

## ASSESSMENT OF HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE

DICKSON BEACH HOUSE  
LITTLE GORGE BEACH, MAIN SOUTH ROAD  
NORMANVILLE

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### SIGNIFICANT FABRIC

Single-storey timber pole-frame shack with original square plan. External pole-frame structure is constructed of 'pressure-impregnated radiata pine poles' [newly available at time of construction] with diagonal and horizontal bracing, the frame supporting a pyramidal cgi roof with central clerestory. Walls consist of vertical treated-pine board-and-batten panelling with an exposed internal timber frame. Openings are all timber framed, and include front timber double doors with side lights, and corner windows. External features include horizontal shutters over the top of openings (which are raised to create a verandah [now clad with corrugated metal sheeting]), and a shutter underneath the front doors which lowers to create a deck. Significant internal fittings include rough timber partitions between all rooms, timber doors and stone floor.

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### STATEMENT OF HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE

The Dickson beach house is a significant surviving representative of the work of notable South Australian architect Robert Dickson. Alongside his own house at Rostrevor, the building's relatively unaltered state provides special insights into the life and design philosophy of Dickson. It is also a notable early example of a perma-pine pole-framed beach hut and demonstrates significant modern design characteristics with its functional minimalist plan, innovative use of multi-function shutters, and the way in which the windows and internal design create a specific relationship with external views.

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### RELEVANT CRITERIA (Under Section 16 of the *Heritage Places Act 1993*)

- (e) it demonstrates a high degree of creative, aesthetic or technical accomplishment or is an outstanding representative of particular construction techniques or design characteristics.**

The Dickson beach house is an outstanding representative of rustic modern beach house design and construction of the 1960s.

### ***Integrity***

One of the ways which enables it to be an outstanding representative of its particular design characteristics and construction techniques is its exceptional integrity. The original layout, construction and almost all features are still the same as when this place was conceived and constructed over 40 years ago. This consistency is due to the fact that it has remained in the family of the Architect, and that the original concept behind the simple construction has been valued and retained by the family.

### ***Construction techniques***

The beach house is an outstanding early example and representative of pole frame construction using perma-pine. (Although invented in India in 1933, perma-pine or Chromated Copper Arsenate (CCA)-Treated Wood was not commonly used for domestic construction in Australia until the 1970s).

Dickson's building has a rustic quality with its rough cut timbers, simple realisation and unpretentious appearance. However, the rusticity is planned, not accidental, and the building is not unprofessionally concocted in the way that many true shacks can be. Dickson's beach house was, in fact, constructed by four carpenters within a few days, a quick and yet professional build which has retained its structural integrity.

Dickson's beach house demonstrated a range of possible uses for the various cuts of the latest 'pressure-impregnated radiata pine poles' and timbers in a way which presaged other environmentally-responsive buildings such as perma-pine buildings in National Parks.

### ***Design characteristics***

Design characteristics of significance include the minimalist modern plan, some of the innovative detailing, and the way in which the beach house responds to its views and location.

Firstly, the plan of Dickson's beach house demonstrates the modernist ideals of 'less is more' and 'form follows function' in a way which typifies the work of Robert Dickson and other early modernist designers and architects in Australia. The plan is no larger or more complicated than it needs to be to satisfy the simple needs of the clients. There is space for the boat in the living room, and the boat is even shown on the original plan. The private rooms are small and minimalist. The design intentions of this plan are particularly well represented because it has never been altered, with even the prescribed furnishings and boat remaining in situ.

Another design characteristic of significance is the innovative use of shutters on the outside of the beach-house. These are kept closed while the house is vacant, and then raised to form a verandah effect when the house is occupied. Most unusually, there is also a shutter at ground level against the double front doors, which is

lowered to create a small deck outside the front door. A large reproduction of the detail design of the upper and lower door shutters was included in the 1984 book by Roger Pegrum *Details in Australian Architecture*. In that book, the Dickson beach house was described as 'Beach House, Adelaide' and was chosen to represent innovative design work from South Australia.

Finally, the way in which the design of the beach house, and in particular the way in which windows were designed for the structure, makes conscious play between the exterior and interior of the building. Dickson's work aims to 'bring the outside in', and in the case of his beach house, the windows are carefully designed to capture views, both through horizontal corner windows in the dining and living areas, and via a vertical slit window alongside the front door, which provides a full vertical slice of the seascape which can be viewed from the master bedroom.

