



# *Float Like a Butterfly*

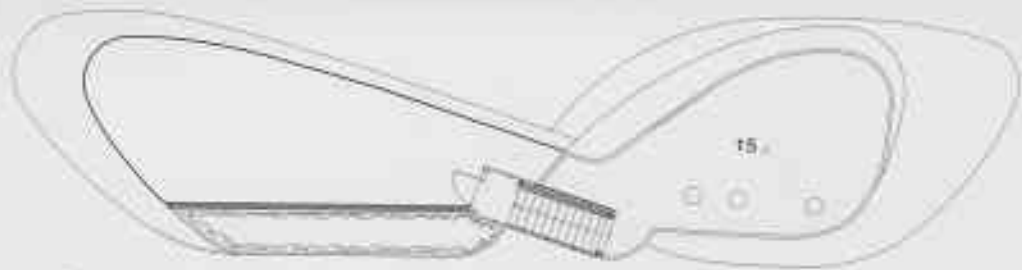
Nine years in the making, Ed Lippmann's Butterfly House in Sydney's Dover Heights is inspired by its environment but also has an otherworldly quality that extends across time and space.

Review Philip Drew Photography Willem Bethmeier

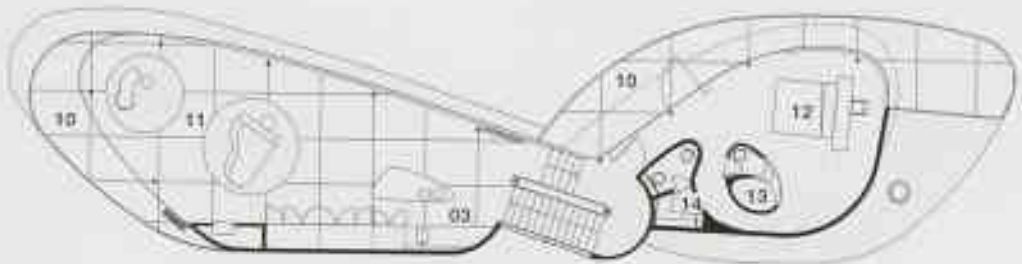




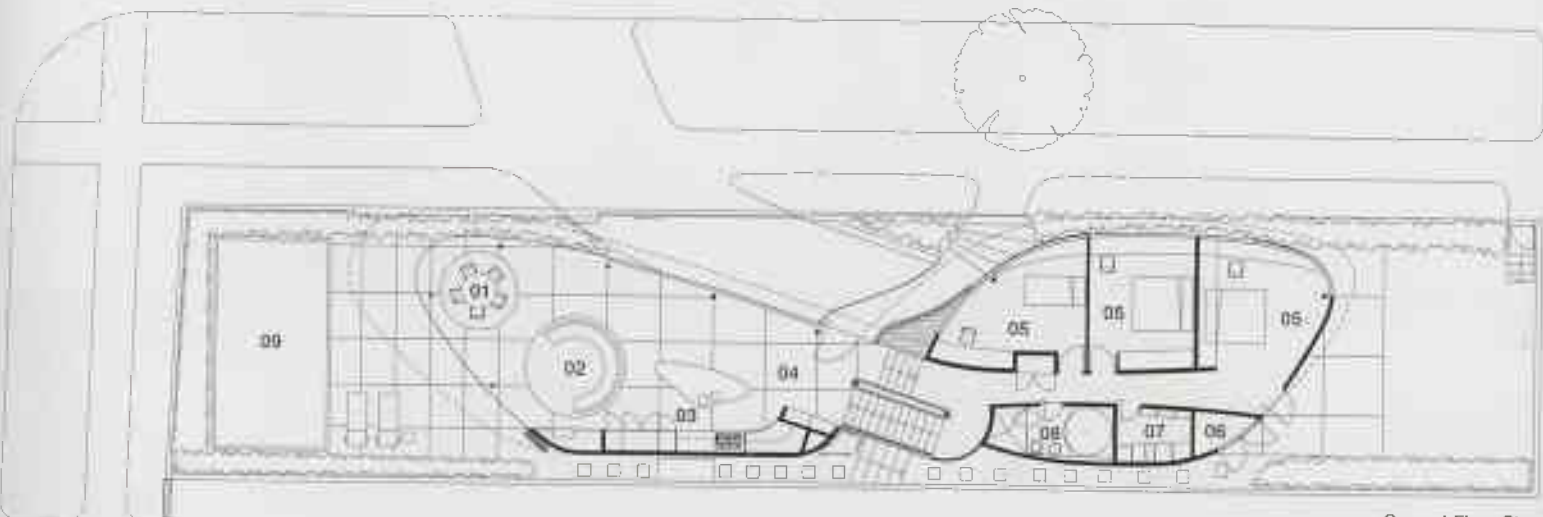
- 01 Dining
- 02 Family
- 03 Kitchen
- 04 Entry
- 05 Bedroom
- 06 Store
- 07 Dress
- 08 Bath
- 09 Pool
- 10 Deck
- 11 Living
- 12 Master bed
- 13 En suite
- 14 Robe
- 15 Roof terrace



