

# RIVERSIDE



# NESTING

LIKE BOATSHEDS ON STONE BASES, TWO HOUSES ON SYDNEY'S HAWKESBURY RIVER SUPPORT RELAXED LIVING AMONG GUM TREES AND PROVIDE A MODEL FOR RESIDENCES ON SENSITIVE WATERSIDE SITES.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DANNY LESER

The main living room, left, faces north-west and opens to an outdoor dining area; glimpses of water are seen through spotted gums lining the shore. A wicker sofa and armchairs from Space sit on a rug from Anibou. Selected accessories from Orson & Blake. Print by Brett Whiteley. This page: a simple Victorian ash console by Rolf Sander is cantilevered along the rear wall of the skylit living room; above it hangs Terri Butterworth's *Venus Beach*. Standard lamp by Louis Poulson.





The outdoor room, left, furnished with a teak table and benches, has low walls to create a sense of intimacy and provide extra seating for parties. Right: linked to the central zone of the house through wide openings, the living area can be closed off with sliding panels. Walls and columns around the stairwell are split-faced concrete blocks. The floor and staircase are brushbox. Wall lamps are from Inlite.

Sydney's Pittwater has forever drawn people to nest on its sandstone platforms and eucalypt-lined slopes. Ruins of Aboriginal camps can still be seen here, suggesting a long history of enchantment with prospects across the bay and glimpses of tributaries through tattered curtains of trees.

Relative arrivistes to Pittwater's pleasures are the Fountains and the Hattons, two couples who have subdivided a river-front property and built two masonry and cedar houses to suit families intended to come. The project, which recently won a Pittwater council award, was planned by Balmain architect Michael Fountain on behalf of his schoolteacher wife, Penny, her brother Andrew Hatton, and his wife, Kathy.

When the Fountains found the property, with its romantically overgrown 1920s shack, they were quick to appreciate its beauty. According to Michael, "We hadn't walked more than a few feet beyond the gate when we decided we had to have it. We were attracted most by the view down from the street to the water's edge. Then we fell in love with a stand of spotted gums growing along the shore, rising to 25 metres high with trunks 1.5 metres in diameter, giving the site a fantastic sense of enclosure. We are very sorry that other people have cut down their trees to open up the water view – we believe you need to respect them to appreciate the real nature of the place."

Another natural landmark is a giant magnolia on the Fountains' side of the property,

which has become a focal point for their house. "When you come in the front door, you get a fantastic view of this major tree, which comes out every year with plate-size white flowers," says Michael.

Before designing the houses, Fountain looked around the area for references or clues to its architectural character. While he was "generally appalled by the way that fantastic sites had been bastardised, and by streetscapes clearly lacking in quality", he was inspired by some fragile structures along the shores: old weatherboard boatsheds perched above the river on hardwood pylons.

"These buildings seemed really appropriate to the estuarine character of this part of Pittwater," he recalls, "but they also seemed very temporary. We were building on land and we wanted our project to have a more permanent quality, so we developed the idea of boatsheds resting on secure stone bases. This developed another logic: the design of a structure that grows out of the earth and then changes character to relate to the trees."

It's no coincidence that this project is reminiscent of the famed residences of American architect Frank Lloyd Wright. Fountain has visited many of Wright's houses in the United States and appreciates the Castlecrag, NSW, designs of his pupil, Walter Burley Griffin. Other influences come from 1960s and 1970s Sydney School architects, such as Bruce Rickard, who were also fans of Wright.











The dining room, opposite, is located at the centre of the house, symbolising its importance as the family gathering place. Around the square table, designed by Michael Fountain and made by Rolf Sander, are dining chairs from Design Warehouse. Silver platter from Orson & Blake; overhead halogen pendant from Inlite. Bi-fold glass doors open to a reflection pond lined with deep green glass mosaic tiles from Pazotti. Standing watch over the pond is a stone Buddha brought back from a holiday in Bali. **This page:** the kitchen overlooks the family room. A small window allows cross-ventilation through the house without losing privacy. Sink and mixer from The Bath House; halogen pendants from Inlite.





The central zone, left, and the magnolia tree that inspired the house's placement on the site are revealed at the entry landing of the staircase. Below left: looking across the first floor from the parents' zone to the children's zone to the children's wing. Below right: the children's bathroom has a custom-made Victorian ash vanity and floors of Pazotti reconstituted marble.





The Fountain house, illustrated here, supports Wright's insistence that organic materials – timber, concrete and stone – should be consistently used inside and out. Frank Lloyd Wright, who died in 1958, would also be impressed by the fine craftsmanship of the building, thanks to a team of tradespeople, led by Guy Hough, who, in Fountain's opinion, "really put their intelligence, their heart and soul into it".

The rooms (or "volumes") of this residence are more generous and expansive than Wright's, however, soaring high compared to his low ceilings and flowing in an open plan that contradicts his networks of intimate rooms.

The house plan begins with a two-storey central zone, incorporating staircase and entry lobby at street level, overlooking a two-storey dining room which opens to a reflection pond and the garden. Fountain says this room is centrally located to symbolise its significance as the family meeting place and to form a connection between two living zones at ground level and the parents' and children's zones upstairs.

In summer, the ground floor is kept open to permit breezes, but in winter, the three zones can be divided, for heating and a sense of enclosure, by rolling down two heavy double-hung screens of cedar and glass from the walls above.

All three living zones are also fitted with folding glass doors, which allow them to be opened up to the garden. In this mode, at certain times, a magical trick of light occurs.

According to the architect, "We love watching those perfect sunsets when the western sun suddenly shafts in to set the pool sparkling and then bounces right up into the top of the house, giving wonderful ripples of light and shade across the walls and ceiling. It's an incredible spectacle".

DAVINA JACKSON

The natural textured facade, above left, with its cedar-framed windows, split-faced concrete blocks and cedar cladding, is 'respectful' of the bush location. Above right: at the rear of the house, the main bedroom's balcony overhangs the family room, which opens to a small stone terrace. Below: the main bedroom looks out to views of the giant magnolia, eucalypts and the estuary. Bedspread and cushions from Orson & Blake.