**(g) it has a special association with the life or work of a person or organisation or an event of historical importance.**

The Dickson beach house at Normanville has special associations with both the life and work of Robert Dickson.

***Associations with work***

Firstly, it is a place which was designed and constructed by Robert Dickson, one of South Australia's most significant late-20<sup>th</sup>-century architects. Although the Willunga slate floors were already in place when the Dickson family acquired the lease for the shack, the internal layout and all walls, roof and fittings were all conceived and constructed by Dickson.

I devised a plan to support the roof on a new pole frame structure, independent of the rough old walls [the original 'walls' were created using old doors in the late 1940s]. A simple pyramidal shaped roof over the square form of the old building was a logical form, allowing for collection of roof water. We used the then newly available pressure impregnated radiate pine poles, recommended to be set directly into the ground. For ease of construction, the perimeter poles were set outside the rough and varying wall alignment and braced independently. The four internal poles were fortuitously located in relation to internal partitions. Paired timber hip beams, cantilevered from the internal columns to the centre, and were mutually supported at the apex. The perimeter fascia formed a structural tie beam restraining outward spread. A raised central roof section, sloping ceilings and upper level fixed roof vent provided natural air flow through the space. The new external poles provided ideal support from which to pivot new shutters.

New independent structural support permitted some re-planning of the interior. The dining table was given prime location in the seaward corner and a new window introduced around that corner to reveal and frame magnificent coastal views along the beach and the cliff faces. [Creating views is one of Dickson's trademarks.]... [Article by Robert Dickson 'The Dickson Beach House', nd]

The principal structure of Dickson's new beach house was constructed over three days in the summer of 1967, using four carpenters and a roof plumber. The house had (and still has) no power or telephone.

The green-stained, rough-sawn impregnated pine was continued as the basic building material for all timber elements, including board and batten wall lining. New shade and security shutters were hung on pivot hinges fashioned from bolts fitted into pipe sleeves set directly into the posts. Under the north wall shutter, facing the approach track, walling was made as an echo of the old lift doors, spaced timber battens sheeted with insect wire allowed for ventilation while providing a measure of privacy. Removable internal timber shutters provided additional weatherproofing when needed.

The front entrance was protected with a double shutter, the lower section sheeted with jarrah slats dropping down to form a deck. Double doors allow a clear width to access the boat. Narrow glass sidelights behind the shutter, the only glass taken to floor level, provide, on awakening, as seen from pillow level, a symbolic vertical strip of sky, sea, sand and rocks, the narrow timber deck and slate floor, all heralding a holiday by the sea. [Article by Robert Dickson 'The Dickson Beach House', nd]

Despite the seeming simplicity of this building, its special qualities have been recognised by the broader community. In his 1984 book *Details in Australian Architecture*, Roger Pegrum selected the beach house as one of the case studies. As well as a description, the book included a photograph of the beach house from the water, as well as a sketch of the front elevation, a copy of the floor plan, and a full-page detail showing the construction method of the pair of front horizontal shutters which cover the front door. Pegrum was particularly interested in the innovative construction of the shutters.

When the building is occupied, shutters and decking attached to the post framing are raised and lowered to provide both sun shading and outdoor sitting areas overlooking the beach. The shutters are clad in lapped boarding and pivot directly from the timber columns. They may be propped at different angles and provide almost total flexibility in sun control and rain exclusion. Behind the shutters a combination of fixed and sliding glass and insect screens permit a variety of options for ventilation and exposure.

When the building is not being used, the shutters are lowered and the decking raised to provide both security and protection. The apparent simplicity of the building conceals a fine understanding of timber detailing for human use in a natural setting. [Pegrum 1984, pp 38 & 39].

The other factor which contributes to the beach house being an important surviving example of Dickson's work is its high integrity. Because it has been so little altered since its 1960s construction, its external and internal design, fittings and detailing continue to celebrate the design philosophy of its architect.

### ***Associations with life***

The Dickson Beach House is a place where Robert Dickson and his family have spent many happy holidays over a period of more than 40 years. In particular, Robert Dickson found that the simplicity of the place provided rest and inspiration.

