

northern exposure

Replacing a 1970s weekender, the luxurious volumes of this coastal house by Cullen Feng accommodate a permanent sea change to Sydney's northern beaches.

Story by Lucy Moloney Photography by Eric Sierins

LOCATED NEAR THE TOP of Sydney's northern peninsula, Whale Beach is known for its remarkable landscape and magnificent homes built along the cliffs and escarpments surrounding the beach. A sense of isolation and protection is accentuated by the presence of headlands at both ends of the beach.

When the owners bought the original three-level "nuts and berries" 1970s house in 2002, it was intended as a weekender. However, with five grown children and a number of grandchildren, they were outgrowing their main family home on Sydney's north shore and started to consider living permanently at the Whale Beach property.

Architects Jon Cullen and Michelle Feng of Cullen Feng – who had worked previously with the owners – were invited to spend a weekend at the property to assess how best to update the house for modern living and future use. After considering a number of options, the decision was made to build a new house that retained the best aspects of its predecessor but was built for the twenty-first century.

From the private road that rises up to the ridge of the hill, major elements of the house remain hidden behind the steep terrain of the trapezoidal site. Then a minimalist porte-cochere comes into view, which picks up on the proportions of adjoining properties and creates a transition zone to the main entry, with undercover double parking located discreetly to the left.

Programmatically, the previous stacked building scheme over three levels suited the dramatic site, and this is echoed in the new scheme. On the upper level, the front door leads into a top-lit entry gallery, where a slot window gives a tantalizing taste of the stunning seaward outlook beyond. The landscape is borrowed for a moment as interior artwork. "On arrival the space creates a deceleration, or pausing space, between the traffic and intensity of the journey to the house and the peaceful contemplative retreat you will enter below," say the architects, adding that on departure, the frameless skylight leaves "a last reminder of the relationship of the house with its natural setting and the quality of that setting."

The solid containment of the entry is accentuated by the wonderful view opening up when you step into the owners' retreat, which spreads across the entire level and can be secured independently from the main house. Opening to a huge timber deck, there is a living area with concealed library/office and kitchenette, flowing through to a sleeping and bathroom retreat. Here necessity makes way for indulgence, yet the interior finishes, including Japanese cedar bath and white Corian joinery, do not compete with the scenery.

In the descent from the entry, the sculptural use of light and form evokes the work of Japanese architect Tadao Ando. The central travertine-clad stair and side walls slice down through the core of the home to connect dramatically with other living and sleeping sanctuaries on the mid and lower levels.

On the mid level, fluid lounge/dining/kitchen areas increase the connection with the external entertaining deck (and beach beyond) through large, full-height glass windows, sliding glass doors and high-level glass louvres. When the house's glass exterior walls slide away to expose the building's fine bones, the living zone takes on a heightened

focus as an open pavilion.

The language of the streamlined joinery, which wraps around the central stair zone and living areas in a reconstituted veneer, extends into the kitchen, unifying various functions and packed with storage and integrated, built-in appliances. Also located on this level is a generous laundry area, resplendent in the same minimalist joinery, and opening onto an external side courtyard. Complete with an outdoor shower and direct access back up to street level, this is an ideal secondary entry for return trips from the beach.

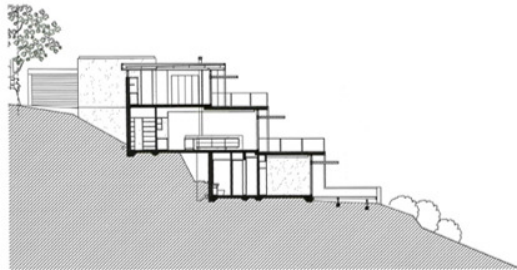
For the owners' large family and guests, the lower level houses three double bedrooms, two bathrooms and a media/entertainment room. From this level, there is access to an eleven-metre lap pool, offset to the right of the external deck so as not to compete with the beach view and finished with Brazilian slate and a dark applied finish that alludes to the hidden delights of rock pools below. The pool also features a dramatic glass end, which cantilevers out over the steeply bouldered landscape fringed with spectacular giant native *Strelitzia* (giant Bird of Paradise) plants.

The low-maintenance, environmentally friendly home affords low heat gain during summer and is bathed in solar penetration from the low winter sun, making the house energy efficient year-round. Radiant heat under a honed travertine floor, along with a built-in gas fireplace, provides all the warmth required during even the coldest winter periods. In summer, the cross-ventilation captures afternoon north-easterlies and there are ceiling fans in the bedrooms, with airconditioning only installed in the media/entertainment room due to heat generated by the audiovisual equipment. There are also external louvred aluminium sunshades on each level, and motorized interior blinds throughout.

An expansive undercroft zone on the rear mid level houses a series of water tanks, capturing an sixteen-thousand-litre capacity from roof and terrace run-off for toilets, laundry, pool and garden irrigation. Home automation used throughout the property includes initiatives to help the site control its water usage.

The design places the occupants near nature, freeing the senses. It displays innovation in its flexible, multigenerational accommodation program and in the use of new materials and systems. Travertine flooring throughout, reconstituted timber veneer cabinetry and built-in bookshelves give the simple interiors warmth, complemented by mid-to-dark-toned external finishes, including dark aubergine-toned rendered brick walls, metal-clad roofs, dark metal pergolas and sunscreens that match the window frames, and natural (unfinished) timber decking.

