



"For 10 years I was doing a lot of low budget jobs, battling to make a statement with minimal means...I hope I never lose sight of the need to do inventive design solutions rather than look to decadent clients with big budgets. Here we spent money on craftsmanship rather than opulence."

Does any city have more allure than Sydney?

On the surface, at least its best is surely unbeatable. Its harbour and waterways give the city an unfair edge over everything else. It is Joern Utzon's masterwork, it is poetry as resonant as Kenneth Slessor's Five Bells and an ocean of inspiration in between. This glittering lure bewitches landlubbers who in turn construct their Babels which speak of desire before place. For every building that draws its breath and energy from the sea, there are a dozen Casa Disasters in waiting. Cashing-in on waterfront is big business and few cities do it with more zeal.

Architects privileged to work on the edges of probably the world's greatest harbour are thus blessed and cursed in one masterstroke of irony. Something made over millennia is quickly undone. A reverence for place is always a good starting point and anyone who listens carefully enough to what the land and sea have to say may not correct the past but, just perhaps, will help point a way ahead. To change, it needs a community of architects, politicians, planners and clients who 'feel'. One thing is irrefutably obvious; money has failed this harbour and East Circular Quay is on the end of the lash for its folly.

Ed Lippmann has a good feel for Sydney. After years of waiting in the wings he suddenly moves towards centre stage. But even largely concealed work such as his Balmoral 'Tree



House' deserves to be seen because it is essentially about relationships with place and the bigger picture of the Harbour. Lippmann describes the house as having a "loose fit". This allows it to be less imposing and be organic without resorting to mudbricks and straw.

The structural rationale which provides the basic layout springs from a series of pods (150 universal columns with 300 UB cross beams fully welded) on a 6m x 6m plan which stagger 1200 north as the house stretches across the site. In this way it responds to the level changes and, as Lippmann suggests, "allows the house to hug the site. By breaking up the boxes over several levels it assists the house to better become part of its fragile natural environment."

Approached from a gravel track, the house adopts a very private face,

with garage, translucent boxed stairwell and living room/kitchen wall. The modular nature of the design which essentially spans three levels provides an intriguing rise and fall of bedroom, bathroom and study on the top floor, lounge, living, bathroom, dining/kitchen on the middle floor and rumpus room, three bedrooms, shower and bathroom on the lower level.

While the whole house is on a grid, a slight skew in plan of the staircase geometry helps strengthen the circulation patterns. Bronze coloured paintwork applied to the major steel sections contribute to its visual retreat into the surrounding bush.

Being interested in Japanese design, Lippmann's clients responded to floating planes, cantilevers and panel banding. Always intrigued by the Los Angeles Case Study houses of the '50s, these clients shared the passion for crisp detailing and structurally light envelopes. The seduction of slenderness and 'invisibility' of these moderns 'floating' on their sites high above the city proved irresistible. Instead of goading clients towards some vaguely comprehended goal, the architect found himself going stride for stride with clients just as informed about an industrial architecture adapted and pressed into domestic service.

Top: South elevation and 'street' approach to house.



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This is Lippmann's most important residential work to date and reflects the benefit of considerable experience. Architecture which bares itself so unashamedly makes many practitioners nervous; it is that much harder to conceal mistakes. It requires absolute commitment from the whole fabrication and construction team. The precision of steel has a potential down-side. Clumsiness means that on projects of such vigorous and detailed expression, even minor errors appear to be blunders. The upside is that a committed team can extract superlative results and this is precisely what has occurred with the Balmoral Tree House. The steelwork is impeccable.

Accuracy is one thing but a real feeling for place is such a rarity. In many respects the house steps back in time. It recalls the Eames' and Neutra. With its thrusting cantilevers amid the greenery, it even echoes Lloyd-Wright's Fallingwater. Lippmann's disciplined forms step quietly into the bush.

Peter Hyatt

Project:	Balmoral Tree House
Client:	Private
Architect:	Lippmann Associates (02) 9318 0844
Structural engineer:	Ove Arup and Partners
Builder:	Coombe, Gordon Legget
Steel fabricator:	Edcon Steel
Principal steel components:	Columns 150UC 37 Primary floor beams 310UB 40 Secondary floor beams and roof framing 200UB 29 150C purlins
Size:	380m ² (plus decks)
Cost:	\$800,000
Photography:	Peter Hyatt

Top: Crisp, functional kitchen space.

Left: A Japanese aesthetic is carried through the interior with pared structure providing supreme internal flexibility.