It is an idyllic environment [with a] strong sense of place... Accommodation is pleasingly primitive. [Article by Robert Dickson 'The Dickson Beach House', nd]

The unadorned and functional design of the shack and the simple use of materials has continued to affirm and reinforce Dickson's design philosophy and the fundamental principals by which he worked. And the fact that it has been so little altered during the past 40 years, despite its primitive simplicity, also speaks to the ongoing relevance and truthfulness of the design. Indeed the place represents more than a design. The realisation of Dickson's conception is a rare and idyllic setting which creates a memorable experience for those lucky enough to visit it.

### ***Significance of Robert Dickson***

Robert Dickson is one of South Australia's most notable architects of the late-20<sup>th</sup> century, particularly because he developed a new way of thinking and designing which influenced generations of architects.

His work received early international recognition. In the 1956 London Exhibition, Dickson's own house (1949) was the only building nominated to represent South Australia's domestic architecture. His house was also one of only six Australian buildings pictured in the *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects* in March 1956 [p 191].

Dickson's work and ideas were also influential on the home front. In 1956, he and Brian Claridge organised a public exhibition in the Botanic Park which showcased international and modern design. In his article 'Architecture in the Park' [*Architecture SA*, winter 1998, p26], C Schumacher described the event as 'a catalyst for change in the architectural profession in South Australia.' By this time, Dickson had spent some time working in Milan and London. He then established himself in South Australia, where he formed a successful partnership with Newell Platten (1958) which went on to design many notable buildings, including the Arkaba restaurant and hotel (1963), the substantial Union House at the University of Adelaide (1967 – State Heritage Place 17619) and many Civic Buildings and private residences. He was also a writer and commentator on design for publications including *Architecture SA*, *the Advertiser* and *News*, taught at the University of Adelaide, and made a significant contribution to the Royal Australian Institute of Architects. Having joined the Institute in 1953, he became a Fellow in 1970, President (SA Chapter) from 1978-80, a Life Fellow in 1981, a Privileged Life Fellow in 1996, and received the President's Medal in 2000.

Dickson's work has also received numerous awards, including 8 RAA Awards of Merit and 10 Civic Trust Awards. There are dozens of articles and lectures written by him, a list of which is kept at UniSA's Architecture Museum, which also holds a

collection of thousands of items associated with his work and features him in the new Architects of South Australia website ([www.architectsdatabase.unisa.edu.au](http://www.architectsdatabase.unisa.edu.au)).

In summary, Dickson has had a profound influence on changing the design sensibilities of a generation and beyond. He reinterpreted the hard-edged modernism of the International Style and the naturalism of such architects as Frank Lloyd Wright into his own style, eschewing decoration and working closely with the needs of the site, clients and builders. He taught, wrote about and exhibited his work and philosophy to countless architects, builders and clients. His buildings were recognised, locally, nationally and even internationally as representing a new era in 20<sup>th</sup>-century design. His work was innovative and truthful, even in the face of general entrenched conservatism in building during this period. Slowly, many of the principles he practised and demonstrated such as attention to the climate and site, simple detailing, honesty of construction, modest use of materials, and responsiveness to design problems have become widely accepted and used by many of the best designers in South Australia and Australia.

These principles are well demonstrated in his beach house at Normanville, which is minimalist and simple in its layout and detailing, honest in its use of materials, and has been so little altered since the 1950s that it provides a rare level of representation of these significant features.

## **BRIEF HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

According to the current lessee Robert Dickson, the original shack was 'owned' by John Allison in the late 1940s 'with Council's blessing'. In 1957, he sold the lease to Dickson's cousin Lois Ramsey, who then sold it to the five related families in 1961. These included the families of Robert Dickson and his brother Graham and sister Delma Virgo. Lois believed that 'the external walls were made from ship's cabin doors which had been set into the sloping ground'. [Historical notes by Robert Dickson, February 2009].

When Robert Dickson first visited the place in 1963 it was in poor condition and in need of reconstruction. Dickson accordingly devised a new plan and implemented reconstruction of the beach house to his design, starting with the pole-framed structure which supported the new roof. Since that time, Dickson's extended family have shared the use of the beach house.

