

BUNDEENA HOUSE

BOKOR ARCHITECTURE + INTERIORS

REVIEW | Paul McGillick

PHOTOGRAPHY | Richard Glover

BUNDEENA HOUSE

A Cross-Cultural Celebration

This house in Bundeena, south of Sydney, is not just a subtle response to its immediate context, but also a refined adaptation of Japanese aesthetics to a particular landscape and the values of its owners.

Paul McGillick sees the house as a cross-cultural conversation through architecture and landscape.

According to the great ethnographer, Bronisław Malinowski, 'meaning is function in context'. Malinowski, of course – studying the Trobriand Islanders during World War II – was concerned with the micro-level of people's everyday lives, in contrast to the then prevailing approach which focused on whole societies and their value systems. This binary choice can be applied to architecture and the somewhat contested notion of meaning.

On the one hand, we can take a macro-view and look at institutional buildings and urban organisation as an expression of the prevailing beliefs and values of a society. On the other hand, we can look at the micro- or domestic level as partly embodying social and religious values (expressed through traditional building forms – for example in South-East Asia or Japan), but also the particular character and concerns of the people who live in the house.

So, to go back to Malinowski's definition of meaning: there is no superordinate and immutable meaning – only meanings generated by what people are doing at a particular time, in a particular place and for a particular purpose. Of course, those behaviors are shaped by social precedent – what Malinowski called the wider context – but their ultimate meaning derives from what he termed the immediate context. The best parallel is the meaning of words.

Dictionaries can only give you an approximation of a word's meaning; ultimately you have to refer to the context in which it is being used. Just try looking up the meaning of 'head', for example. Or, better still refer to the authority of Humpty Dumpty: "When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, "it means what I choose it to mean – nothing more and nothing less."

This house in Bundeena resonates with meaning for its owners, so let's start with the context.

The owners are both doctors – one a pathologist, the other engaged in neurological research. Their main home is in the Sydney beachside suburb of Coogee. They wanted a second house to escape to on the weekends where they could swim and kayak. Over several years (and in consultation with their architect, Julius Bokor), they looked at sites north of Sydney, but decided on Bundeena to the south because it was simultaneously remote (on the fringe of the Royal National Park and otherwise accessed by ferry across the broad expanse of the opening of Georges River at Port Hacking) and easily accessible from Coogee. It needed to be a multi-purpose house, a home-away from home, with studies for both owners, a studio for the man of the house who is an amateur sculptor, provision for guests and eventually a home to retire to. The owners also share a passion for the culture of Japan, especially its gardens.

The 'accessible remoteness' of Bundeena – along with its stunning location, framed by the National Park and the ocean on one side, and the tranquil waters of Port Hacking on the other – has contributed to its cultural uniqueness. It is known for its 'bohemian' character, derived from the number of artists, writers, potters and intellectuals who have clustered around the town over many years. It is both a micro-culture and a micro-climate.

The site is itself unique. Built on one of the last unbuilt sites in Bundeena, the house sits on the crest of a sandhill giving it sensational views: to the National Park, to the ocean, back down to Bundeena cove and across Port Hacking to the distant suburbs and city of Sydney. The brief was for a modest house which respected the existing scale of houses in Bundeena and which grew out of the landscape and avoided imposing itself. Above all, there was to be a seamless integration of the house and the landscape.

