the first floor are each quite different, 'but they all have one thing in common: glass screens that open on to the sea.'

By maintaining the ocean as the constant focal point, the architecture is never too clever-clever or confounding. Each room is set to lap up the view, with the exterior walls simply working as an outer skin to draw them together. 'It's a very easy building to read,' says Alex.

This beach house is also centred around sustainability. Alex has long worked with new energy and his father was the pioneering solar architect Dominic Michaelis. 'He was ahead of his time really,' says Alex, who believes that energy conservation and insulation need to be set into a house's blueprint from the start. 'It's no good just adding, say, solar panels as a kind of decorative trim at the end of a project,' he says.

This house borrows some of the principles of Scandi architecture, retaining and reusing the existing heat and light while allowing for ventilation. 'The layout means we get the absolute maximum natural light, so there's no need for artificial light in daylight hours,' Alex explains. Meanwhile the house's structure – render wrapped around a prefabricated timber frame – is extremely well insulated.

Today, all that remains of the old house is the rickety wooden gate. 'People open it and expect to come down the path and find a quaint little place,' says Susanna. 'And then this rather amazing building reveals itself.' See more of Alex's architectural portfolio at michaelisboyd.com



'This house is all about drinking in the uninterrupted views of nature at its most raw, most pure'



← **LIVING AREA**

'This is our chill-out space,' says Susanna. 'It's easy and comfortable and instantly calming.'
Get the look The wood burner is from Rais. These are Designers Guild sofas. The pebble chair is by Australian designer Roslyn Campbell. The Eames elliptical coffee table for Vitra is available at Skandium. The rug is by Luke Irwin.

↑ **KITCHEN**

A minimal, distraction-free scheme maintains the clean, white aesthetic. 'It's a very straightforward space to cook in,' says Susanna.
Get the look This is Bulthaup cabinetry.

OUTSIDE SEATING AREA ↗

This spot suits the unpredictable Cornish weather. 'It's great for shade if the sun is out, or it's sheltered from rain if the clouds gather,' says Susanna.
Get the look For similar weather-proof outdoor furniture, try Cane-line.

'Even the bath has a sea view, while the roof lights are designed for stargazing on a clear night'



↑ UPSTAIRS LANDING

A grassy roof lies beyond the window on the first floor, adding to the house's natural layers.
Get the look The artwork, made from bottle tops, was bought in East Africa. The flooring is from Dinesen.

EN SUITE ↗

All three bathrooms have tubs with a ringside view of the sea. 'So there's no squabbling about who gets the "best" one,' says Susanna.
Get the look The Porthole bath is from The Water Monopoly. This is a Habitat side table.



MASTER BEDROOM

Sliding doors open on to a glazed balcony, keeping this space in touch with the elements and flooding the room with sunlight. 'There's definitely some primeval urge in all of us that always draws us back to the sea,' says Alex.
Get the look The Malm bed and wall light are both from Ikea. This is the Void pendant by Tom Dixon.

HOME TRUTHS

Alex, tell us something that would surprise people... I nearly gave up studying to become a professional tennis player.
Desert island dish? Crusty bread piled with organic butter - I can't resist, even when Michelin-star cuisine is on the menu.
Dream dinner party guests to resurrect? Oscar Wilde, Joan of Arc, Filippo Brunelleschi and Zaha Hadid.
You're 18 again, what are you wearing? Embarrassingly tight black jeans, winkle pickers and a black shirt.
Favourite in-flight reading? *Livingetc*, *Wallpaper**, *The New Statesman* and *Hello!* All bases covered.
Most overused phrase you hear? 'The wow factor'. No longer wowing me.

OUTSIDE SEATING AREA

Weathered vintage dining furniture contrasts with the crisp, sharp whites elsewhere in the house. Beyond the steps lies an outdoor shower area. 'We let some local friends use it after surfing, but they have a habit of stripping off, so we try not to arrive unannounced,' says Susanna.

Get the look Find similar garden furniture at The Hoarde.

LIVING ETC LOVES

How sculptural, cityscape curves provide the frame, but there's still space for the odd touch of rustic timber and driftwood handles.

Windows that circle the square. Geometrically, the porthole windows and shell-inspired stairwell balance the sharper angles for a gentler mood.

The double-glazed living space with glass on either side and the view beyond – humans are almost incidental.

Baths with a sea view. Water, water everywhere...

THE BLUEPRINT