## **PUBLISHED RESOURCES**

### **Books - Specific references to Dickson Beach House**

- Dickson, Robert (pre-publication 2009) *Addicted to Architecture*, Wakefield Press, Adelaide ['The Dickson Beach House' pp 60-62].
- Pegrum, Roger (1984) *Details in Australian Architecture*, RAIA Education Division, Canberra ['Beach House, Adelaide, South Australia' pp 38 & 39].

### **Books - General references relating to Dickson's work**

- Apperly, R., Irving, R. and Reynolds, P. (1989) *A Pictorial Guide to Identifying Australian Architecture*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney.
- Page, Michael (1986) *Sculptors in Space: South Australian Architects 1836-1986*, RAIA (SA), Adelaide.
- RAIA (SA Chapter) (1954) 'South Australian Chapter', *Year Book of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects 1954*.
- RAIA (SA Chapter) (1981) *Architecture SA 1970-1980*, RAIA (SA Chapter) Adelaide.
- Taylor, Jennifer (1986) *Australian Architecture since 1960*, Law Book Company, Sydney.

### **Journals and Proceedings**

- (1953) 'Architect's Own House - At Rostrevor Park, S.A – Architect R. H. Dickson.', *RIBA Journal*, July-September 1953: p 69.
- (1964) 'Ten Best buildings of 1964', *Architecture and the Arts*, December 1964: p 15.
- (1999) Dickson, Robert 'Art and Architecture in Practice: A life's work', *Architect SA*, Winter (July) 1999: pp 10-17.
- (2000) 'Award goes to veteran Adelaide architect', *Adelaidean*, 17 July 2000: p 7.
- (2000) 'RAIA Presidents Medal: Award of Merit, LFRAIA', *Architecture Australia*, September/ October 2000: p 21.
- (2000) Parken, David 'RAIA Awards 2000: President's Medal: The James Irwin RAIA President's Medal: Mr Robert Dickson LFRAIA', *Architect South Australia*, vol. 13, no.3: p 6.
- (2003) Hurst, Rachel 'An unselfconscious architecture: the work of Robert Dickson', in *Proceedings of the Society of Architectural Historians of Australia and New Zealand Conference*, Brisbane.
- (2004) Hurst, Rachel 'Modest Revolutionaries: The Architecture of Dickson and Platten', *Proceedings of the 21<sup>st</sup> Annual Conference of the Society of Architectural Historians of Australia and New Zealand*, SAHANZ, Melbourne: pp 233-239.

### **Newspapers**

- Vagnarelli, Ruth (2003) 'Leading Men', *Adelaide Matters*, Issue 42, November.
- Petrys, Lisa (2000) 'Robert's architecture is all in the mind', *Southern Times*, 2 August.
- Ward, Peter (2004) 'State of the Union is good enough for judges', *The Adelaide Review*, July, no.250: 21-22.

### **UNPUBLISHED RESOURCES**

#### **Theses, papers and articles**

- Blaess, Darren (2002) *The Morialta House 1950: a natural approach an unselfconscious architecture*, Honours thesis, University of South Australia.
- Collins, Julie (2008) *Robert Dickson Biography* [draft article, 10 September 2008]
- Dickson, Robert (nd) *Student House at Morialta* [typed article including photographs and plan]
- Dickson, Robert (April 2002) *Morialta House* [unpublished notes]

### **Catalogues**

- Architecture Museum, *Series 272 - Dickson, Robert Collection* [Catalogued collection of over 2,000 items]
- Royal Australian Institute of Architects (1983) *RAIA South Australia Significant 20th Century Architecture* [card index, held at Architecture Museum, Louis Laybourne Smith School of Architecture and Design, University of South Australia (LLSAM)]

### **Verbal and written communication**

- Robert Dickson
- Pam Phillips, partner of Robert Dickson
- Antony Radford, Professor of Architecture, University of Adelaide

### **RELEVANT WEBSITES**

- Architects of South Australia [www.architectsdatabase.unisa.edu.au](http://www.architectsdatabase.unisa.edu.au)
- RAIA 20th Century Notable South Australian Buildings Register online at [www.architecture.com.au/i-cms?page=1.18.3146.5400](http://www.architecture.com.au/i-cms?page=1.18.3146.5400) and [www.architecture.com.au/i-cms?page=5251](http://www.architecture.com.au/i-cms?page=5251)



