

# ARCHITECTURAL RECORD

McGraw-Hill  
CONSTRUCTION

12  
2010

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**A husband-and-wife team brings design out of the bush and into Australia's suburbs, where the great majority of the nation's population lives.**

**LOCATION:** Sydney, Australia

**FOUNDED:** 2004

**DESIGN STAFF:** 5

**PRINCIPALS:** Stephanie Little,  
Tony Chenchow

**EDUCATION:** Little – University of New South Wales, B.Arch., 1994. Chenchow – University of New South Wales, B.Arch., 1993

**WORK HISTORY:** Little – Partnership with Tony Chenchow, Sydney, 1994–2003; Owen Haviland, Sydney, 1989–90. Chenchow – Partnership with Stephanie Little, Sydney, 1994–2003; Campbell Luscombe, Sydney, 1992–93; Lewin Tzannes, Sydney, 1990–91; Travis Partners, Sydney, 1989–90

**KEY COMPLETED PROJECTS:** Pitched Roof House, Sydney, 2009; Freshwater House, Sydney, 2008; Ang House, Sydney, 2008; Semi-Detached House, Sydney, 2007; Szirtes House, Sydney, 2005

**KEY CURRENT PROJECTS:** Skylight House, Sydney, 2010; Mosman Row Houses, Sydney, 2011; Palm Beach House, Sydney, 2011; Byron Bay House, Byron Bay, Australia, 2012; Coogee House, Sydney, 2012; Dover Heights House, Sydney, 2012; Victoria House, Sydney, 2012

**WEB SITE:** [www.chenchowlittle.com](http://www.chenchowlittle.com)

*Russell Fortmeyer is a Sydney-based journalist and engineer and a former editor at ARCHITECTURAL RECORD.*

# CHENCHOW LITTLE ARCHITECTS

**TONY CHENCHOW AND STEPHANIE LITTLE** belong to a crowded field of husband-and-wife architectural practices in Australia. Like their better-known counterparts Lindsay and Kerry Clare or the infrequent collaborators Glenn Murcutt and Wendy Lewin, the two have distinguished themselves with a collection of residential projects that sensitively respond to the Australian climate and architectural and social traditions. But unlike Murcutt or the Clares, Chenchow and Little have established a critical practice that directly engages the overwhelmingly suburban status of the population.

"I think the perception of Australian residential architecture is that it's all in a bush setting," Chenchow says, using the local term for "rural." "In reality, it's quite different, with more than 75 percent of homes in suburban locations." Chenchow and Little met when they were both studying at the University of New South Wales in Sydney. He's from western Sydney, and she grew up in the country in New South Wales. Once they both had graduated, in 1994, they worked together occasionally but often practiced separately in contract to larger firms before finally establishing their own practice in 2004 in Sydney. "I dislike suburbia, so it's something we try to question, to strategically look at the traditional model and create alternatives," says Chenchow.

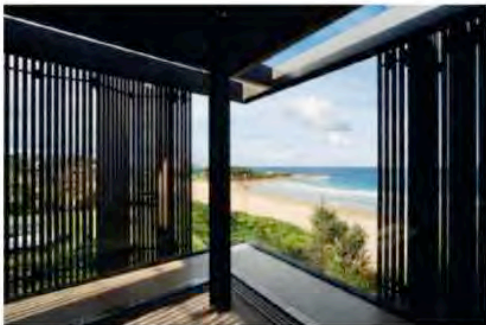
Like all architects in Sydney, Chenchow and Little often must contend with councils that wield significant, if uninformed, power over the massing and aesthetics of new buildings. With their Pitched Roof House (2009), the architects viewed this interference as an opportunity, taking the council's desire for sloped roofs at face value. But they inverted the traditional pitch and echoed the forms with a hyperarticulated steel-frame structure. The Pitched Roof House shares much of the same design vocabulary that marks the firm's other work, such as formal gestures dictated by zoning allowances, elegantly precise detailing, a muted palette fixed in materials such as timber, zinc, and glass, a reliance on screens and louvers to modulate solar loads and avoid installing air-conditioning, and, above all, a tendency to orient houses around a central courtyard that dissolves the plan in fluid space. The two architects like to layer space from outside to in – courtyards epitomizing this approach – to create interstitial spaces that can manage the extremes of the Australian climate. "In the Freshwater House, we pulled the line of the glazing back from the louvers along the perimeter of the house," says Little, "ending up with something that works a lot like a traditional Australian veranda." Except it's not traditional.

Little says she and Chenchow would like to expand their practice into commercial buildings but find it difficult to compete in this market given the dominance of large firms and risk-averse developers. Currently, the firm has 10 houses in design or construction. In 2009, the Freshwater House won the prestigious Robin Boyd Award for Residential Architecture from the Australian Institute of Architects, which should propel the two architects into the upper ranks of the country's design-oriented firms. The pair feel emboldened now to start looking overseas to expand their practice. "It would be great to interact with a foreign culture and look at their regulations as a constraint to generate ideas," Chenchow says, laughingly adding that it is Little who does most of the research into planning and zoning requirements. *Russell Fortmeyer*



**"BEFORE WE START ANYTHING, WE BUILD MODELS OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD,"** says Little. "We're a bit anachronistic that way." The couple's design of the three-bedroom Ang House, completed in 2008, responds to the common Sydney dilemma of updating a relatively narrow semidetached house and terrace without disrupting the heritage envelope of the original building. In this case, the architects preserved the sandstone exterior at the conservative local council's request and extended a new structure into the lower rear garden, bringing the landscape into the footprint of the house through use of a cantilevered second story. From the street, the house remains an unassuming cottage, while beyond the front door, a light-filled, open plan emerges. The firm's other houses share this infusion of gardens and outdoor spaces in plan. Two gleaming white steel trusses, rendered in precise detail, express the cantilever, visually and structurally extending the ground-floor living spaces out to a terrace enclosed by white louvers. A new second story contains the master suite. The restrained finishes, quiet structural gestures, and minimal provision of enclosed space set Chenchow Little's approach apart from the countless other versions found throughout Sydney. In 2009, the house won a National Architecture Award for small projects.



