



In the studio: Stephanie Little and Tony Chenchow. PHOTOGRAPHY KATHERINE LU

The practice of

CHENCHOW LITTLE

ADDRESSING THEMES OF INTERSTITIAL SPACE, OPERABLE FACADES AND STRUCTURE AS ORNAMENTATION, THESE AIA AWARD WINNERS ARE MASTERS OF THE DOMESTIC SPACE.



Interstitial spaces on the periphery of the Semi-detached House. PHOTOGRAPHY JOHN GOLLINGS

It's not often you can tell something about an architectural practice by the front fence, but the cyclone wire fence – black powder coated – outside a recently finished house on a conservative suburban New South Wales street says a great deal about Chenchow Little. One, they can be provocative. Two, they have a democratic, non-hierarchical attitude towards materials. “Cyclone fencing has always been associated with low cost housing,” says Tony Chenchow. “We’re trying to work with it purely as a material, without any connotations.” (Internal walls of unadorned fibro are another example of that way of thinking.) Three, they play by the rules – their way.

Look at the roof of the house and those observations are reinforced. The council doesn't allow flat roofs in the area. The architects don't call such restrictions limitations, says Chenchow. “We call them departure points – they make us start thinking ‘let's explore that.’” The roof they settled on, a complex structure of triangular facets, pitching up and inverting both internally and externally, complies with all council requirements – it follows height controls and is certainly not flat. “We've created a pitched roof in a contemporary way.”

Tony Chenchow and Stephanie Little – professional and life partners – have been working together for 15 years and during that time have managed to keep the practice small (four people for the

past 10 years) and they plan to keep it that way, working on around six houses a year. “It means you are thrown in the deep end straight away and are involved in all aspects of design,” says Janice Chenchow, a cousin of Tony's who has been with the practice for four years since finishing a degree in interior architecture and international studies.

For virtually the whole 15 years, Chenchow Little has concentrated on residential projects. Early in their career a client gave them a piece of advice. “He told us not to be too ambitious, not to take on too many different types of buildings,” says Little. “He said it's too easy to lose focus that way.”

With the practice firmly focused on residential work, she continues, “All the technical and functional aspects have become second nature to us; it's important to get that grounding to allow us to push ideas.”

And it takes a few houses, says Chenchow, “to develop concepts and strategies; it's not as if we've perfected anything yet”.

Each house they design is quite different. “We don't have a cookie cutter approach,” he says. “What we do is very different from the society we live in, which relies on quick sound bites. What we do is slow.”

As a response to what they see as the inadequacy of the traditional suburban dwelling, they are currently exploring three themes in their houses: interstitial space, operable facades and structure as ornamentation; all of which they believe form more appropriate aesthetic and spatial responses to the way we live today. The interstitial or in-between spaces explored in the Semi-detached House includes verandas, courtyards, stairways and circulation path »

SEMI-DETACHED HOUSE, SYDNEY, 2007

“Through this process of exploring interstitial space, we aimed to depart from the predictable semi-detached house typology characterised by shotgun planning, introverted rooms, small side windows and flat ceilings.

The design involved the addition of a new steel framed superstructure above the existing sandstone basement and roughcast rendered bedroom level. Verandas, courtyards, stairways and a circulation path linking the street level to the garden below extend the living areas.

A skin of adjustable louvres applied continuously across the facade provides privacy and solar control to the interstitial space. The flanges of the horizontal steel members are reduced to the same visual order as the louvre blades, so the facade is viewed as a textural surface without focal points. We're not interested in breaking down the scale by including discernable features such as windows arranged through a formalistic logic; rather we sought to unload the traditional utilitarian interpretation of the device and the material.

The Modernist ideal emphasises separation between ornamentation and function, but this is not so clear here. The louvre's aesthetic role is as important as its technical and functional one.”

MIDDLE HARBOUR HOUSE, SYDNEY, 2008

“Middle Harbour House's interstitial spaces are a series of balconies and courtyards within the depth of the new facade. With varying heights and sizes, they open from the interior and are concealed and revealed to varying degrees by the placement of a layered series of operable screens and landscape elements. This complex approach has enabled the primary living functions of the dwelling to be located within the front yard of the site – the project's rear yard being small and largely unusable – while maintaining privacy. The screens are angled to focus views to the Spit Bridge and provide the building with its unique form and texture. The spatial richness of this zone is accentuated by the tension created between the geometry of the existing dwelling and the new front.”