**FILE NO.: 26195****SITE RECORD****DICKSON BEACH HOUSE  
LITTLE GORGE BEACH, MAIN SOUTH ROAD  
NORMANVILLE**


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**FORMER / ALTERNATE NAMES:** 'Little Gorge Beach house', 'Lady Bay Beach house', 'Shack, Lady Bay South'

**DESCRIPTION OF PLACE:** 1967 timber-framed shack

**DATE OF COMPLETION:** 1967

**REGISTER STATUS:** **Description:** Nominated  
**Date:** 13 December 2007

**CURRENT USE:** **Description:** Residence (part-time)  
**Dates:** 1967-current

**PREVIOUS USE(S):** **Description:** n/a  
**Dates:**

**ARCHITECT:** **Name:** Robert Dickson  
**Dates:** b 1926

**BUILDER:** **Name:** Four carpenters (names unknown)  
**Dates:**

**SUBJECT INDEXING:** **Group:** Residential  
**Category:** Shack

**MISCELLANEOUS INDEX:**

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA:** **Description:** Yankalilla District Council

**LOCATION:** **Unit No.:** -  
**Street No.:** -  
**Street Name:** Main South Road  
**Town/Suburb:** Normanville  
**Post Code:** 5204  
**Region No.:** 4  
**Region Name:** Fleurieu Peninsula

<b>LAND DESCRIPTION:</b>	<b>Title Type:</b>	CT
	<b>Volume:</b>	0000
	<b>Folio:</b>	0000
	<b>Lot No.:</b>	
	<b>Section:</b>	Road Reserve
	<b>Hundred:</b>	Yankalilla
<b>AMG REFERENCE:</b>	<b>Zone:</b>	xx
	<b>Easting:</b>	xx
	<b>Northing:</b>	xx
	<b>Map Sheet No.:</b>	6527
	<b>Map Scale:</b>	1:100,000
<b>OWNER:</b>	<b>Name:</b>	The Crown
<b>MANAGER:</b>	<b>Name:</b>	District Council of Yankalilla
	<b>Address:</b>	PO Box 9
	<b>Town/Suburb:</b>	Yankalilla
	<b>Post Code:</b>	5203
<b>LESSEE / OCCUPIER:</b>	<b>Name:</b>	Robert Dickson, Graham Dickson & Delma Virgo
	<b>Address:</b>	1 Wandilla Drive
	<b>Town/Suburb:</b>	Rostrevor
	<b>Post Code:</b>	5073
<b>PHOTOGRAPHS:</b>	<b>No. of images:</b>	10
	<b>Image Type:</b>	Digital (Colour)
	<b>Photographer:</b>	Anna Pope
	<b>Date:</b>	14 January 2009