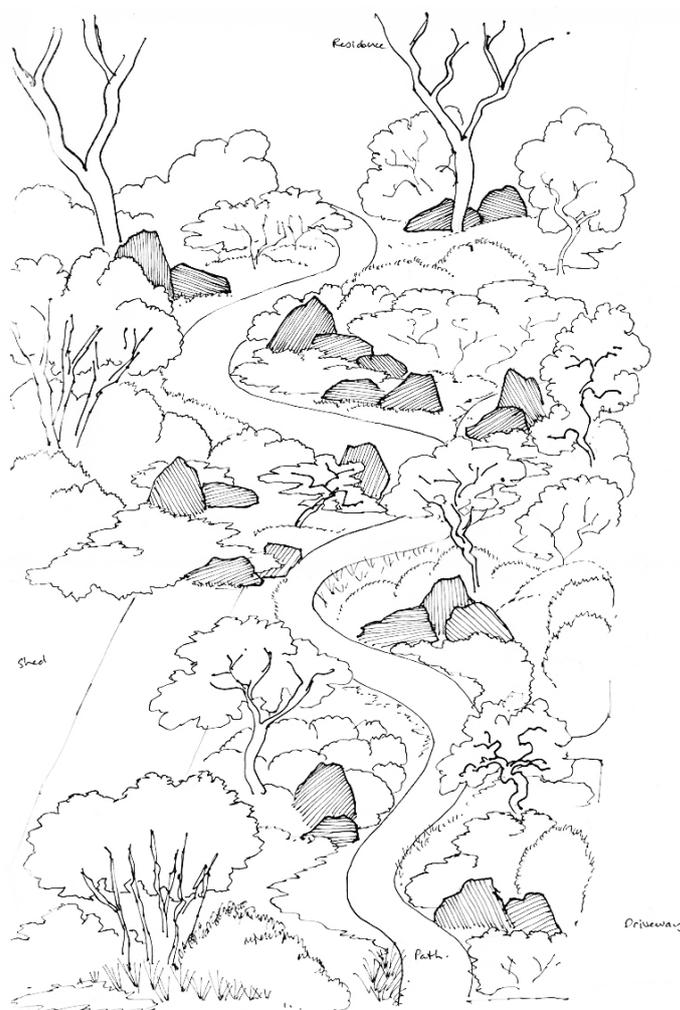
The landscape dominates when looking out from the house, but also on approach, because it sits up on the hill with an extended walk up from the street to the house entry. Anticipating the opportunity for a Japanese-inspired garden, the owners had earlier purchased 43 large rocks, several tonnes. Prominent landscape designer, Ken Lamb, had previously created a Japanese garden for them and now they retained him to design the Bundeena landscape.

The immediate image on arrival is that the house is like a temple or castle atop the hill. This then generates the traditional Japanese symbolism of the journey, with life as a garden landscape, climbing circuitously up towards the temple and the heavens. The arrival sequence is a transition from the public to the private, initially through a torii (inspired by the simple post-and-beam Japanese garden gates), then via a gently sinuous path flanked by the low shrubs and ground cover of a native garden and past a dramatic Angophora tree.

There is no formal entry to the house, just what architect, Julius Bokor, calls a 'space' with stepping stones up to the living area and terrace. "The landscape," says Bokor, "is the generator of the whole arrival sequence."

Once inside the house, rather than opening up to the extraordinary views, another Japanese aesthetic strategy is adopted: framing and editing the views, the latter being also a way to modulate the intense natural light. Hence, from the ground-floor living area a feature window frames the imposing Angophora, but upstairs the panoramic ocean and landscape views are carefully edited both to intensify the perception of the outside and to create privacy from the neighbours on either side. Just as it heightens our perception of the outside landscape, this strategy also serves to heighten the sense of connection between inside and outside – the sense of place.

Apart from its scale, the house also references its Bundeena context through its simple form. The shed-like single-pitched roof to collect water and provide shade echoes the coastal shacks seen all round Australia, while an intriguing tension is set up between the minimalist, white form of the building and its informal coastal shack provenance.



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01
View of the house upon entering the site from the road