Layered street facade of the Middle Harbour House. PHOTOGRAPHY PHILLIP HAYSON

KEY AWARDS

2009
Freshwater House, Sydney
AIA National Award: Robin Boyd Award for Residential Buildings
AIA State Award (NSW): Residential Architecture – New Houses
Interior Design Awards: Colour in Residential Interiors (Commendation)
Ang House, Sydney
AIA National Award: Small Project Architecture
AIA State Award (NSW): Residential Architecture – Alterations and Additions

2008
Freshwater House
HIA, CSR NSW Housing Awards – Most Innovative Use of Steel
Ang House
HIA, CSR NSW Housing Awards – Renovations and Additions (under \$600,000)

2007
Semi-detached House, Sydney
HIA, CSR NSW Housing Awards – Most Innovative Use of Steel Award

2003
Rushcutter's Bay Apartment, Sydney
Finalist, Belle, Apartment of the Year
RAIA State Award (NSW) Interior Architecture (Commendation)

2001
Mason House, Sydney
RAIA State Award (NSW) Single Housing (Commendation)

» linking the street level to the garden below, all housed within a steel framed superstructure. In the Southern Highlands House and the 2009 Robin Boyd Award-winning Freshwater House, the overarching idea they worked with was the operable facade: a skin of shutters encasing the building, forming a strongly rhythmic and sculptural pattern of repetition, pragmatically designed to respond to issues of weather, security and privacy. The Pitched Roof House, with its undulating roof form fits into the category of structure as ornamentation and so too, in an entirely different way, does the Ang House, an addition to a Federation style semi. The client's brief here was for a new living area opening to a deck, an upstairs bedroom and a column-free garden space. The architects' response was to insert a simple steel truss into the rear of the house, which performs the traditional supporting role but "also acts as a spatial device that intensifies the perception and perspective of the space".

Chenchow and Little believe they each have their strengths. According to Chenchow, Little is the organised one. "And I often don't know when to stop, and keep pushing," he says. "We always have long discussions of how far to go and when to stop." Both agree that their approach towards design is singular and holistic, concentrating on houses as "pure objects, rather than a collection of bits and pieces. We're not interested in celebrating the door handle".

CONTRIBUTOR: LETA KEENS

writes about architecture, design and the arts for a number of publications, including MONUMENT 93.

SOUTHERN HIGHLANDS HOUSE, NEW SOUTH WALES, 2004

"This site contains remnant rainforest, basalt outcrops and an expansive established garden, with gently undulating lawns surrounded by dense swathes of exotic trees, and is also exposed to strong winds and sudden changes of extreme weather. For this reason, a skin of operable external shutters protects the exterior of the building, modulating solar access and privacy as well as altering its appearance. When the house is not in use, the shutters can be locked in place and the dwelling secured. So Southern Highlands House doesn't only explore the theme of operable facades, it also explores the idea of using landscape as a generator of domestic building form.

The form of the proposed dwelling mimics the dense thickets of trees that shield discrete patches of lawn and bridges two sections of such planting. A pocket of undulating lawn has been extended into the centre of the dwelling, around which the building wraps to form a courtyard and entry. The trees and the building channel vistas and delineate the external space. On entering the building, a panorama of the valley opens up unexpectedly on the other side."

FRESHWATER HOUSE, SYDNEY, 2008

"Freshwater House developed our idea of the operable facade to mediate between the requirements for privacy and shading on a relatively public site adjacent to the beach.

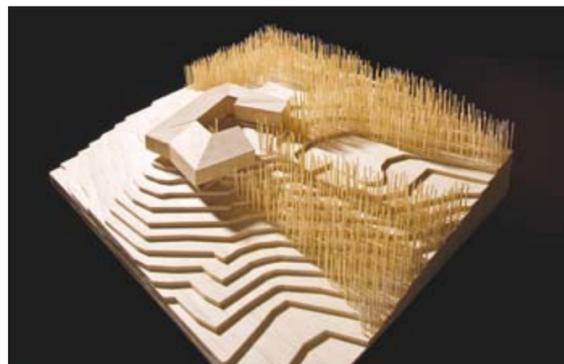
The basement podium level is introverted and enclosed, concealing a deeply recessed entry vestibule and garage within the natural topography of the site. It is clad with vertical weathered timber battens, wrapping around the entire level and extending to the ground floor, which form a balustrade at the periphery of the site. These battens are angled on each facade to allow direct views to the beach below.