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FILE NO.: 26195

## LOCATION PLAN

**DICKSON BEACH HOUSE  
LITTLE GORGE BEACH, MAIN SOUTH ROAD  
NORMANVILLE**

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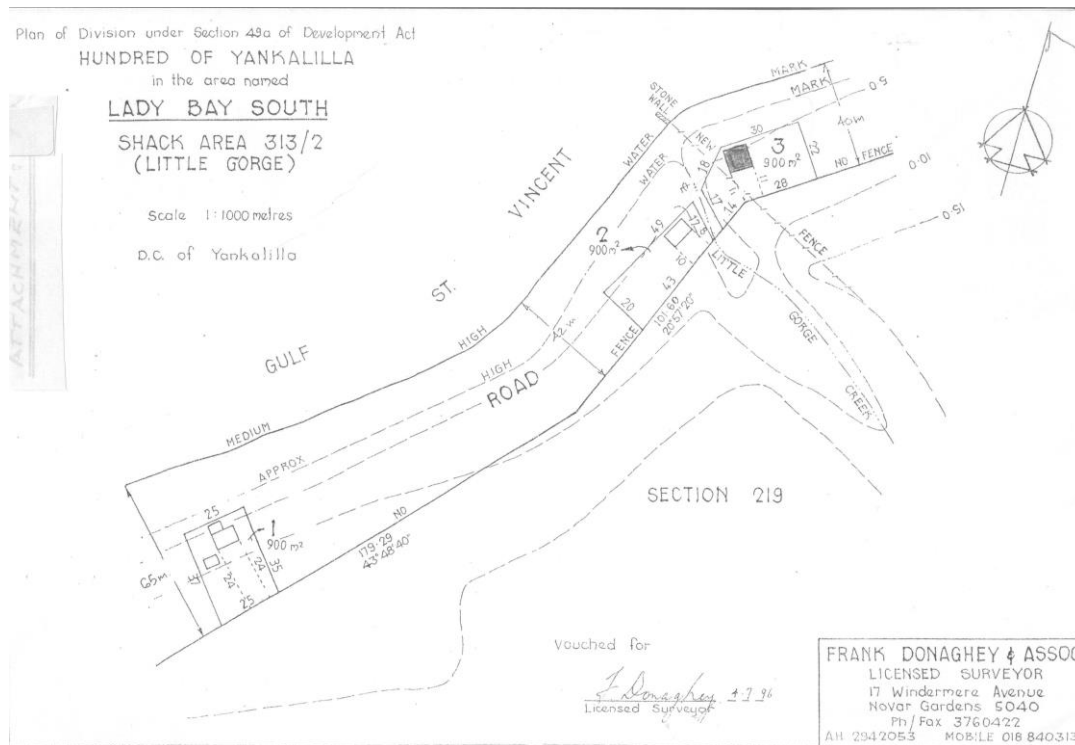
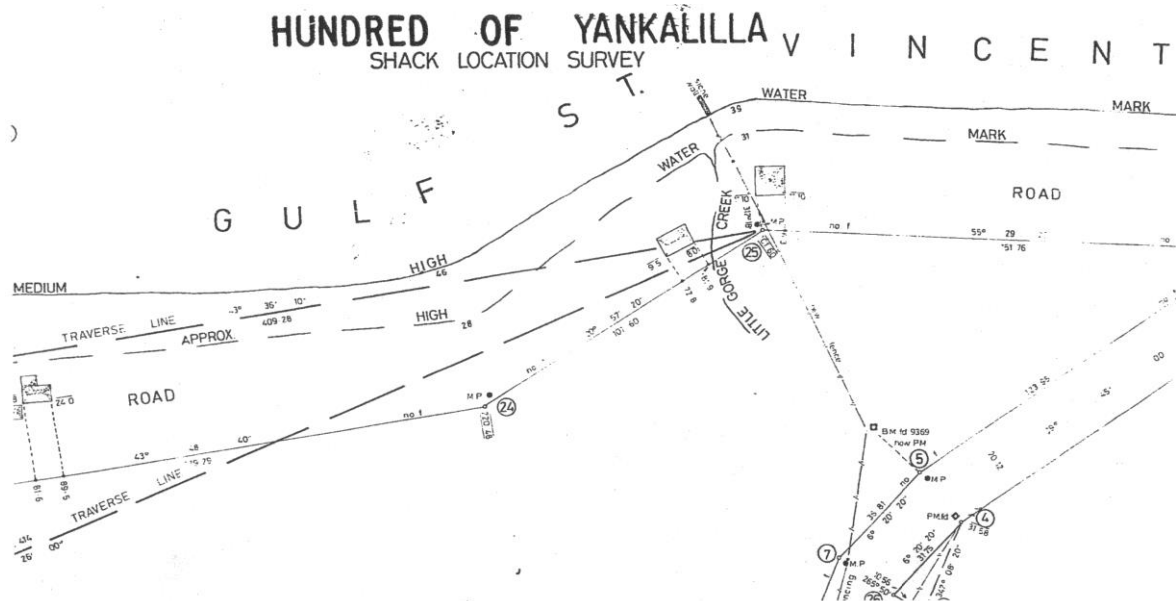


