This calm, private hideaway has a gentle and subtle relationship to the harbour waterfront.
Balmain East RESIDENCE by Melocco & Moore Architects
SYDNEY, NSW

With undeniably spectacular views of Sydney Harbour, this low and careful addition to an 1883 Victorian villa encompasses the idyllic concept of private waterfront hideaway.

Words by Genevieve Lilley
Photography by Brett Boardman

The shoreline around Sydney Harbour varies enormously, as do the houses on its waterfront. Modern properties on the eastern shores are designed to maximize the view at all costs. They are characterized by floor-to-ceiling glass, a grand sense of scale and stunted landscaping. By contrast, the shoreline around Middle Harbour supports gums interspersed with modern, but still ambitious, steel houses. The Balmain peninsula is one of the longest occupied and remains a rich historical precinct. Unlike Hunters Hill and Woolwich, where the original buildings have been substantially concealed by largely overwhelming additions, Balmain remains an evocative thread of land with a mixture of housing stock and aspirations.

This project sits at the north-eastern end of the peninsula and is a substantial reworking of an existing four-room Victorian villa, constructed in 1883. The building presented modestly to the street and faced the harbour. A vast, mature eucalypt in the garden is a marvellous feature of the site as one looks out from the original house towards Goat Island and the bridge.
The new kitchen, dining and living pavilion is robust and modest, full of light and air.

Protected living spaces step down towards the water, terminating in a viewing platform.
Melocco and Moore Architects was appointed to work on the project by a client whose family the architects had worked for before. The client was clear from the outset that he would act as an owner-builder (which he had previously done) and this information allowed the architects to design and document accordingly. The site is divided into three almost equal parts – the villa nearest the street, the central lawned area with the large gum one level below the street, and a lower harbour garden with a simple boatshed, slipway and lawn area running out to meet the sandstone sea wall.

The architects’ strategy was to strip accretions from both the street side and the harbour side of the villa, exposing the original building. Its fine detail on the harbour side is celebrated with reinstated iron lacework. A garage and a service entry were added to the street side, as well as an entry alcove that, when opened, allows the eye to wander right through the hall of the building to the harbour. This initial view is breathtaking, and generous, and respectful of the form and modesty of the villa.

A low and careful addition has been made to the southern boundary of the site at middle garden level, its sill height matching the lawn. The flat, pebbled roof of this building can be seen from the verandah of the villa. The architects’ original intention was to have this as a green roof, covered in succulents, but such visual generosity was eliminated at the planning stage due to concerns of overlooking by this garden’s “use as a terrace.” A glass slot clearly separates the new wing from the original villa.

The addition is now the heart of the house. A discreet new side
The new wing deflects to the original villa, flanking a magnificent gum tree on its way to the water.
stair from the upper hall descends to the back of the new lower wing, where fine, curved timber cabinetry leads to alcoves for a study, a media room, a bathroom and a gym under the old villa. The kitchen of the new living pavilion faces north to the adjacent “middle” garden, its umbrella the generous gum tree that filters light into the new space.

The living pavilion steps down towards the water, terminating in a viewing deck that overlooks the harbour. With a slender yet robust raw off-form concrete frame and natural timber windows, the new space is reassuringly protective from the inside and magnificently modest from the outside. It appears almost as a sort of garden wall in a natural setting. The building is thermally stable and, being narrow, has excellent cross-ventilation.

From the middle garden, the simple box form of the new wing is offset by a series of stepped platforms that lead down to a pool. There is an extraordinary pool bathroom tucked under the living area, all raw concrete, with a confident and playful use of dark mosaic tiles. Where pools are usually front and centre of waterfront sites, this one is a calm oasis down near the water, barely visible from the villa or the new wing. Jane Irwin advised on landscaping, and the terracing of the garden only reinforces the subtle control the whole design team had on the site, even though they did not supervise site works.

Each part of the design contributes to the site but allows the celebration of those separate parts. The villa has been restored and again made into a transparent simple four-room dwelling. The new wing sits modestly below it, deferring to the enormous gum. But within the new space, the living areas are generous in spirit, precise in execution and relaxed in feel.

This reworking captures that idyllic concept of a private waterfront hideaway. Nowhere in the house is there evidence of gratuitous grandness. At every point, there is generous light, beautiful views and a modesty that many clients, architects and builders can learn from when considering waterfront work in Sydney.
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Practice profile
A design-based practice specializing in bespoke residential, local government and multi-residential projects.

Project team
David Melocco, Philip Moore, Temara Lane, Nick Hibberd

Builder
Owner

Consultants
Engineer: Leo Carboni and Associates
Landscaping: Jane Irwin
Joinery: Reino Joinery

Products
Roofing: Ardex bituminous membrane; existing grey Welsh slate
External walls: Off-form concrete; existing render and paint
Internal walls: Off-form concrete
Windows and doors: Stockton Joinery rosewood timber windows and doors
Flooring: Polished concrete; existing Nash Timbers red ironbark hardwood boards
Lighting: Opal Lighting Systems 55-watt halogen downlights and Taipan LED floor washers; Inlite Quad 53 pendant

Kitchen: Fisher & Paykel C450 pigeon pair integrated fridge/freezer; Miele oven and integrated dishwasher; Gaggenau Vario 400 series cooktop; Qasair custom rangehood; Briggs Veneers joinery doors; Fantini Cafe kitchen mixer from Rogerseller; stainless steel benchtops

Bathroom: Duravit Scola basin; Kaldewei Centroform freestanding bath; Catalano 54 wall-hung toilet suites, Fantini Nostromo basin mixer and Soho Round Cafe shower rose, all from Rogerseller; Bisana Tiles Mocha honed stone and Chestnut glass mosaic tiles

Heating and cooling: Allstar Shutters Blinds & Awnings external timber blinds;
Jetmaster 700 fireplace

External elements:
Homestone Pellegrino sandstone paving
Other: Polished concrete finish by Waterstone

Floor area
690 m² site
595 m² floor

Time schedule
Design, documentation:
12 months
Construction:
12 months

05 Stripped of accretions, the existing villa has been restored to its original quiet dignity.