Roof-Floor Plan



First-Floor Plan



Ground-Floor Plan

LOOKING LIKE AN alien craft that has crash-landed near the cliffs of Sydney's South Head, Ed Lippmann's Butterfly House has two petal-shaped wings and a vertical tower in the middle outstretched like a bow-tie. From the shorter end, the wings swell out voluptuously, like breasts swinging out powerfully over extended hips. It is also reminiscent of Velázquez's reclining nude, *Venus at her Mirror* – or, more in keeping with the 20th century, a fractured abstract by Picasso. Not surprisingly Lippmann's unusual house turns heads. Even during construction its unconventional form caused a traffic accident

The house appeared in a recent Telstra television commercial. The ad begins with a dad flying a kite with his son on an ocean cliff. In the distance we see the house mysteriously isolated with the wife advancing. The message is obvious: in the era of digital communication, the world outside is never distant. Telstra links us to the cosmos. Such a communications utopia is not a future vision, the ad intones, but is *today*

The house was commissioned in 1995 by a Chinese/Malaysian property developer whose only request was "the house has to have no straight lines", since he firmly believed in *feng shui*. Throughout its design the house was vetted by the owner's *feng shui* master in Malaysia. Meanwhile the client's minder, a busy Singaporean who also doubled as builder, and came with a reputation for gratuitous violence, acted as project manager. A large gold medalion strung round his neck indicated his taste in design. Lippmann was ordered to present his scheme the following week. In spite of these discouraging portents, the site and brief were so challenging Lippmann prepared preliminary sketches. Normally Lippmann would not have accepted a project without a financial consideration and discussion about his fee and a signature. But at that stage there were no financial limitations. What would a house be like with no straight lines? It was an intriguing proposition. There was also the stunning location astride a long sandstone rampart holding back the in-sweeping ocean that halted abruptly at South Head; while in the other direction, it offered spectacular views down Port Jackson to the CBD, Harbour Bridge and Opera House.

Lippmann developed the propeller-shaped bow-tie scheme in a matter of days, from his initial perspective view looking towards the city from on top of the raised podium which obscured the street in front. The plan evolved from this idea. The combination of serpentine glass walls on a rectangular podium recalls the paradoxical Opera House combination of free geometry roof shells on a stone platform. Like the Opera House, the actual definition of these shapes took longer; at first it was a figure-eight, gradually this evolved into the present attenuated asymmetric arrangement of loops. The perspective sketch became the house. Except for the void opposite the entrance, few significant changes were made to this early sketch. The curved building form presented difficulties – curved glass was available only from Canada and Belgium. But since cost was not a consideration

The client's reaction was nothing if not decisive: "This is what I want!" he bellowed.

The house had two curved wings (a basement with a six-car garage and two levels above), the larger extending west towards the city containing living areas, and a smaller wing extending east with the bedrooms. A thorax linked the two. This thorax contained a stair and was the house's lungs. Above the roof terrace, glass louvres exploited the Venturi effect in a modern version of a Middle East Malkaf, drawing air up and venting it out. This was crucial to Lippmann's idea of a fixed, transparent envelope comprising fixed curved-glass floor-to-ceiling walls protected from the sun by generous overhangs that were ventilated through slots in the spandrels.

Set back from Military Road towards the back of the site, Lippmann's unorthodox free-form scheme avoided ugly side yards and opened the harbour view up to its neighbour. However, while Council could not object to the building's novel form, since it complied with the Local Development Control Plan, they nevertheless forced him to move the house forward to within 10m of the street boundary, to what Glenn Murcutt once referred to as the "fear line". The move created a small isolated backyard outside the ground-floor bedroom wing >>

- 01 View from street
- 02 First floor kitchen/living/terrace
- 03 Light filled circulation space
- 04 Master bedroom and suite







Preliminary sketch

- 05 The wings of the house reach out toward the city walls
- 06 The interior seems to stretch out beyond the curved floor-to-ceiling glass
- 07 Entry to ground floor
- 08 The house appears to float over the city skyline at night