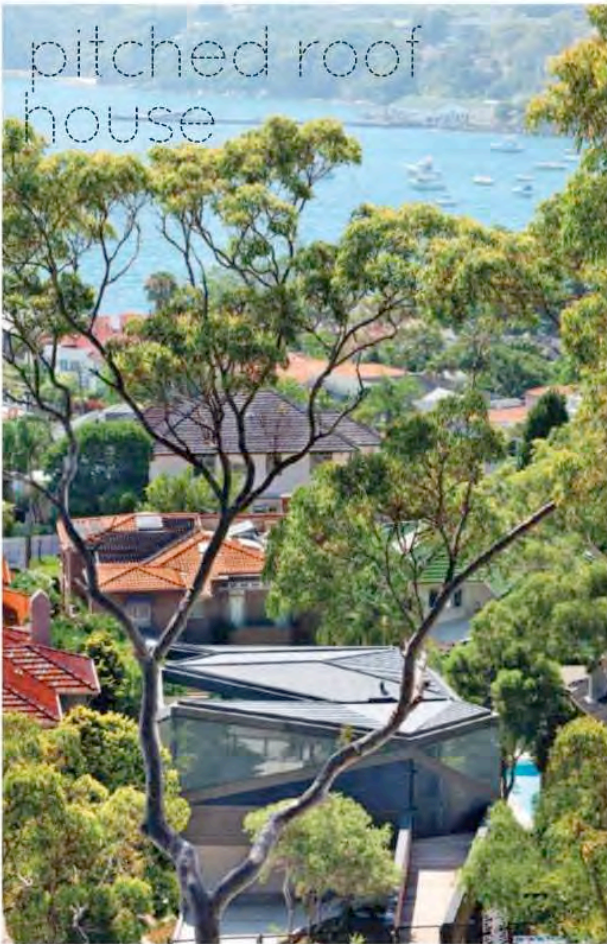


**THE FOUR-BEDROOM FRESHWATER HOUSE, IN A** northern Sydney beach suburb, is one of the firm's most abstract houses. In plan, living and dining spaces are similarly proportioned, allowing the clients to mix up their living style throughout the year. On the basement garage level, the architects responded to the local council's demands for a contextual design by mimicking the color of the adjacent sandstone walls with unfinished timber battens angled to take advantage of views. The staccato spacing of the battens is repeated in the external zinc screen around the glass second story. The architects say these gestures were inspired by a need to balance privacy and the desire to capture exceptional views to the beach and Pacific Ocean beyond. Bucking the recent tendency in Sydney to use white finishes in houses along the coastline, the muted color palette includes a matte black finish to the living room ceiling, done to both reduce sunlight glare off the sparkling ocean and to merge the ceiling with the dark sky at night.

#### THE WEST ELEVATION

of this four-bedroom residence – a renovation of an existing house in one of Sydney's eastern beach suburbs – incorporates a new steel superstructure that enables the once closed-off house to open up to its surroundings with a series of building skins. Starting from the outside, the series includes a zinc louver screen, then an open circulation space, and finally the house's actual envelope. "By creating this verandalike space, we've extended the line of the house out," says Little, adding that the additional space puts a little-used side yard to work as a buffer against harsh western sunlight. The louvers ensure the house remains comfortable, even without air-conditioning.





**BUILT IN 2009, THIS HOUSE EXEMPLIFIES THE ARCHITECTS' GOAL OF** fusing multiple components into a cohesive whole. They designed an exuberant structure that minimizes the number of columns, maximizes the role of beams in setting the house's primary organization, and shifts traditional readings of perspective. Chenchow views this structure – made of zinc-clad timber – as both the internal and external expression of the house. It also responds directly to the local council's requirements for neutral finishes (zinc, charcoal-colored glass), pitched roofs, and setbacks on all sides as the house steps down three stories from west to east. The architects incorporated a favorite device: a service core (kitchen, stair, bathroom) that serves as a delineator of space. Chenchow says this use of the service core is akin to that of many high-rises and offers immense flexibility for circulation, new ways of using space, and the introduction of courtyards in all but the narrowest of houses. "Traditional suburban homes have a front and back and you're always moving in those directions, with sides as leftover spaces," he says. "We're trying to get rid of that typology."



**THE ARCHITECTS FIRST EXPLORED A** courtyard approach to residential design with their Szirtes House, completed in 2005. Here they faced the challenge of building a new suburban house behind an existing one and wrestling with the resulting lack of views and street frontage. In response, they developed an "abstracted ground plane," in Chenchow's words, of garden, interior, and courtyard, with major functions such as kitchen and bathrooms pulled to one side of the plan. The scheme blurs the boundaries between inside and out. Built on an existing  $\frac{1}{4}$ -acre site, this important early project highlights the firm's desire to increase the density of existing suburbs, providing an open, glassy ground floor surrounded by a garden, and a heavier, screened-off upper story for bedrooms. "We find you can fit two functioning, spacious houses on a standard suburban block and they both work quite well," says Little.

