

# Avalon Beach House

by Sam Crawford  
and Emili Fox

## FIRST HOUSE

In November 1995, I was working on my fifth-year major design project in what was then a six-year degree in architecture at the University of Sydney, and living in a cockroach-infested share house in Redfern. I remember the day that my sister Georgie called – on the landline – to tell me she and her husband had purchased a dilapidated 1950s weatherboard house on an idyllic site in suburban bushland between Pittwater and Avalon Beach.

Previously home to a chain-smoking elderly woman, and in near-original state, the house needed work. Georgie asked if I could recommend an architect for the job. Despite having another year of study to complete my university degree, and without thinking, I told her that I could do it. Of course I could! “Great!” she said. I think – hope – that this was the answer she was after.

After the call, I lay on the floor and freaked out about how I was going to do it. I called and asked fellow architecture student Emili Fox to collaborate with me. She agreed. Well aware of our complete lack of experience, we offered to work for half the usual fee of an established architect. We lived and breathed the project for two years, labouring over every detail. When the fees were tallied up, we earned less than \$1 per hour. What we gained in experience, however, was incalculable; it gave each of us the confidence to set up our own architecture practices soon after completing university.

We had so many ideas for the house and, as is often the case with architecture students, our initial concepts included all of them. Some timely advice from architect and mentor Peter Stutchbury – to bring out the essence and simplicity of the original weatherboard house – saved us from our over-enthusiasm.

In the resulting design, a modest, run-down 1950s beach house was converted into an open, light-filled, four-bedroom home. We wanted to provide our trusting clients – my sister, her husband and their young family – with a beautiful, flexible, functional house that was within the limits of their budget, and that by some measure would enrich their lives and their experience of the beautiful coastal setting. We saw the project as an opportunity to explore what we believed to be the essence of architecture: the manipulation and articulation of light through aperture, texture, colour and form.

The house won an Australian Timber Design Award for young designers and was published in the *Sydney Morning*

Abundant enthusiasm outweighed limited experience for Sam Crawford when his sister called (on the landline) with an invitation to renovate a tired 1950s beach shack. Sam reflects on how this house, designed in collaboration with Emili Fox, kickstarted his career in architecture.

Words by Sam Crawford  
Photography by Brett Boardman



Section 1:400

0 5m

01 A new bedroom and deck were added to the rear of the house.





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*Herald's Domain* magazine – then a staple of the design media – and in an early issue of *Houses* magazine (issue 20). We were also included in an issue of *Domain* with the headline “Young Talent Team: the next generation of Sydney architects.” In reality, though, I still felt entirely unfit to apply for a job in an architect’s studio. The next best option, to avoid the rejection and humiliation of applying for a job, was to start my own practice.

On the back of the publicity for Avalon Beach House, more commissions trickled in. With each project, I took a similar approach: work bloody hard to achieve a quality design outcome for our clients, regardless of the fee; get it photographed and published; get more work; and keep going. Somehow, it has worked. Running my own practice fresh out of university was a terrifying experience. I worried that I lacked the knowledge and skills to design and document a building that I could be proud of and that my clients would love. In many ways, 25 years later, it still is terrifying. I still feel that I am learning; every project, every brief, remains a monumental challenge. The flip side is that this is what makes architecture such a great profession. It never feels easy. Never rote.

It is particularly poignant for me now to recall those early days, as my darling sister died from cancer this year. I will always feel grateful to Georgie and her husband Terry for kickstarting my career in architecture, and for their unwavering faith in my ability as an architect. ☺

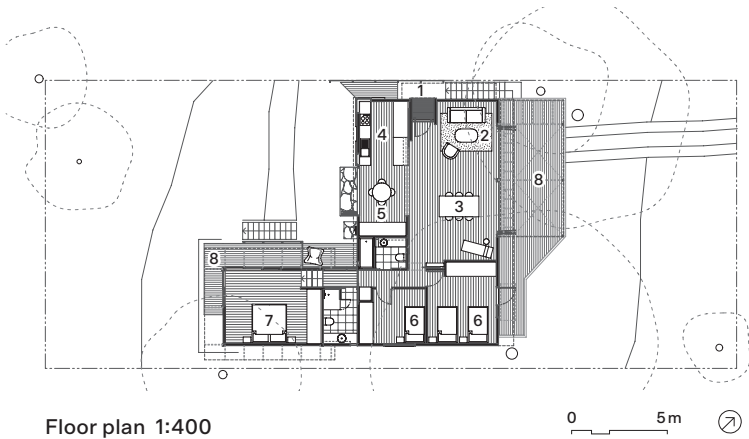


02 The low-budget project celebrated the directness of the beach shack while adapting it for functional family life.

03 Sliding screens in the living zones act as movable walls to accommodate varied occupation.



- 1 Entry
- 2 Living
- 3 Dining
- 4 Kitchen
- 5 Breakfast
- 6 Bedroom
- 7 Main bedroom
- 8 Deck



Floor plan 1:400

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