This project demonstrates that on a difficult and complex site, it is possible to fulfil the rigorous requirements of the client while engaging in a spirited and robust dialogue with the landscape. The house also highlights the complexity and variety of approaches to sustainability: tried and tested low-tech passive solutions combined with a sophisticated network of green systems, all without compromising the design resolution. Its elegant, stepped form thoughtfully defers to the magnificent ridgeline setting, but discreetly holds its own through its finely crafted interplay of light, materials and composition. **H**



Section

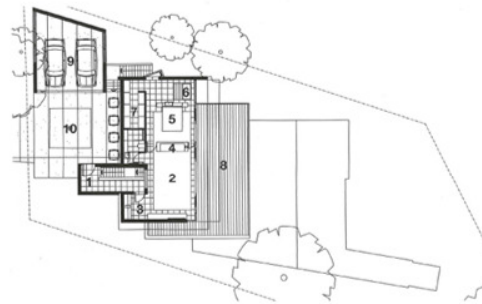
PREVIOUS PAGES, LEFT: The stepped building form is perched on the trapezoidal site, reminiscent of the original 1970s weekender. **RIGHT:** A lap pool stretches out towards the stunning views of Whale Beach. **THIS PAGE:** The warmth of the simple interior spaces is created through the use of travertine flooring, reconstituted timber veneer cabinetry and built-in bookshelves.



THIS PAGE: Large, full-height glass windows, glass sliding doors and high glass louvers increase the internal connection to the outdoor living area and views beyond. OPPOSITE: Louvred aluminium sunshades at each level avoid solar heat gain during the summer months, but allow solar penetration from the winter sun.

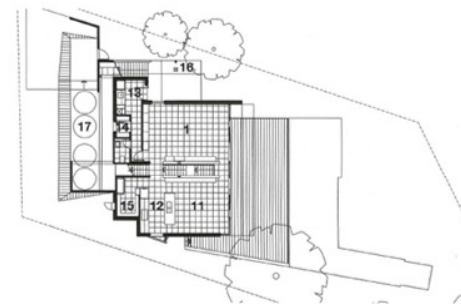


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|------------------|--------------------|
| 1 Atrium/entry | 11 Dining |
| 2 Living | 12 Kitchen |
| 3 Kitchenette | 13 Laundry |
| 4 Study | 14 Store |
| 5 Main bedroom | 15 Pantry |
| 6 Japanese bath | 16 Outdoor shower |
| 7 Robe | 17 Rainwater tanks |
| 8 Deck | 18 Media/games |
| 9 Garage | 19 Bedroom |
| 10 Porte cochere | 20 Lap pool |



0 5 m

Upper level



Mid level



Lower level



THIS PAGE: The simplicity of the Japanese cedar bath does not compete with the scenery from the bathroom.

ARCHITECT

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PRACTICE PROFILE

This medium-sized practice specializes in single and multi-residential buildings, hotels and commercial interiors.

PROJECT TEAM

Michelle Feng (design architect),
Jon Cullen (project architect),
Nik Wong, Gerald Li

BUILDER

FS Hough Builders

CONSULTANTS

Engineer MFN Group
Landscaping Peter Glass
and Associates
Joinery PJR Industries

PRODUCTS

Roofing Colorbond Premium Facade, insulated **External walls** Euronix sandstone acrylic render to masonry **Internal walls** Rendered masonry, lined and painted; Simona travertine tiles, honed **Windows** Aneela sashless, aluminum-framed with Interpon Vivica 'Brilliance' powdercoat finish; Silent Glass motorized roller blinds **Doors** Entry: pivoting door with Colorbond cladding; internal: solid-core timber, painted; balcony: sliding, glazed **Flooring** Simona travertine tiles, honed; Cavalier Bremworth Kohnoor 'Old Lace' carpet; Woodnotes rug **Lighting** Internal: LPA downlights with surface-mounted AFill fittings; Euro luce Glo Balls; External: LPA fittings **Kitchen** Miele induction cooktop; Fisher & Paykel oven; Caesar rangehood; Liebherr fridge; Neff integrated dishwasher; Blanco sink and mixer; CaesarStone 'Osprey' benchtop; satin white polyurethane cupboards; alabaster overhead cupboards **Bathroom** The Japanese Bath Company cedar bath, stool and mat; Kaldewei Classic Duo bath; Rogersseiler Scarabeo basins, Acquaticona shower bars and Verso WC; Intamix Bomba tapware; Hydrotherm heated towel rails **Climate control** Natural cross-ventilation; underfloor heating to some areas; pergolas **External elements** Hardwood decking; custom black Pebblecrete to pool interior; Brazilian slate tiles to pool wall; CM Brick Allan Block 'Oatmeal' steps **Other** Custom entertainment units, buffet unit, study unit; Emmemobili dining table and chairs; Vitra lounges; Richard Schultz 1966 Collection outdoor setting

FLOOR AREA
325 m²

PROJECT COST
\$2,500,000

TIME SCHEDULE

Design, documentation 18 months
Construction 18 months