**Project name** Butterfly House  
**Architects/interior designers** Legmann Associates  
**Principal architect** Ed Legmann  
**Project team** Ed Legmann, Gerard Allen, Paul Ockler, Brian van der Pijp, Jack Robinson  
**Construction manager** Argus Pty Ltd  
**Structural engineer** Alan B. Apperloo  
**Hydraulic engineer** Thomas Mann  
**Mechanical engineer** IPR Consultants  
**Electrical engineer** Barry Smith & Associates  
**Time to complete** 1995-2005  
**Council** Glenelg Council  
**Client** L.J. Ann - concept, Michael Cantor - construction  
**External materials** Gammal Insulated curved casted fixed and operable window panels, triple glass, Hübner-Klima heat soaking glass roof doors, Brecotherm Centre, multi-paned operable glass doors, Synstone, cast aluminium, Jackson panels, anodized aluminium cover plates over air outlets  
**Interior materials** terrazzo floor finish - Westpac terrazzo carpet - Alex Bowen set plasterboard ceiling - Styrene-Mylor polystyrene sprayed joinery units - Timber Joinery Hölzer, Savaas (berg) metal system





>> The house's free-form organic shapes represented a radical departure from Lippmann's hitherto customary Rational architecture of lightweight steel frame and standard industrial panel-and-glass construction. Up until 1936, his architecture had been practical and pragmatic, and very cubic. His rationalism persisted but was applied to a totally free rectangular geometry. He worked hard to make everything function well. Each detail of the house presented a challenge; nothing was standard or could be assumed beforehand.

A year later – by which time the concrete slabs, beams and columns were poured leaving an exposed structure – the client announced he was selling the property. Following a pause, in 1939, it was purchased by Michael Cantini and Dominic Arino, who patiently set about completing the house after the original vision. They wisely asked Lippmann to stay on and advise. But instead of one family, the house now needed to accommodate the Cantini and Arino families, each on a different floor plate. Six years later, in 2005, the house was finished.

The extended construction time over nine years gave Lippmann time to work through the details. The design also transformed Lippmann's architectural orientation by taking him into unexplored territory. These days he is much more conscious of the emotional and psychological effect of space on human consciousness.

Lippmann admits, "I am very interested in Rationalism focused on the practical and pragmatic aspects of architecture, but that is far from the full story – I practice meditation which is where the Vedanting (Sthapatya Veda) comes in." Our well-being is affected by light and shade and contributes to the ambience and emotional impact on us of architectural space.

Bill Lippmann's house was completed back 80 years to the Venetian visitor, Federico Kiesler (1900–1968), possibly best known for his moving pottery-shaped Shrine of the Book, Jerusalem, 1963. In 1932 Kiesler presented the idea of the Endless House. Kiesler's concept of "endless" space assumed a kind of architectural solution of how continuous spaces

Although a building may be a completely protective structure, there are many ways to give the impression that the outer and inner worlds meet there, and that the inhabitant is part of a cosmic world – not only part of a street or a plaza or a community.

Lippmann's Butterfly House also departs from what Kiesler termed the "cube-vision tradition", instead of enclosed space, the space is "disclosed" to the outside. More so in Lippmann's case where the level of transparency is considerably greater than Kiesler envisaged. Kiesler labeled these "spaces of disclosed spaces for living". To achieve his aim in the Endless House, Kiesler revealed a shell of continuous tension and eliminated the sharp division between floor, wall and ceiling of box. Instead of the curved concave surfaces that Kiesler proposed, Lippmann's curved-glass walls meet his horizontal floor and planes sharply at right angles.

Not only does the space inside overflow, it reaches out beyond the glass into the setting and beyond to the universal and cosmic and becomes a kind of cosmic architectural communication. It was Marshall McLuhan in 1962 who claimed that communications media would reduce the world to a single global village. We live with the consequences. Everyone today is a semi-nomad, constantly on the move yet in touch with the world. Life has acquired a cosmic dimension: a micro-chip engineer visits Australia, sees the Butterfly House, and commissions its sister for Santa Cruz on the Californian Pacific coast. At 37° north, it is the same distance from the equator as Sydney.

Sydney, shielded by a thick wall of sandstone, its entrance blocked by Middle Head, is an isolated city from the sea. Its narrow entrance is easily missed. Beyond its major harbours, the city locally spreads westward to the Blue Mountain escarpment.

I can think of no more elegant summing up of Sydney's strategic geographical location than what is offered by the Butterfly House and its site at Dove Heights. Its two main levels pulled out along its harbour-facing edge, the longer by the harbour and city, the shorter condensed to the ocean, inside, it seems an endless view – with itself – cosmic in its reach although through the permanent curved glass, like other Kiesler – it runs on layers and sees as if through and reflects back to the cosmic frame of reference. [4]

