

A photograph of a modern interior space. The room features extensive wood paneling on the walls and ceiling. In the foreground, a tall floor lamp with a white, multi-tiered shade stands on the left. To the right, a portion of a light-colored, textured sofa is visible. In the background, a dining table with four wooden chairs is set up. A vase of orange flowers sits on the table. The room is bright, with light coming from large windows on the right side. The text 'to the POINT' is overlaid in the bottom left corner.

to the  
POINT

TEXT: ANDREW WIGAN PHOTOGRAPHS: ASHENHURST.



*Moored securely to the land and with the overtones of a boatshed, this house engaged tradesmen who ensured its owner/architect a quality of finish fit for a luxury yacht.*

The solid ash furniture contrasts nicely with the grain of the brushbox flooring and the rich tones of the cedar doors and internal cladding. Adding security around the main common living areas, an ingenious split-face version of Besser Block was used, providing the positive and negative reliefs of the internal stone columns. With appearance and function comparable to that of sandstone, material costs were cut by a factor of about 10.



The centrally located dining table brings the two portions of the house together. It is on the central axis of the house and represents what was felt would symbolise the 'common ground' for the family. The planned addition of cedar screens to the main vertical timber posts on either side of the table will help the house respond to situations requiring a containment of noise or heat.

Just as most of us are helped along in life one way or another, with various faculties inadvertently 'lubricated' in various ways, an architect is often helped along by the wielding of that powerful symbol of permanence: the pen. This particular architect was eyeing mine wistfully as I wasted it aimlessly in the air. Soon to comprehend the misappropriation of resources here, I handed over the pen to Micheal Fountain and, after quickly unearthing a scrap of paper, was witness to a remarkable transformation.

In the confusing surrounds of a busy lunchtime cafe in Balmain, I watched and listened as Fountain's visions behind the house recently completed for himself came pouring out to the tune of the pen in the thoughtful and unhurried tones evident in his work. Would I be privy to that scrap of paper and would it do as the basis for a story? I kept thinking to myself. A very enlightening lunchtime later, that scrap of paper fairly erected itself as a monument to the thinking behind the project.

It's been said that one of the greatest things an architect can offer is a vision: a philosophy that guides how a house can be lived in. But when an architect and client are one and the same, the need for this vision to be accurately conveyed is obviated. So in this unique house, nestled in



The basin is moulded out of two 6mm sheets of veneered medium density fibreboard bonded together. Its subtle waveform is finished in a 2mm clear acrylic. Manufactured by Rolf Sander Interiors.

the gums of Sydney's northern peninsula at Church Point, the architect's challenge was one of conveying the vision to the subcontractors; of communicating the essence of what the house was intended to stand for.

As owner/architect Micheal Fountain points out, "It all starts with the relationship established with the builder. We didn't screw the builder in the first place who, in turn, didn't screw his subcontractors. We said to the subbies, 'We expect a very high level of quality here. There is no pressure from a time point of view and we want it done right.' While this might sound like an invitation to spend big money, it actually worked in that, once given the time and opportunity to display their talents, tradesmen will turn out quality work in a very reasonable time frame. Recognising this and then indulging the tradesmen's intellect and skill had these guys immersed in their task. They were respected as tradesmen and did a fantastic job."

Through allowing the tradesmen input into how materials might be applied to best effect, the result is a remarkable house that clearly displays the specialist knowledge and skill of each trade. A clear case of the benefits of delegating rather than dictating terms.

The site's original tenant was a dilapidated timber shack, built in the 1920s. It had an attached writers' studio and was lived in by Micheal Fountain and his wife for a year before its demolition. It was a blessing in disguise, as the experience with the site's orientation and particular strengths were directly incorporated into the new house. Fountain says, "The living rooms and verandah of the new house were positioned almost exactly where those of the existing house were, despite the vast realm of possibilities offered by the site. We thought probably the most significant facet of the site was the location of the giant magnolia tree." It was used as the symmetrical nucleus of the new house, around which two parts were erected to either side.



The boatshed theme is carried throughout the house. Here, the row of upstairs windows subtly evokes a sense of a boat's portholes.

Fountain had wanted to find a form for the house that was appropriate for the area. He checked virtually all houses in the area, only to discover that "much of what we saw failed to pay any real respect to the environment around it". In a bid to find something that did fit—in its shape, relationship to the site and materials used—he began to see clues in the old boatsheds on the foreshore of this Pittwater estuary. And being on an estuary, the appropriate size of the house was also a matter subjected to careful consideration. Treating it as very different from, say, an ocean location or even one suitable for the main bay of Pittwater, Fountain felt this implied a scale to the building. "So in wanting to create a three-bedroom house, we felt the scale of a three-bedroom house seemed inappropriate to the site. I thought we were going to have to break it down somehow," he went on to explain.



The warming effect of the timber and lighting is particularly evident on the house's upper level, where the bedrooms and study are located.