**Figure 1 - Aerial photograph showing location of beach house**

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## LOCATION PLAN

**DICKSON BEACH HOUSE  
LITTLE GORGE BEACH, MAIN SOUTH ROAD  
NORMANVILLE**

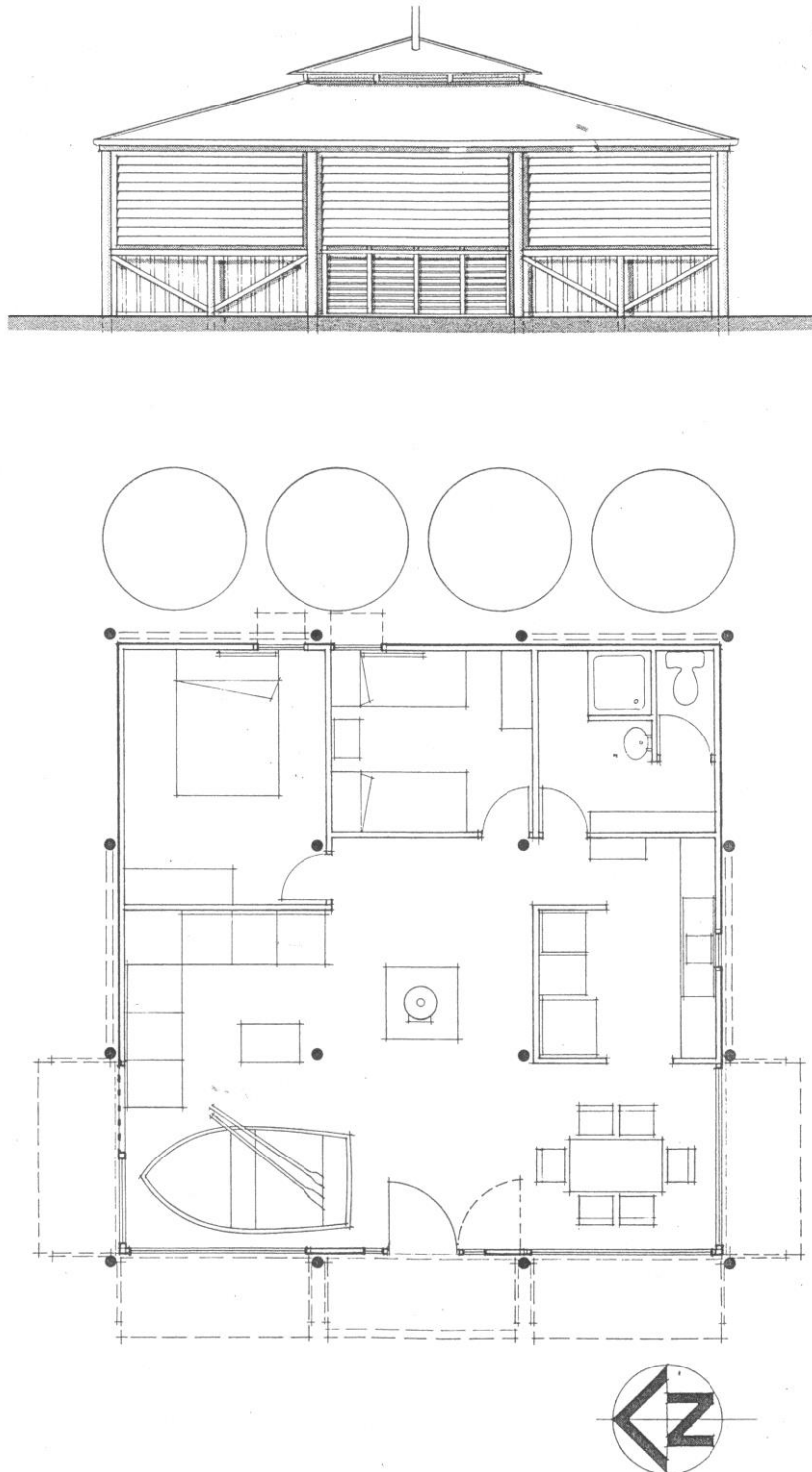


**Figures 2 & 3 – Site plans showing location of beach house**

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## BUILDING PLAN

**DICKSON BEACH HOUSE  
LITTLE GORGE BEACH, MAIN SOUTH ROAD  
NORMANVILLE**



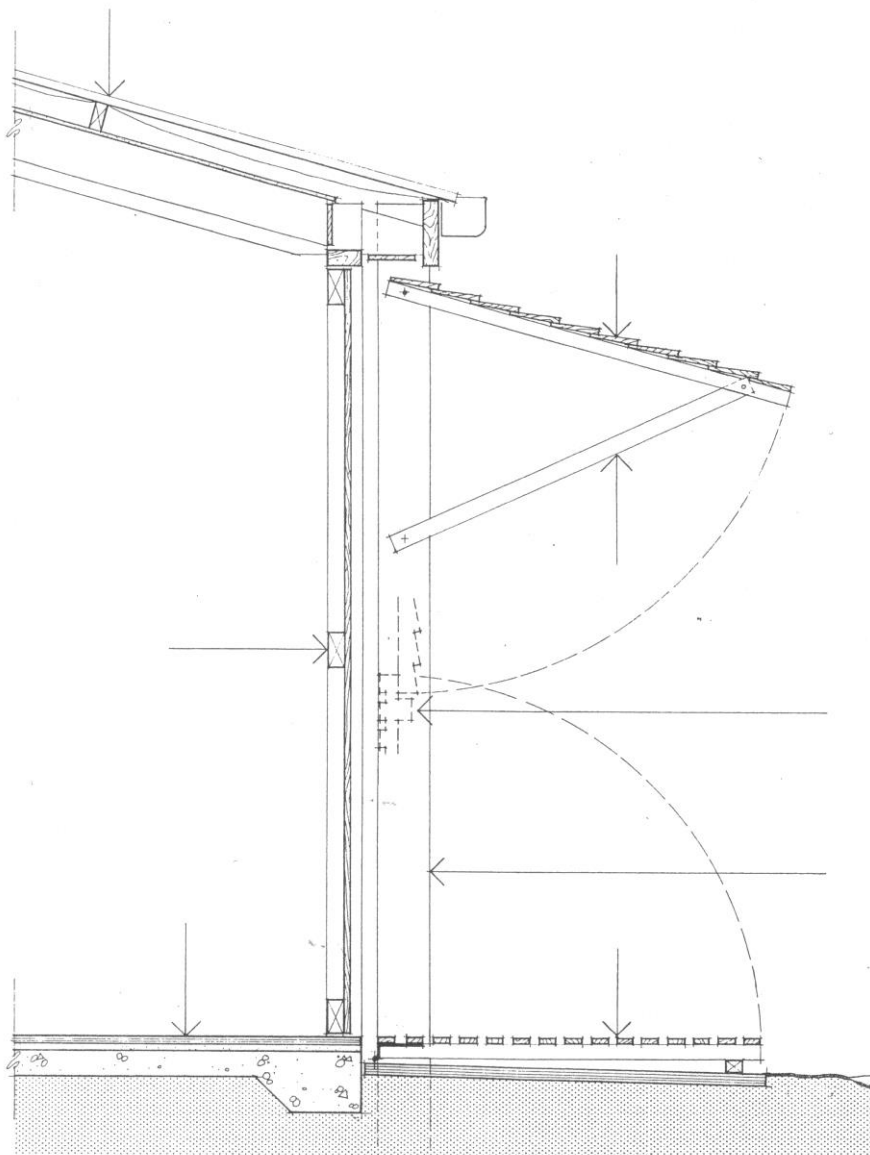
**Figure 4 – Floor plan of beach house**

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## BUILDING DETAIL

DICKSON BEACH HOUSE  
LITTLE GORGE BEACH, MAIN SOUTH ROAD  
NORMANVILLE

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ROBERT DICKSON  
125 NORMANVILLE

Figure 5 – Detail of shutters

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## **PHOTOGRAPHS**

**DICKSON BEACH HOUSE  
LITTLE GORGE BEACH, MAIN SOUTH ROAD  
NORMANVILLE**

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***Dickson beach house from beach (SW)***



***Dickson beach house from beach (SW)  
showing open door shutters (window shutters closed)***



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## **PHOTOGRAPHS**

**DICKSON BEACH HOUSE  
LITTLE GORGE BEACH, MAIN SOUTH ROAD  
NORMANVILLE**

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*Dickson beach house from road*



*Front entrance (showing shutters open to form deck and verandah)*



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## **PHOTOGRAPHS**

**DICKSON BEACH HOUSE  
LITTLE GORGE BEACH, MAIN SOUTH ROAD  
NORMANVILLE**

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***View from dining room***



***Living room showing boat***



***Partition to kitchen***



***Kitchen***



***Window detailing***



***Internal wall detailing***