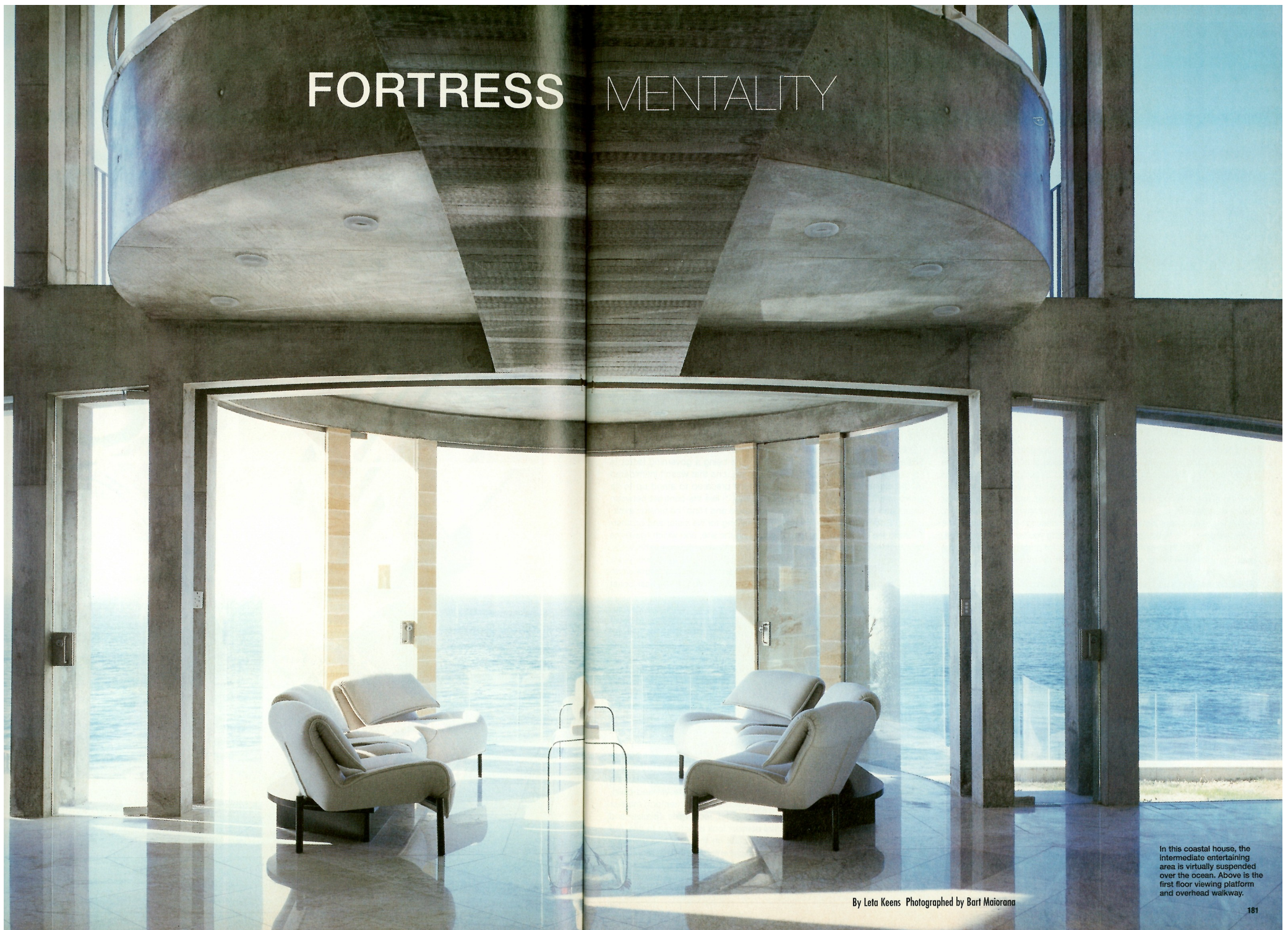


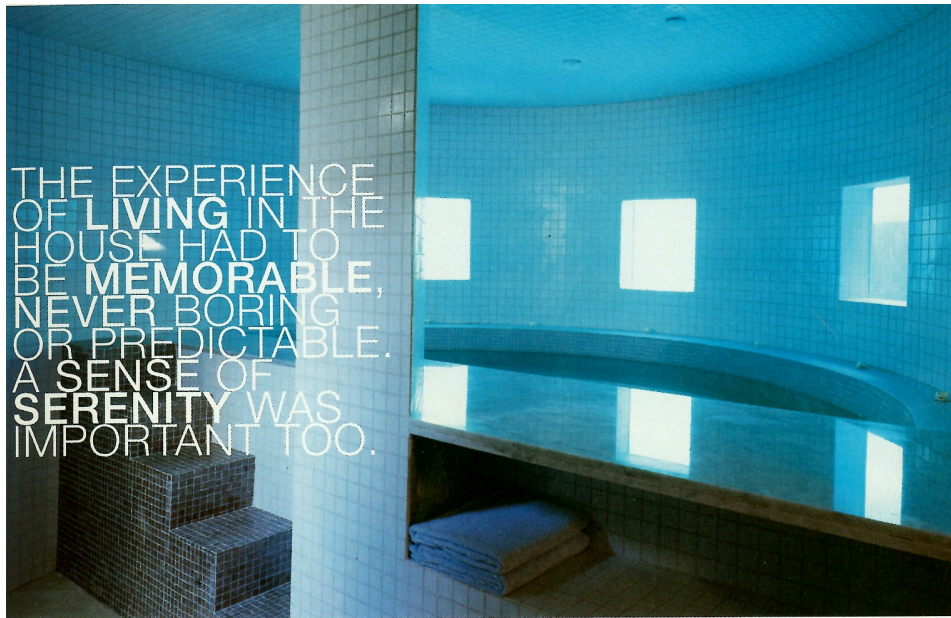
FORTRESS MENTALITY



In this coastal house, the intermediate entertaining area is virtually suspended over the ocean. Above is the first floor viewing platform and overhead walkway.

By Leta Keens Photographed by Bart Maiorana

THE EXPERIENCE OF LIVING IN THE HOUSE HAD TO BE MEMORABLE, NEVER BORING OR PREDICTABLE. A SENSE OF SERENITY WAS IMPORTANT TOO.



Just before you hit the crest of a hill in south Coogee, all notion of land drops away and you're left with an abstract vision of horizon bisecting the ocean and sky. It's one of those overwhelming Sydney views that makes you wonder how on earth it's possible to feel so isolated only 10 kilometres from the GPO. Travel up and over that crest and there's a similar sense of amazement – this time for a building that stands on the cliff-top, a building that bears no relation to the nondescript bungalows in the streets around it, a building that's unlike anything you've seen in Australia.

There are the battlements and crenellations for a start – but you're not even remotely reminded of those faux-medieval music halls that were such a part of suburban life in the Seventies. This looks as if it's there for a reason, as if we need guarding against some unknown enemy. On first view, it's a squat, solid building that appears to be hunkering down against the storms that blow in off the sea. Look again and it's romantic, sun-drenched and weathered by time, evocative of a Sicilian villa. Another glance and the house takes on a personality of its own, one without any obvious influences, one minute robust with fortification-thick walls, the next disappearing into its surroundings.

The house that hangs on the edge of the cliff is the creation of architect Renato D'Ettorre, commissioned by his sister and brother-in-law, whose sole requirements were three bedrooms, each with an en suite. From that pragmatic brief, D'Ettorre designed a building he admits "is not for the faint of heart. It's for people who respond to things, who walk in and go "Wow." Fortunately, that's exactly the response his family feels every time they come home. "I love it," says D'Ettorre's brother-in-law. "It's our little piece of paradise." Part of the wow factor comes from D'Ettorre's choice of materials – 90 per cent of the building is concrete, the rest brick, glass and sandstone. Colour, both internally and externally, comes almost entirely from these materials: "Red, yellow and grey, which sit well against the ocean, are embedded into the compounds; we haven't applied synthetic colour," says the architect. D'Ettorre has managed to breathe life into the concrete, to make it look as if it were quarried rather than machine-made. He achieved that by scoring it to lessen its bulk and create an illusion of giant blocks, hammering away at the surface in some spots to give the effect of weathering and to reveal the river pebble aggregate underneath. He chose river pebbles because of their quartz shimmer – "plus pebbles are part of the language of the coast".