Atop the podium, and in contrast to it, the living level is open and expansive. It is conceived as one fluid horizontal space, taking in the whole area and connected visually to the landscaped areas below and above the site.

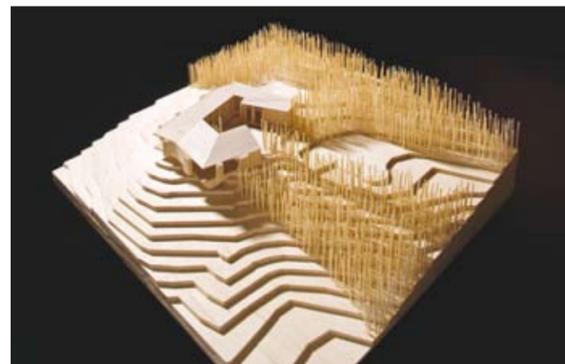
The top bedroom level floats above the living level and is veiled with custom-made external bi-folding shutters. The shutters are constructed of anodised vertical bronze-coloured battens to maintain beach views, provide privacy and allow dappled light to this level. The shutters' detailing is purposefully simple so the building reads as an abstract sculptural form in the landscape."



The operable facade of bronze anodised shutters. PHOTOGRAPHY JOHN GOLLINGS



Southern Highlands House with closed shutters. PHOTOGRAPHY PHILLIP HAYSON



... and with the shutters open. PHOTOGRAPHY PHILLIP HAYSON



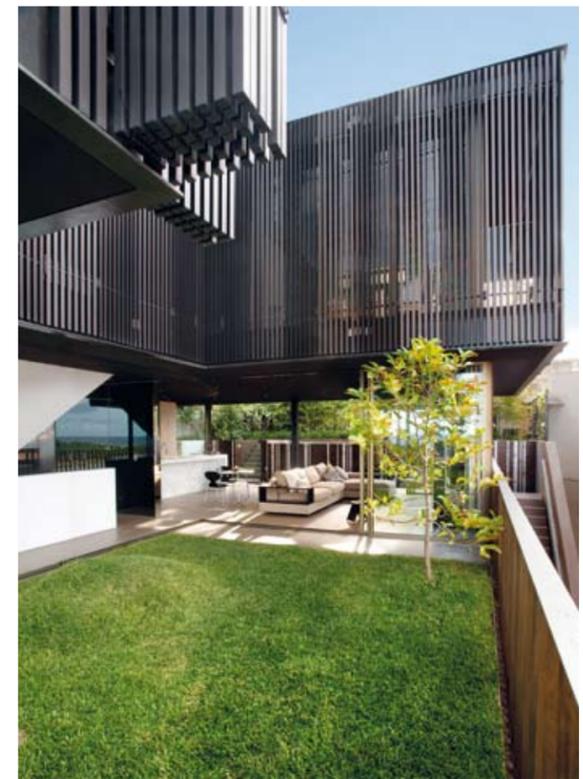
Another view with the shutters open. PHOTOGRAPHY PHILLIP HAYSON



