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Design

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THE ART OF CITY LIVING

TWO DECADES OF WORKING TOGETHER HAVE TURNED HUSBAND-AND-WIFE ARCHITECTS TONY CHENCHOW AND STEPHANIE LITTLE INTO MASTERS OF CALM AND FRESH URBAN DOMESTIC SPACES

STORY **ANNE LIM** PORTRAIT **NICK CUBBIN**

Chenchow Little Architects may not have a house style, but there is something that could be called a house atmosphere. The small Sydney architectural firm headed by Tony Chenchow and Stephanie Little believes in the power of architecture to improve people's lives, particularly in highly urbanised environments. Focusing mainly on bespoke single houses, the pair aim to create a sense of serenity, a sense of space and volume, sunlight and a relationship with the garden through atriums and courtyards.

The practice's many awards include Australian architecture's highest accolade for residential design, the Robin Boyd Award in 2009, for a house in Freshwater on Sydney's northern beaches. An image of that house with the serendipitous addition of a couple of surfers out front became iconic around the world, bringing their work to the attention of international publishers. In 2010 Chenchow and Little were shocked to be named in *Architecture Record*'s Design Vanguard issue as one of top 10 international firms in the world.

"I think it's because we presented an alternative story of what Australian architecture is," Chenchow muses, sitting in the practice's small studio in a converted warehouse in Surry Hills, surrounded by plywood models and walls papered with prizes.

"Australian architecture is known internationally for houses in a bush setting. Glenn Murcutt's Pritzker Prize did wonderful things for the profession internationally, but it gave this false impression that we all live in houses in the bush, whereas in reality 80-90 per cent of us live in the city. So when they asked us to submit a portfolio we talked about how we design architecture in a highly urbanised setting and we listed strategies we employ such as courtyards and skylights, playing with the council codes."

In the arresting image of Freshwater House, there is little to show the house is close to the beach, other than the presence of the surfers. The building rises sculpturally from the street, a skin of bronze shutters providing privacy and security while also allowing views. Achieving a balance between outlook and privacy was also a priority in a recent project, the striking K House in Sydney's eastern suburbs. The sun-bathed, city-facing side faces a pedestrian walkway, so to maximise both privacy and sun exposure the architects created a protective cement shell that will weather over time, while inside along the periphery are hidden several courtyards that blur the line between inside and outside. "In terms of the materials it's quite a warm, rich house," Chenchow says. "It's a bit like an oyster shell — the outside is able to withstand the elements, it ages well, weathers well, but the interior of the house is all lined with beautiful timber, so it's a bit like a walnut."

Chenchow and Little say the key to their seamless working relationship is they have had time to work each other out. Meeting in the final year of university, they became a couple first and then started working together almost straight after graduation.

"We met when you don't have a rigid opinion of what architecture is or how you feel about certain things, so it's

Stephanie Little, left, and Tony Chenchow have won numerous awards since setting up business together soon after graduation

Freshwater House earned Chenchow Little the Robin Boyd residential award in 2009. The elevated position, top left, allows for a private compound, screened from the neighbours; the stylish kitchen, above, is open and expansive; the bedroom, left, has slatted dark metal screens for control of sun and privacy; the view of Freshwater Beach, far left

good that we met early on because we both seem to have developed our architectural language together," says Chenchow, who at 46 is two years Little's senior.

"We've basically grown up together," Little adds. "I think why we're still together is we've always been very complementary; our characters and our skills are very complementary, so we just always got on well."

Interviewing the pair, who have been in practice together for nearly 20 years, reveals the truth of this statement. One will answer a question, then the other will amplify or add a nuance; there is no disagreement, no talking over or interruption, although they say they do have strong discussions at times. "I think better outcomes come from that. It's an important part of the process to look at different options, different ways of dealing with the issues and working through those together and basically fighting our case and seeing which case ends up the stronger one," Little says.

They work together on every project, believing it prevents the competition that sometimes arises when partners pursue separate projects. Being the more organised, Little concentrates on contract administration, code compliance and dealing with builders while Chenchow spearheads the design. "I think sometimes if