D'Ettorre, whose family emigrated to Australia from Italy in the early Sixties, speaks of the windswept cliff-top site being a governing factor in his design: "I wanted to build a strong house, one that wasn't intimidated by the elements." And that means a house prepared to stand up to its environment, not blend in in an obvious way. "I like the contrast between nature and the built form – it intensifies nature and I find the tension exciting." D'Ettorre spent three months housesitting for his sister and brother-in-law in the old shack that was originally on the site, and which "gave me time to ponder things". He can't name any particular influence in his work, but says it comes from the library of images built up in his mind over years of travelling. Adds his brother-in-law: "You can be anywhere in the world you want to be in this house – Naples, Costa Smeralda, the Amalfi Coast – it's only limited by your imagination."

It's this sense of wonder that D'Ettorre had in mind as he was designing: "The experience of living in the house had to be memorable, to never be boring or predictable." A sense of serenity too, he says, was high on the list of issues to be resolved. "It had to be a place where your troubles would drop away at the front door."

Entry from the street to the main courtyard is via an extraordinarily solid stainless steel grid gate, inlaid with squares of polished Carrara marble. Bollards, which double as seats, tables and lighting units, guide you to the front door, but it's difficult to resist detouring toward the pool which, with its clear glass safety barrier on the cliffside, appears to tumble over into the ocean. Once back on course, the interior offers real intrigue and a sense of discovery. Like an oyster shell, the outside is deliberately rustic, the inside perfectly smooth. A colonnaded corridor runs the length of the building. Pierced by shafts of sunlight from skylights and portholes, it draws the eye ahead and upward, offering mere glimpses of views and spaces beyond. The house, which took five years to design and build, reveals itself gradually – spaces flow into each other in a freeform manner and involve a complex geometry of overlaid rectangles, circles and squares. Living areas to the left of the corridor look directly out to sea, but the informal sitting room, by turning its back on the view and toward a sunken fireplace, feels cosy. A double-height entertaining area alongside, with a crossover bridge above, is "where you experience the space and view," says D'Ettorre. Similarly, a formal dining area beyond takes in the coastline. Bay windows jut out over the ocean; sandstone columns incor-

Top left: The basement spa, which feels almost like a Roman bath, is lit by portholes facing into the swimming pool. Above: The dining room, with spotted gum parquetry floor, lies on the ocean side of the house. Right: A sheltered courtyard, paved in sandstone excavated from the site, is tucked in between the house and cliff. The architect, Renato D'Ettorre, says the house can be viewed from any direction but feels that "this is the most successful side".



Above: A roofdeck above the garage is lined with bollards which double as tables and stools. A Juliet balcony, cantilevered out over the patio, leads from the main bedroom. Above right: The view from the living area through to the dining room. A triangular bay window hangs out over the pool. Right: A crossover bridge on the first floor level leads to a viewing platform.



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porate peepholes, which "in medieval times you'd stick a gun out of; now you stick your gaze out". The irregularly-shaped kitchen, flowing between the living areas, is a room you come upon almost by accident and it's only when you spot the large pizza oven that you even realise its purpose. Above the sink a row of portholes gives framed views of the next headland; throughout the house carefully placed portholes do more than any artwork possibly could.

On the other side of the corridor an intimate sitting room, almost chapel-like with its vaulted brick ceiling, opens onto a sheltered courtyard and sheer rockface. A viewing platform between the bedrooms, reached by the walkway over the living area, is dramatically reminiscent of a ship's bridge. On the same level, a large deck over the garage faces toward the surrounding suburbs to jolt you back into the realisation that you're not so isolated after all.

With its combination of exposed and sheltered spaces, this is a house designed to suit all weathers – peel back the layers in summer, let the sun play through the skylights in winter, and allow the moon to light your way at night. "It's fantastic during an electrical storm," says D'Ettore's brother-in-law, a view not shared by his wife, who prefers to escape to the basement for protection. It's also a house designed with minimum maintenance in mind; while neighbours regularly wield paintbrushes to combat the effects of sea spray, D'Ettore's brother-in-law says, "I've had to do bugger-all since we moved in." The garden, too, needs little attention; all plants are local to the area and grow profusely. The strength of D'Ettore's house lies partly in the details, which don't stop even at the garage (witness the timber lattice roll-a-door to filter light, the colonnaded wall looking toward the pool, the stone paved floor and vaulted brick ceiling). Lying as it does alongside the Coogee to Maroubra walkway, the house has become a local landmark, gaining plenty of attention – mainly favourable, say the owners – from passers-by. "Every man and his dog walks by here," says D'Ettore, who made a point of positioning the house's most interesting side toward the public path. "If this house, whether they like it or not, sinks into their subconscious, then I've achieved what I set out to do." ■