... and locked up when the owners are away. PHOTOGRAPHY PHILLIP HAYSON



The bedroom floats above the living area. PHOTOGRAPHY JOHN GOLLINGS



A view of the living area. PHOTOGRAPHY JOHN GOLLINGS



Ang House living room and deck with truss supports. PHOTOGRAPHY JOHN GOLLINGS



The rear deck cantilevers over 3m into the garden. PHOTOGRAPHY JOHN GOLLINGS

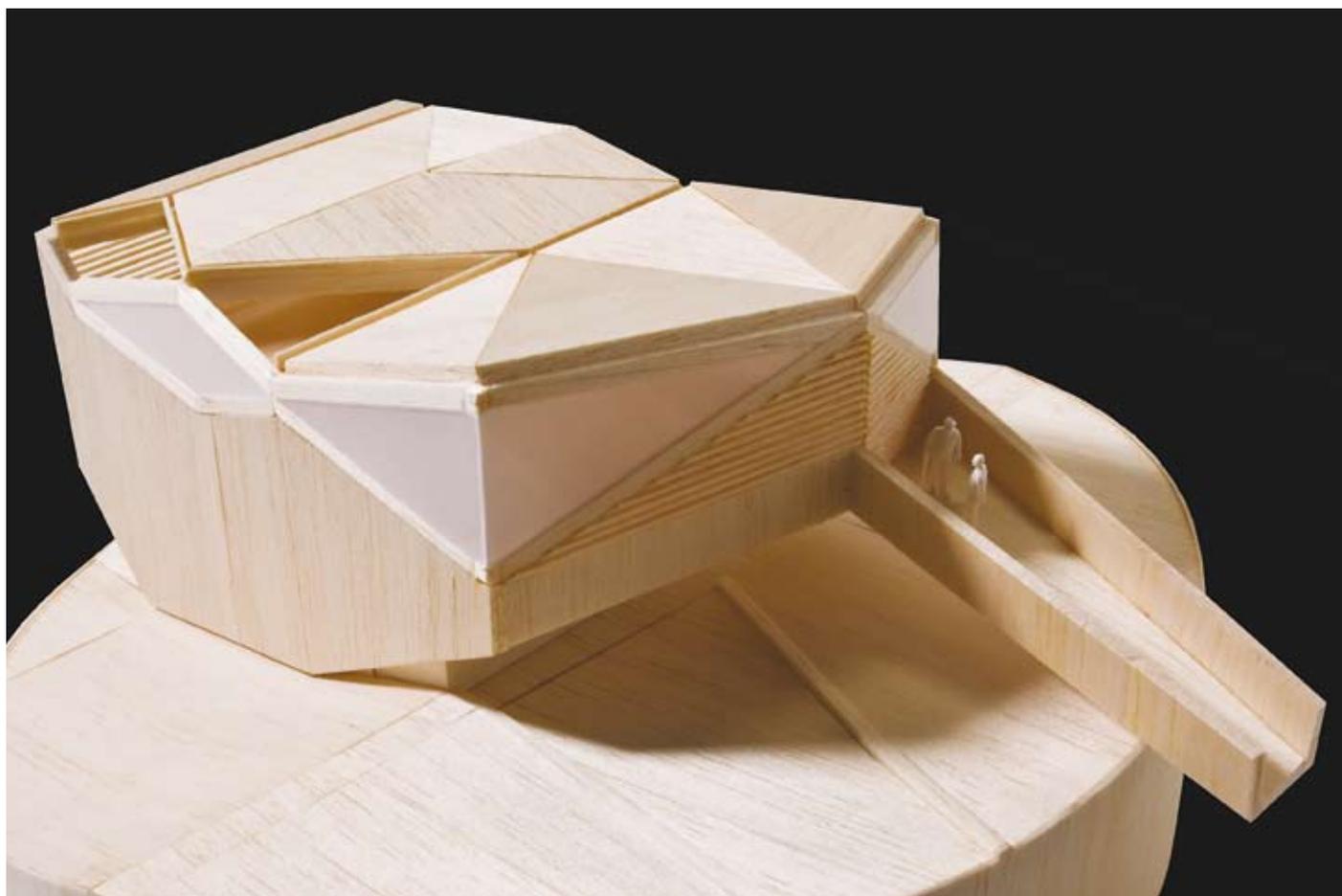
ANG HOUSE, SYDNEY, 2008

“In Ang House we explored the use of structure as ornamentation. The client’s brief was for a new living area opening on to a rear deck, an attic bedroom and a column-free garden space, and our response to this brief was clear and direct.

The addition is a simple steel truss inserted into the rear portion of the house that eliminates the need for vertical supports for the rear deck, and enables it to cantilever almost 3m. The truss also provides lateral bracing for the existing masonry side walls, as the internal cross walls were demolished to open up the rear.

