

Metropolitan

ARCHITECTURE

A pool where beauty is a shore thing

Andrew Boy Charlton, the newest member of Sydney's harbour team, is easily the best looking young man in the squad, writes Elizabeth Farrelly.

Of all building types the pool, post-Hockney, gives broadest scope for surreal effect. Ed Lippmann, architect for the new Andrew Boy Charlton Pool in the Domain, has exploited this to the hilt, but with such subtlety that you can take it absolutely straight, absolutely pool-on-the-rocks, if that's your poison.

The 1998 design competition for the pool revamp was such a curious hybrid – an open comp into which a select handful were formally invited – that Lippmann almost didn't bother. Life's way too short to play the tilted field. But after some cajoling from his wife, his last-minute, Sunday evening sketch-idea won the day. Now built, it has produced one of the most deliciously liquid environments in Sydney, and the handsomest pool in town.

Of course the site helps, in this regard. Aquatic centre, aquatic setting; hard to beat. But water-side aeries are still stuff-upable, as the rest of Sydney's rococo coastline amply shows. From Bondi to Dee Why, the sheer dominance of the tight redbrick room, as under-vented as it is overpriced, is literally breathtaking. Looking back, it is hard to credit that any culture, however raw in the architecture department, could deny the sensuality of setting and climate so avidly, and for so long.

True to tradition the first Andrew Boy Charlton Pool, built in 1967 to designs by architecture firm Alexander & Lloyd, was about as closed as an open-air pool can be. A classic brick-and-tiler, albeit with clerestories and monopitch roofs in the nuts-and-berries style of the time, it did everything possible – mainly in the form of solid concrete walls – to preclude any hint of relationship with domain or harbour. Ironic that, despite this emphatic

sensory rejection, the pool became one of Sydney's best-known gay showplaces.

Even so, the mid-'90s diagnosis of concrete cancer – rusting steel bursting its concrete flesh – brought few tears. Here, at last, was an opportunity to do it right. The brief required nothing beyond the obvious – a couple of pools, couple of change rooms and dual engagement with the nature and nurture of this truly spectacular site.

But Lippmann has run with it. At \$8 million the budget was loose enough to allow some play, tight enough to concentrate the mind. The plan is supremely simple; two pools aligned along the contours and entry on the cross-axis, with the chiasmus marked – pinned, as it were – by the pavilion of workaday stuff (ticketing, cafe, lift, change and so on). Even this was mostly given; the site boundaries

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made any other pool arrangement tortuous and the entrance was implied by the existing concrete stair. Besides, where else can ticketing go but the entrance?

Lippmann's insight lay in divining the simplest possible diagram to order the messy givens, and contriving not only to preserve its simplicity, while accommodating the functional hoo-ha, but to tighten it into lyricism. This, the diagram thing, is the hallmark skill of British high-tech king Norman Foster. And sure, Lippmann's work is smallish compared with Foster's standard fare of airports, world banks, rail stations and corporate HQs. But he



treads, clearly and consciously, in the great man's footsteps.

Or has, up till now. For this pool is something new for Lippmann, bringing a sensuality that is as much a departure for him as for the site. Till now, Lippmann has belonged to the ultra-modern super-Calvinistic cool-school, restricting his palette to two colours (white, silver) and three materials (concrete, aluminium, glass). Disciplined. So disciplined in fact that his work, undeniably elegant, has tended to the sorbet category, great on a hot day when you're already full-to-the-gullet, but hardly a main meal.

Lippmann's Andrew Boy Charlton Pool is different. Still modern, still cool, still ultra-transparent, it has mobilised, for the first time, old feelgoods like colour and texture. Why? Maybe it's a sign of maturity, confidence, willingness to loosen a little. Maybe its the pluralism of the times. Either way, it is a knockout.

Where once reason ruled unqueried, a vivid, almost accidental joy in the nature-nurture contrast is suddenly everywhere. Part ocean pool, in the half-wild Sydney lineage, and part urban bathhouse, the new Andrew Boy Charlton constantly kisses fine, clear geometries with sea-edge roughness; smooth, high-energy aluminium with unpolished NSW hardwood; stiff planar burnt-umbers with the shimmering aqua of aqua. Contemporary showroom slick with old-fashioned, barefoot,

bodies-on-timber sun-lizardry. An old concrete stair, left in the grassy hillside by earlier incarnations, is transformed, simply by being on-axis, into a sharply, chically folded plane. Even its imperfections, in the light of renewed purpose, are merely a modish whiff of under-dressing.

The stair leads to an open-mesh stainless steel bridge, from which function is a sideshow. To right, ticketing and see-through yoga-room (very hatha); to left the cafe, ring-moated as a little latte-pontoon. Full-frontal, meanwhile,

and main-screen, is the bay. That's the moment. The "omigod" heartstopping moment, which the architecture both creates and celebrates in a single gesture.

From there it's downhill; down the curved stainless stair to the main deck level where change-rooms, tucked under, sit either side of another view – more intimate but equally compelling – of the old sandstone wall, remnant of pools past. And the change-rooms themselves are an exercise in unanticipated delight. Air-con-free, they are washed instead in

clean salt air that wafts through walls of sliding glass, louvred for privacy. Underneath again, at rock level where the old seawall is now exposed, a yet-to-be-completed timber pier juts to sea, offering small-craft landings, scuba-lesson spots and unsurpassed foot-dangling.

The rest is simple. Set like a lifebelt at the pavilion's middle level is the vast pool-deck, part concrete, part slatted greybox, through which the sea is clearly visible. The pools themselves, wind-protected on three sides by clear, rimless glass, sit flush with the deck, making a single continuous surface and completing the godseye allusion of a three-layered water fall; moat to pool to harbour.

Domain-side of the big pool, the old concrete bleachers – virtually all that remains of the first pool – have been reclad in the same vividly rust-coloured timber as the deck, while the solid panels on the building are clad in either pre-weathered zinc or burnt-orange fibre-cement. Combined with a ruthless rectilinearity this gives the whole a semi-industrial quality that seems entirely at home on the semi-working waterfront.

Next to Nigel Hellyer's chatty *Dual Nature* and just down-shore from Robyn Backe's *The Archaeology of Bathing*, Lippmann's Andrew Boy Charlton Pool could be another in the string of fore-shore sculptures around Woolloomooloo Bay. One that just happens to be habitable.

What a dive ... fast-laners and foot-danglers, top, in the pool with a high-rise horizon, right.

Photos: Dallas Kilponen (top) and Robert Pearce