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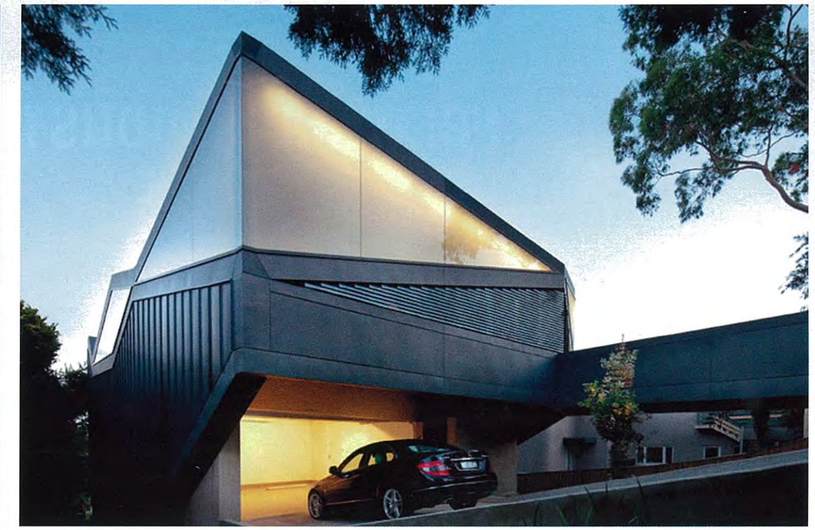
you have two designers it's quite hard to work with each other," says Chenchow.

But they insist Little's work is just as creatively integral as Chenchow's since the design process does not stop at the drawing stage but continues organically through the various stages of a project. "I think the general public has this impression that great architecture is purely about the design but there are many facets to what an architect does," Chenchow says. "For example, if the contract administration with the builder isn't handled properly you will end up with a poorly built house."

"To me, the documentation is vitally important," Little explains. "If I don't have all of my Ts crossed and my Is dotted, there's no way we can go on site and see things as they're progressing and suggest changes to make the scheme better if we haven't got everything else running perfectly. If you're constantly fighting battles — I forgot this on the drawings — you can never have the head space to look back and say 'what if we change a paint colour?' or whatever. And it just adds so much to the result if you've got the head space to do that."

In fact, Little's creativity in interpreting council codes led to one of Chenchow Little's most impressive house designs. The Pitched Roof House was in a council area where regulations insisted on pitched roofs. Rather than viewing this as an obstacle, Little used it to generate the roof design by exploiting a loophole that did not specify the required angle of the pitch. "A pitched roof doesn't always need to pitch up; it can pitch down," Chenchow says. "So juxtaposed against the surrounding traditional roof forms, it still complied with the regulations but we've reinterpreted it in a completely new manner ... And when you do that, you actually design specifically for



Clockwise from top left: The K House in Sydney's eastern suburbs overlooks the city skyline; the Pitched Roof House uses triangular geometry to invert a traditional pitched roof design; the Skylight House in Balmain shows how Chenchow Little turned a dark terrace into a space bathed in light

that site, for that client. And that's what we enjoy doing."

Because they enjoy working together on every project, Chenchow Little has purposely remained a small studio with just three full-time staff apart from themselves and a workload of about a dozen projects at a time. "We have to say no to quite a bit of work but we prefer to work on each project ourselves to maintain quality," Little says. "We are control freaks really," Chenchow admits. "We're interested in quality, we're interested in providing a personal service to our clients, and if we grow too large and take on too many projects, you can't achieve those two aims."

While the majority of their work is new houses, mainly in upmarket suburbs, the budgets of projects on their website vary from a few hundred thousand to several million dollars. They say costs are largely dependent on the size of a house and in the past 14 years clients have been asking for bigger and bigger houses to maximise the potential of their sites. "We'd be happy to do a small, highly detailed house, but people are prioritising size over quality unfortunately," Little says.

Now parents to a two-year-old son, Chenchow and Little have recently renovated their inner-city terrace and done something revolutionary — they actually reduced

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the available floor space rather than adding to it. They cut a huge atrium in the middle and put a series of skylights on top to allow light to come through down the roof to the ground floor. Because of the increased sense of volume, the apparent space is greatly increased, Little says. "The best architecture is always about manipulating space, light and creating an atmosphere, so the floor space doesn't really have much to do with that."

She agrees that having a child has changed the way they look at the design of a house. "We have still managed to fit two living areas into our terrace house, which I think works well for a family. We have a baby's room close to the master bedroom and secondary bedrooms on upper floors for when our child is older. Rooms have a dual role, so the baby's room is wired to be a future child's study when it is no longer required. We have saved space by limiting circulation areas, and limiting the size of bedrooms and bathrooms so we can keep the living spaces as generous as possible."

Chenchow, who was born in Sydney of migrants from Hong Kong, and Little, who grew up on a farm in Griffith, say their joint passion for bringing freshness to architecture means they don't differentiate between work and home life. Even their holidays are themed around viewing architecture.

"We embody architecture, so we're always learning," Chenchow says. "It becomes entrenched in your lifestyle. Even when you're walking down to Bourke Street Bakery, you're always looking at the streetscape and the way light filters through the plane trees and how the afternoon is very different from the morning and how light is so important in creating an ambience at different times of day. We're always looking at that. You need to live it." W