STUCHBURY & PAPE
WITH BOURNE + BLUE
HARBOR HOUSE
NEWCASTLE,
NEW SOUTH WALES,
AUSTRALIA

In S.A.M., you’ll find Peter Stuchbury engaged in yoga on the beach near his home north of Sydney—even in winter when it’s still dark at that hour. “There’s a sense of the unknown—it’s a wonderful start to the day,” he explains. “I associate with people in the city but I live in a natural environment, and that informs our work.” He credits Lloyd Grace, the Australian landscape designer, and architect Richard Legget, who recently won the Inniss Award for Nature, for teaching him the value of people and places.

Over his twenty-five years of practice, Stuchbury has built many houses with his colleagues and collaborators, and though each is distinctly different, the process is constant: “I spend a lot of time thinking about the problem, visit the site as much as I need to, and try to please the clients before I begin drawing.” That painstaking approach has been the mark of James and Virginia Laid, doctors with three small children, who had found a site with a spectacular view, but wanted a more imaginative solution than two other architects had proposed.

Stuchbury went to school in Newcastle and loved the great natural amphitheater of the site. He proposed a deep cut in the hillside that would command a view to the northeast over the Buddina harbor, but would conceal the house from the Anglican bishop’s residence at the top of the slope. Within this “concrete armchair” as he called it, he placed an inner wall of storage and bathrooms and a wood frame that enfolded the waterfront facing in contrast with the weight of the concrete. Within this frame, double-height living areas project forward to either side, and a row of bedrooms over the kitchen and dining area to the rear. The exposed roof is tilted up to catch the light off the sea, and deep plywood boxes look direct sun from the two lofty rooms. He produced schematic drawings of these components, and the clients gave him the go-ahead.

The house is an elaboration of that quintessential feature of Australian building—the porch. Whether its the shady verandah wrapped around a homestead in the bush, or one of the curved tin canopies that grace every Victorian farmhouse in the city, on this sunny evening that Stuchbury added to the deck of an artist’s cottage in the hills outside Sydney, it’s a natural means of tempering heat and glare, allowing you to spend much of the day outdoors. Here the entire house resembles a porch, from the glass-roofed gallery along the south wall to the soaring void beneath the pitched canopy at the front. Living areas flow into each other and out to the garden, especially when the glass slides are drawn back, as they are so much of the year, blurring the division between indoors and out. The architect’s love of openness was reinforced during the two years he spent in New Guinea. The bedroom divisions are flexible, too, to allow the spaces to be reconfigured when the children are grown (driving the teenage daughter to seek a bit of privacy in the ground-floor guest bedroom). The architect likes the stack of deep boxes that block the sun to horse blinkers, and they double as viewing channels that capture pieces of the distant landscape from the upstair’s gallery. The bathrooms are revealed when hinged flaps open into the void of the passage, which serves as an internal street—an urban feature realized on a domestic scale.

Exposed concrete blocks, smooth concrete floors, zinc flashing and brackets, simple joinery, and a cable-braced roof supported on three slender steel beams gives the 2,800-square-foot house the earthy character most Australians prefer. Stuchbury wanted an alternation of light and shade, as though you were walking through a forest. “Too much light and it loses its authority; too little and it lacks context,” he explains. To execute his ideas, he picked Shane Blue, a former student who now practices in Newcastle, and together they’ve invested this simple structure with warmth and toughness, intricate spaces and intriguing vistas. The building requires no air-conditioning and only a minimum of floor heating in winter.

“The house is an ideal project—as a source of innovative ideas that can be adapted to other situations. You get to work intimately with a client, which is an important learning experience. To translate people’s needs into a built form is a remarkable opportunity, and there’s an element of surprise—you can never quite imagine how it’s going to turn out.”