

one to watch

Christopher Polly

In practice for the past seven years, Sydney architect Christopher Polly has built an impressive portfolio of residential architecture. According to Phillip Arnold, Polly's site-responsive, innovative approach to housing design ensures he'll receive plaudits in the years to come

Below—Haines House
Opposite—Elliott Ripper House



Christopher Polly established his practice, Christopher Polly Architect, in Sydney in late 2005. Previously he'd worked for Angelo Candalepas and Tzannes Associates, although his own work is perhaps less elaborate, with a pleasing modesty. He's inspired by Richard Neutra, Rudolph Schindler and, maybe surprisingly, Hans Scharoun. 'I discovered the work of Scharoun at university,' Polly says. 'The formal qualities are perhaps not as interesting to me as how the details are crafted to inform the whole building, although his formal manipulations are always a response to circumstance, whether from the brief or site.' Among contemporary architects, he cites David Adjaye, Sergison Bates, Tezuka Architects and Eduardo Souto de Moura. All have direct approaches to brief and to detailing and an avoidance of complex forms for their own sake, methodologies that mirror themes in Polly's own work.

Polly's architecture ranges from residential work, including a penthouse apartment renovation in Darling Point, through to commercial work including showrooms, restaurants, small apartment buildings and the EyeOpener optometrist on Castlereagh Street in Sydney. Given this extensive portfolio, he finds the 'emerging architect' tag problematic. 'The term "Emerging",' he offers,

'might suggest an architect is new to the profession and doesn't have the experience to handle large or more complex work.'

Like most architects, he's keen to work on larger projects and public works. 'Many potential clients have the idea that because they've seen houses you've designed that that's what you specialise in. For much of my career, though, I've worked on complex buildings and I've found that working on one project scale usefully informs work at other scales.' However, he stresses, 'At the moment I'm just taking what comes along. Each project is treated as if it is my most important. I do each as well as possible and hope this will eventually lead to larger commissions.'

Polly begins with an analysis of site circumstances, focusing on the character of the existing building, as in the case of the Elliott Ripper House in Rozelle, or on the pattern of development in the street, as in the Haines House. Originally, the Elliott Ripper project had very strong form muddled by lean-to additions at the rear, inhibiting everyday use of the yard. Polly's solution was to incorporate well-detailed doors and windows, opening the home up at the corner to the ground floor yard and to the canopies of established trees. The yard becomes an extension of the living space, while a step up to the yard allows the threshold to be used as a shelf or seat. →



Below—Darling Point Penthouse

Above—Darling Point Penthouse
Below—Elliott Ripper House

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→ Staircase, skylights and polycarbonate highlights deliver abundant daylight to all spaces from every direction. In this way the character of the existing house is enhanced and the opportunities of the site are revealed and politely exploited. Polly elaborates: 'I'm not trying to impose a particular style on my clients and I'm not trying to position myself, necessarily, with an easily distinguished design language. I approach each project afresh and try to find an appropriate response.'

That approach is also readily apparent in the Haines House and one detail in particular – a curious quirk of the plan. Not only does the circulation snake across the site but the big, new garden room has a bathroom and laundry plonked right in the middle. This goes against conventional logic, which might dictate that a circulation corridor runs down one side of the existing house and ends in a living and dining room opening to the rear yard. As an 'apparent error', it has drawn comment from some of Polly's colleagues, who believe that part of the architect's role is to persuade their client to do more rather

than less. Yet as he explains, 'the client was very clear that having renovated the bathroom only several years before it was not to be touched'.

In fact, Polly has turned the client's constraint into a lovely attribute. With its snaking circulation and counterintuitively located bathroom, the house now unfolds, revealing itself incrementally. Each element exposes its own character – cosy and enclosed, or voluminous and open – and each room provides a glimpse of its relationship to the next room. Even in the centre of the plan there are views of the sky and of the canopies of neighbouring trees.

Entering the marketplace, many architects try hard to brand themselves and their work with a clearly identifiable language, or the same form and details reoccurring in their work. Clients then purchase the brand rather than finding the right architect to solve particular problems.

Rather than starting with certain formal or stylistic obsessions, Polly's work is contingent and appropriate. Simply, it is just good work. **ar**

