CASUARINA BEACH HOUSE

An elegant house by Lahz Nimmo is the first to be built at the new Casuarina Beach development in northern NSW. John Macarthur reviews the project and considers the issues of display, comfort and “homeliness” that it raises.

Photography by Brett Boardman.

Can a house be architecture? Aren’t houses a bit too close to the skin – more like clothing, or furniture – and a little too personal to be part of the public world of issues and ideas? This is a moot point and a tricky one for Australians, whose architectural achievements are largely villas, for preference sited alone in a natural landscape, but more often in the bush-walking parties we call suburbia. The case against the house as architecture was famously put by Adolf Loos, who thought that a house ought be designed for comfort. As the role of art is to shatter complacency, the aspiration of architects to do “arty” houses puts them directly at odds with what people want to come home to, at least according to Loos. Yet Loos’ own houses seem to do just the opposite. His stark, blank facades with their complex interior planning and suave decor were pitched right up the noses of the faux aristocrats of the Austrian bourgeoisie. In the 1910s and 20s his houses were confrontational and artistically avant-garde, but Loos thought that this was a fault of the times. He imagined a future in which the house designed by the architect would be familiar, comfortable and as culturally discrete as a well-made suit. This imagined future, this extension of the problem of the fit of one’s own dwelling to the general question of housing, its social aspirations, its economic dynamics, and its urban consequences, is what – to put the other side of the argument – might allow a house to be architecture.

Lahz Nimmo’s house for Don and Kerri O’Rorke at Casuarina Beach is a modernist jewel. This is a house designed to fit the site, not an addition to it. It is so comfortable you can hardly tell you are in a beach Shack. You feel like you could live here all year round.
Casuarina Beach in northern New South Wales, invites these questions, partly because of the role architecture plays in marketing this new housing development and also because of the severe, rather Loosian, street facade of the house and the warm layers of its interior. The security officer who showed me around explained how prospective Casuarina residents found the house unfamiliar and confronting unless they saw inside and then the house produced a sense of ease and comfort that my guide thought quite uncanny.

The building is a two-part composition that contrasts a “sleeping box” and a “living pavilion”. The former is an efficient enclosure clad in recycled hardwood, with bedrooms above a rumpus room, services and garage. The latter is a parasol roof over a pavilion for living, cooking and eating. The “sleeping box” is generic in form, a parapet-sided, simple box described largely by the site boundaries and setbacks, while the living pavilion is a dynamic form, with the enclosed area set back and facing north and east under an overhanging mono-pitch roof made more expressive by a chevron cut-out in plan and by big cantilevers that play at over-reaching themselves and requiring some columns. The entry to the house is a tight passage between the box and a low garden wall on the boundary. This arrives in the interspace between the box and the pavilion, which is roofed and partly clad in various degrees of battening. The merits of this breezeway are most apparent from the main bedroom, where a window looks over the space, under the pavilion roof, into the living spaces, and over the pavilion to the only glimpse of the sea that could be achieved on the site. The composition of the building is pleasingly apparent in the one view from it.

The house is oriented to the exterior, which is also governed by the contrasting elements. The pavilion opens onto an extensive lawn, a paved terrace and the public areas of Casuarina Beach. The ground level of the box opens out to a private court with a plunge pool. The two-part diagram is successful in organising the site and creates some rich experiences. However, like any dichotomous composition, it is difficult to maintain, and, to my mind, the zone of the breezeway and kitchen becomes a bit muddled. The demands of security, weather protection, and access to two internal and three external spaces, result in the interspace becoming a reluctant middle. This ambiguity in section also infects the exterior plan. The kitchen protrudes to separate the front formal lawn from the back paved romp space with its plunge pool. But, moving between the two involves a somewhat graceless swerve behind a bank of kitchen services or a detour through the living spaces.
Despite this moment of indigestion, the house convinces in its attention to detail. The constructional elements are presented discretely. For example, the steel portals, which support the pavilion roof, are largely concealed by the ceiling, but this pulls backs to expose the joints, neatly framed by a clerestory. The display of the architecture is largely in the detailed surfaces and finishes, such as pattern nailing of the floors, contrasting levels of precision in the tiling, shutter systems, and some remarkable built-in tiled baths.

Lahz Nimmo not only designed the building, and its largely fixed furniture of benches and cupboards, they were also commissioned to select the moveable furniture, soft furnishings and fabrics and they were given an impressive budget for art. In this they show apparently effortless good taste and some humour, for instance contrasting a ceramic blue polar bear by Scott Redford against an abstract plywood patterned painting by Lyell Bary which puns on their own feature plywood ceiling in the living pavilion.

This attention to details is not just a matter of the shelves and cupboards being well designed to fit the saucepans or the art works, each element has a spatial role in defining route, space and vision. To a large extent this project of fitting the house to its use and users is the scope of domestic design, but it risks becoming somewhat uncanny. The budget puts some limit on this line of the architecture of living, but, at a conceptual level, where should it stop? When I talked about this issue with Annabel Lahz she recalled the story that Adolf Loos told against Joseph Hoffmann. Hoffmann was supposed to have complained of a client that his choice of slippers had ruined Hoffmann’s design.

So we should perhaps seek the architecture of the house at the larger level that is also raised insistently here. While the Casuarina Beach House is tailored to the O’Rorke’s comfort, it is also a model of what Casuarina Beach housing is supposed to aspire to. Don O’Rorke is a director of Consolidated Properties, the developers of the site, and, along with other marketing points in lifestyle and ecological sensitivity, Casuarina Beach has been heavily marketed through "Architecture". Selected architectural luminaries are approved designers, with sketch designs in brochures, and available for commissioning. Some of the architects make personal appearances in television advertisements, including Geoffrey Pie, the masterplanner, who chats about the project while peddling a bicycle along a beachside boardwalk. Whether or not such advertisements persuade potential subscribers to this lifestyle to buy, this approach marks a startlingly different position for the discipline. Architecture moves from the means of doing...
building to being a major part of the point of building. So, while the O’Rorke’s house meets a range of requirements, both particular to the clients and typical of any beach house, it has another equal role – to market the project and to set design standards. Undoubtedly it does this. Lahz Nimmo’s building is exemplary in the sense that it takes seriously the improved suburbia subdivision pattern and builds as close as is allowed to the boundary; it sets a strong front/back relation to give some liminal sense to a street that at present is just curbing; and it is kitted up so as to be nearly self-sufficient in energy, water and sewage treatment. But beyond this, it is also required to be an exemplar of “architectural-ness”, to announce the cultural aspirations of the development. Thus it risks the censure that Loos raises of the “architect-y” house that represents itself in a manner that we expect of public buildings. Does Lahz Nimmo’s house escape this censure? This is an issue of context and of point of view that only time will answer. At the moment this carefully wrought building is surrounded by empty sites ominously bubbling with the kind of monetary investment that portends some serious building, for which Lahz Nimmo’s house may be, or may fail to be, the model. Like my guide, I find the house rather uncanny at the moment. Unlike him, I’m quite used to the idea that (good) architects can design spaces that almost seem to know where you are and what you need to be there. What makes my spine tingle slightly is what this means culturally. Is a house for one’s private self, or for display, and can one’s comfort be the thing displayed? Maybe all of this will become clearer at Casuarina Beach in the next few years.

Dr John Macarthur is a senior lecturer in architecture at the University of Queensland

Project Credits
Casuarina Beach House.