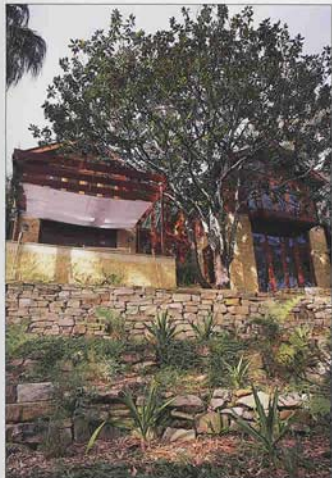
These overriding concepts of the central tree, the form of the boatshed and the desire to build a house with a scale appropriate to its position and surroundings created the basis of its eventual design. The magnolia tree was to become the divider between the two pavilions, or boatsheds. But with the general theme of the stilt-legged boatsheds suggesting a lack of substance, Fountain knew things must be modified to avoid losing the substantial nature he felt necessary for a house. With the notion that a house should represent a real sense of security, warmth and protection, the challenge was to achieve this while using a product—timber—that doesn't immediately convey that sense of protection.

"Our response," Fountain said, "was to maintain that quality of protection by integrating a stone base into the house. This then created two 'zones' inside the house, on both horizontal and vertical axes. The stone base of the house engenders it with some security and moors it securely to the site, while the progressively lighter upper timber sections of the house stem from it and blend more naturally with the thinning bows and foliage of the surrounding trees."

The deliberate demarcation of the house's two pavilions was based on a philosophy of family. Creating each pavilion as a homogeneous form in its own right, his idea was that family members could relate to each other as well have a space to call their own. (It's envisaged that one is destined to become the 'kids' pavilion'.) "It enables family members to identify with the house as a whole and then also identify their part, over which they can assert authority and bear responsibility," explained Fountain.

Crucial to the whole design was the recognition of what best represented the combined interests of the family and was likely to facilitate their coming together. "The way we live," said Fountain, "the dining room is that place. It's appropriate that where the family comes together is on the house's axis. The neutrality of this meeting place is symbolised by its separation from both pavilions, the void above the table and its position of proximity to the front door. The pond directly outside acts as a night-lit reflective pool for the tree above, while the small fountain adds the dynamic of running water and a feeling of being on the water's edge. Limiting the size of the opening to the estuary views helps to frame and add an expansiveness to them, like peering from the porthole of a boat."

In terms of materials, there was never any other choice than to use predominantly timber. Fountain was accustomed to working with it and admires its warmth, humanity and softness. Through juxtaposition of the warmth of timber, the security of stone and the crisp skeletal nature of the black steel beams, the best qualities inherent in each material are highlighted and offset against one another. The house employs the special use of some engineered timber products, such as Hi-Span beams, in response to a scarcity of cost-effective natural timber and the importance of some structural members being very straight and true. However, no exotic materials were



The two 'zones' of the house and the prominent magnolia are visible from its watery aspect, while the scale of the house pays respect to the site's location on an estuary of Pittwater.

intentionally sourced. The house uses a conventional oregon stud frame and rafters with steel or engineered timber beams, and a corrugated steel roof. Western red cedar is used for the prominent French doors and throughout the interior. Special silicon bronze nails were used for all cedar cladding to avoid streaking caused by galvanised nails reacting with the cedar.

Outside, the pergola is a stained, pressed, treated pine over a tallowwood deck and teak furniture. The deck resembles that of a yacht, with Sikaflex—a marine sealant—filling the gaps. The deck is then bowed to promote water run-off into the house's water tanks. The high clay content of the soil meant special attention had to be paid to the flooring to combat moisture problems. This was particularly necessary because of the grade of the site and the difficulty in achieving adequate cross-ventilation. Brushbox strip flooring was specially milled to a 50mm width to resist cupping of the boards. Tongue and grooves have all been glued to aid with moisture resistance, while the secret nailing of the boards is in keeping with the clean lines of the house. Finally, attention to lighting helped create a warm, dramatic ambience by the use, almost entirely, of indirect lighting.

With the devastating impact of the bushfires that swept



The deck is one of the most successful areas of the house, with a sense of projection out toward the surrounding trees and water. Decking timber is tallowwood with a marine product—Sikaflex—filling the gaps. Its perimeter offers plenty of informal seating and, with the French doors open, a brilliant summer living and entertainment space is created. Outdoor furniture is naturally weathered teak.

through Sydney during January of 1994 still fresh in the minds of the residents of Church Point, it was an issue Fountain could hardly ignore. Many houses in the area were timber which, with gutters home to thousands of incendiary gum leaves, were indefensible fodder in the path of the raging fire. Fountain's response to the risk was to install an irrigation system that, with the turn of a valve, shifts the distribution of the water from the garden to the roof. In fact, a complex sprinkler system safeguards the entire roof of the dwelling and is fed by two large tanks of rainwater. A backup generator acknowledges the lethargic water pressure experienced by residents during the fires, with the water mains overloaded by the optimistic deployment of countless desperate hoses. With the odd charred reminder of the fire still evident, the system was considered money well spent.

In fact, the lifestyle offered by the entire house and site is a glowing tribute to the forethought put into it. And without the help of that little scrap of paper, I would never have been able to tell its tale. What a pen can do in the capable hands of an architect!