02
Preliminary concept sketch for site landscaping, by Ken Lamb

03
Set atop a sandhill, one approaches the house via a meandering path flanked by low native shrubs and large bush rocks

04
The covered terrace frames the dramatic views over the Royal National Park and towards the ocean

05
A large feature window in the living room highlights a key element in the landscape - the existing Angophora

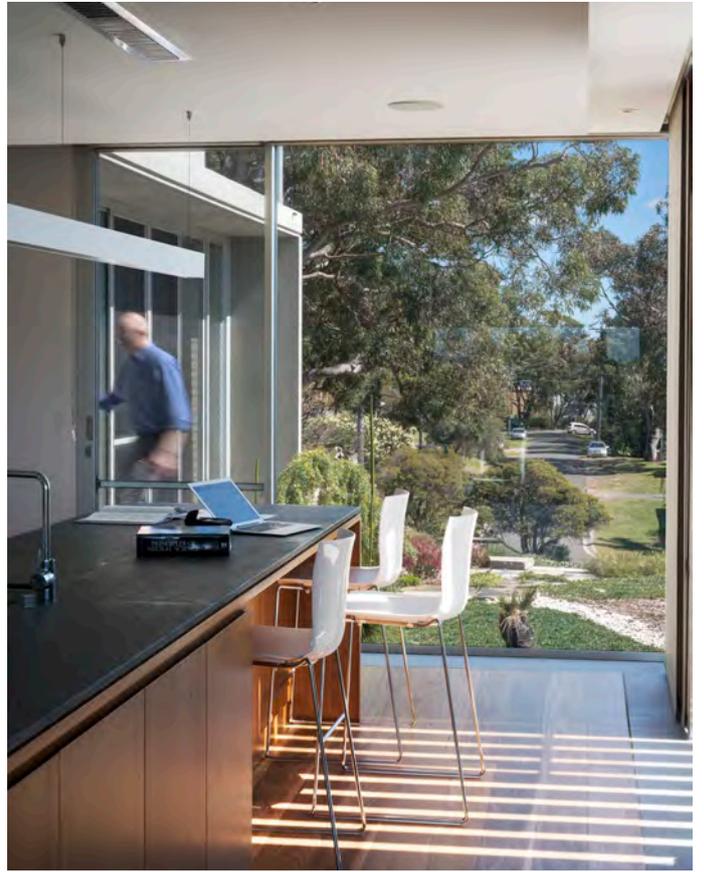
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View back down towards the road from the kitchen, the windows can be screened for privacy with fabric panel blinds on sliding tracks

07

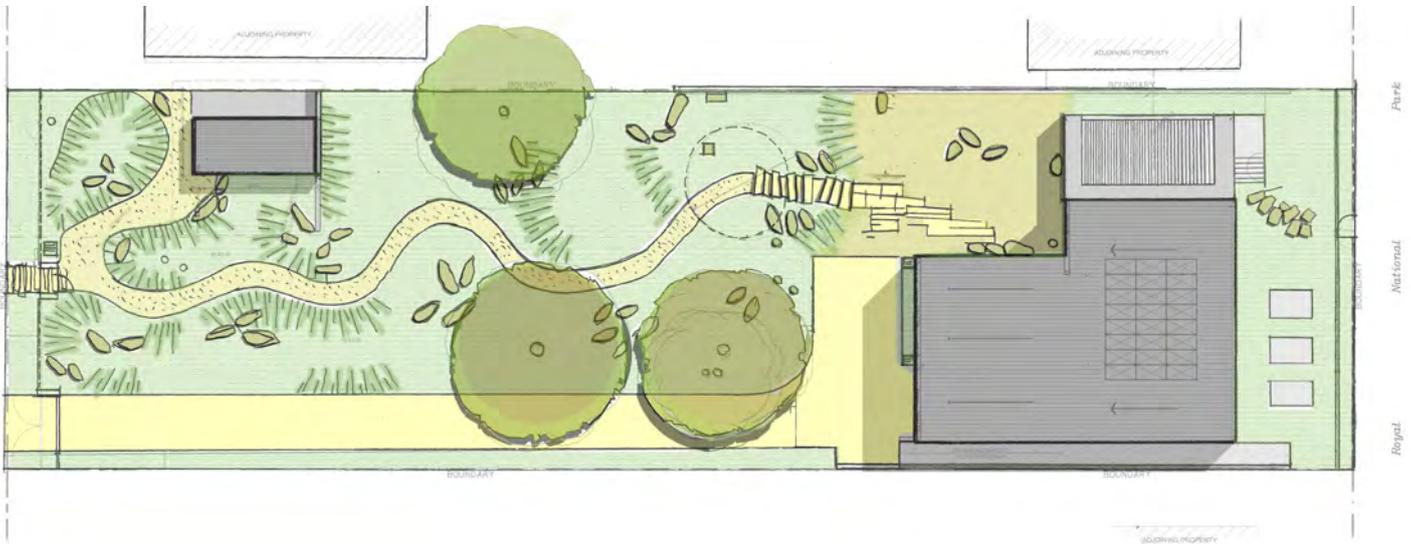
The double height living room as viewed from the first floor, with re-cycled Blackbutt timber floor and a timber-battened screen which conceals services