The structural system performs the traditional support role, but it also acts as a device that intensifies the perception and perspective of the space. The diagonal struts accentuate the vanishing points of the space, a feature highlighted by the placement of mirrors.

The new work incorporates materials of varied textures, all within a monochromatic palette, contrasting the addition to its haphazard surroundings, and the consistency of colour, diagonal struts and careful placement of mirrors, increase the sense of space and the play of light within the dwelling.”



Pitched Roof House model showing the faceted roof plane. PHOTOGRAPHY PHILLIP HAYSON

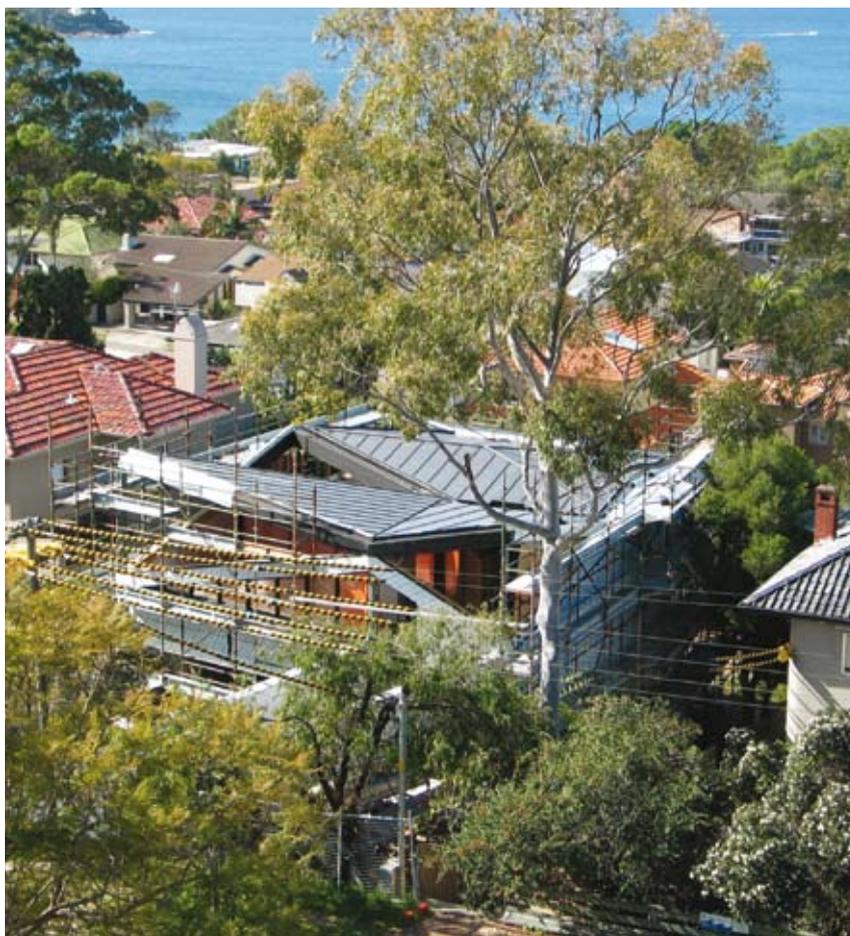
PITCHED ROOF HOUSE, SYDNEY, 2009

“Responding to the local planning codes that encourage the use of pitched roofs to reflect the predominant local roof form, the geometry of the project’s roof is made up of a series of triangles which, unlike the traditional pitched roof, not only pitch up but also invert to form a faceted plane. The structural beams follow the geometry of the roof and continue down along the face of the building so the structure is expressed both externally and internally.

While exploring the geometry of the house through a series of internal and sectional models, we realised that the triangular geometry accentuated the vanishing points of the internal space in a similar manner to the diagonal struts of the Ang House. The accentuated perspectives here, however, do not occur from a single vanishing point but from two.

The house’s structure has developed into a spatial device to organise the external and internal appearance of the building and so has moved into the realm of ornamentation. Modernist oppositions of ornamentation/function, structure/necessity in this dwelling aren’t so clear.”

ALL ARCHITECT STATEMENTS BY TONY CHENCHOW AND STEPHANIE LITTLE.



View of the house under construction from a neighbouring dwelling. PHOTOGRAPHY TONY CHENCHOW

