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MIRROR FINISH

Chenchow Little Architects apply a high shine to whatever they construct.

Photograph NICHOLAS WATT Edited by KAREN McCARTNEY

Architects Tony Chenchow and Stephanie Little were shot exclusively for *Belle* by Nicholas Watt on the site of the Coogee House.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY PETER BENNETTS (DARLING POINT AND BRESICWHITNEY), JOHN GOLLINGS (K HOUSE)

A QUESTION ABOUT THE ARCHITECTURAL PROCESS of award-winning practice Chenchow Little Architects (Tony Chenchow and Stephanie Little) seems, on the surface, to produce contradictory answers. But unpicking the responses from this husband and wife team, both answers are two sides of the same coin and reflect the complementary roles each play. To Stephanie, the process is a strategy of engagement with the site, the council code and the interrogation of the client brief, whereas to Tony the design outcome is never prescriptive – it is a creative journey in which the ending is never strictly determined. And this is why they work so well together. "We don't compete, we know our strengths and, interestingly, clients often ask for us both to be at meetings knowing we represent different aspects of the creative process," says Stephanie.

Out of this duality of approach emerge beautifully conceived and logical buildings where the poetry is never lost in the precision of the execution. Sitting on the table of their Surry Hills boardroom is a model of a new apartment building, the result of a City of Sydney Design Excellence competition for the growth suburb of Waterloo. With so many cookie-cutter apartments on the market how do Chenchow Little imbue their building design with a quality beyond the everyday? Stephanie explains that the site was originally a wetland and the name of the adjacent park, Dyuralya, meaning wetland bird or brolga, gave them a concept to explore in the built form. "We began looking at the history of the site, exploring the typology of wetland buildings and developed a series of crisscrossed stilt supports which give the building both its intrinsic structure and its aesthetic form," explains Tony.

This coaxing out of an idea, be it from the client brief or the site itself is important for the genesis of a concept. The K House in Sydney's Vaucluse started with the twin notions of balancing privacy and view alongside a meaningful connection to the exterior. "We used the concrete form to create a sculptural shape (determined by Woollahra Council's strict code) as a protective skin but then exploited the warmth of timber to line the internal spaces," says Stephanie. The house can be completely opened up as the glass doors disappear into mirrored cabinetry and, as Tony points out, "with this porosity between inside and out, the notions of space can be manipulated. It is expansive but still cocooning."

If there were an award for "architectural excellence with mirrors" it would undoubtedly belong to Chenchow Little. Witness the judicious use of bronzed mirror finishes alongside perforated brass mesh in their latest interior scheme for real estate agency BresicWhitney in Hunters Hill or their playful "hall of mirrors" powder room in the recently completed Darling Point apartment. "I have always loved the mirrored bathrooms of Neville Gruzman but we are aware that it is a tricky surface and needs to be used with care," says Tony.

The other area of developing expertise within the practice is the sensitive way in which the pair works with clients with serious art collections. "We would love the opportunity to do a public art gallery and expand our understanding of curation and display," says Tony. In the meantime, their artful buildings with their strong signature and conceptual strength will have to suffice. "The brief for the Coogee house was for the wife to feel like she was on a ship with an expansive view of the horizon, and the husband, who has a love of camping, wanted to evoke the lightness of a tent," says Stephanie.

Thankfully, they have come to the right architects.

For more information, visit chenchowlittle.com.

From top Light pours into the highly crafted interior of the Darling Point apartment. The dining room of the K House in Sydney's Vaucluse shows the timber interior and the level of openness the house can achieve. The sculptural concrete skin of the K House. The BresicWhitney office interior in Hunters Hill plays with raw and luxury materials to create a showcase for art pieces.