06

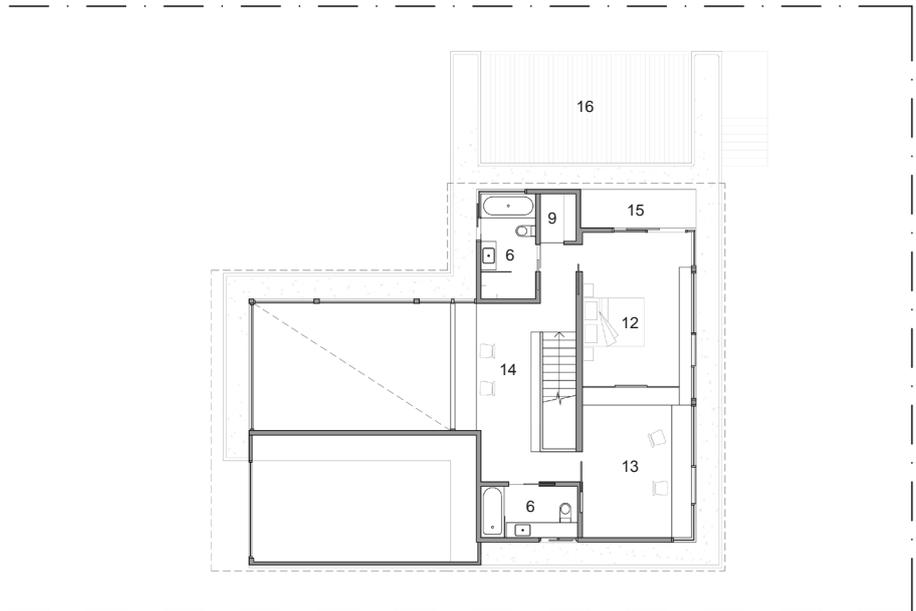


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Site Plan & Landscaping Sketch

1 : 400

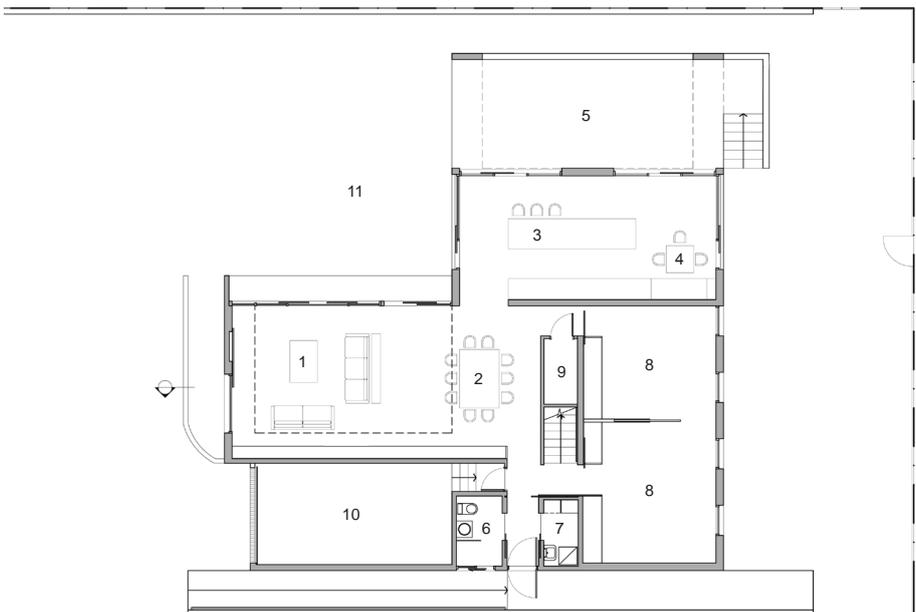


First Floor Plan

1 : 250

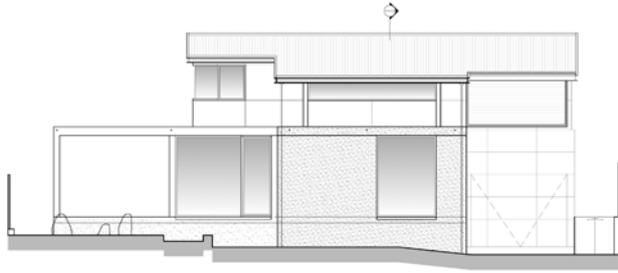
KEY

- 1 Living Room
- 2 Dining Room
- 3 Kitchen
- 4 Informal Dining
- 5 Covered Terrace
- 6 Bathroom
- 7 Laundry
- 8 Multi-Purpose Room
- 9 Storage
- 10 Garage
- 11 Japanese Zen Garden
- 12 Main Bedroom
- 13 Study
- 14 Corridor/Study
- 15 Terrace
- 16 Operable Roof

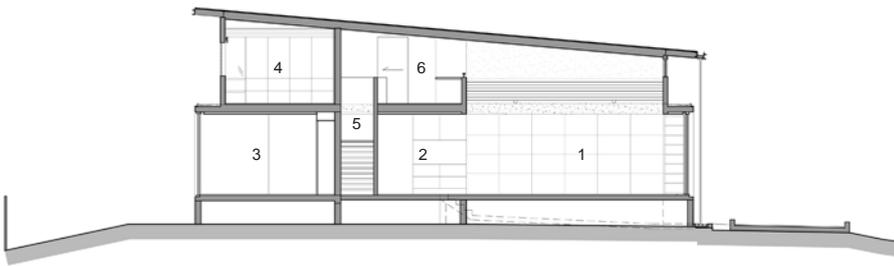


Ground Floor Plan

1 : 250



Eastern Elevation
1 : 250



Cross Section
1 : 250

KEY

- 1 Living Room
- 2 Dining Room
- 3 Multi-Purpose Room
- 4 Main Bedroom
- 5 Stair
- 6 Corridor/Study



08

08
Bathroom off the main bedroom, with its corner window capturing the view towards Port Hacking

09
Two adjoining multi-purpose rooms on the ground floor, divided by a large sliding door allowing flexibility of use. Full height windows, spaced evenly across the rear wall, frame slithers of the National Park beyond

10
The main bedroom maximises the site's panoramic views over the National Park and the ocean beyond, with a glass sliding door opening onto a small outdoor terrace



09



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11
The ceiling rakes up over the double height living room, and allows a slice of the view towards Port Hacking from the first floor landing

12
The journey begins and ends as you cross the threshold and pass through the entrance gateway, inspired by the traditional Japanese *torii*

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The external finishes - a combination of raw concrete, rendered blockwork, fibrous cement cladding, galvanised steel and glass - are all designed to weather and age in parallel, becoming more attuned to their natural setting and softening into the landscape

Inside, the house with its simple T-shaped plan, continues the Japanese inspiration with a fluid circulation on the ground floor and the use of sliding screens and doors (shoji) to create functional flexibility. The stem of the T-plan is the formal dining and living space. Down the southern side is a tana, an adaptation of the Japanese internal wall with shelving and recesses. Almost nine metres long, the wall includes a sliding screen and a variegated assembly of spaces for the display of works of art and pottery. The western short elevation is interrupted only by the feature window, while the northern elevation is a glass bi-fold wall looking on to the arrival path and protected from the sunlight by overhangs and an elegant Silent Gliss sliding curtain. The floor is re-cycled Blackbutt, a softening and natural element to complement the restrained minimalism of the house. This is echoed by a Blackbutt timber-battened screen which disguises the services and acts like a soffit around the three sides of the space and separating the main space from the west-facing highlight window.

The kitchen doubles as an informal dining area and leads on to the covered terrace which acts as a link between the town side of the house and the ocean side. Together they form an informal gathering and eating space which again conjures up memories of the traditional Australian holiday house.

Upstairs the house is basically two private rooms (one a study-cum-bedroom) plus two bathrooms. The bedrooms are facing the ocean and National Park. The views here are edited, unlike the master bathroom which embraces the panoramic view over Port Hacking.

In terms of internal finishes, the house is an outstanding example of how simple and inexpensive materials can be used to create an elegant interior through imaginative design.

The house is of simple construction, using materials that require little maintenance and which will age without needing to be painted. "It is really important to me," says Bokor, "to think of a building getting to be comfortable with itself."

The floors are reinforced concrete and the walls are concrete blocks with insulation and lining on the inside while externally they are treated with a cementitious water-proofing material which will age in a way similar to the concrete. The fact that this is an extreme flame zone suggested constructing the house from galvanised steel and Colorbond, along with the powder-coated aluminium windows with fire resistant glass. This house is very much of its place. And just as Bundeena itself is a coming together of many cultural and landscape elements, so the house quietly generates a conversation about the things which underpin the values of its owners. Despite the cross-cultural initiatives, there is never a hint of pastiche – the house is very much itself and very much a home.

Paul McGillick is a prominent, Sydney-based writer and editor in the fields of architecture, art and design.



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BUNDEENA HOUSE

ARCHITECT

Bokor Architecture + Interiors

Project Team:

Julius Bokor
and Cindy Bolomey

BUILDER

Ben Richardson Building

STRUCTURAL ENGINEER

M. Zimmerman & Associates

LANDSCAPE DESIGNER

Imperial Gardens Landscapes
Mallee Design

PRIVATE CERTIFIER

Urban Approvals

BUSHFIRE

Eco Logical Australia