

A PROTECTED FAMILY HAVEN

CRANE LODGE BY SECRET GARDENS

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High atop a rocky slope in Palm Beach, a tiny getaway in Sydney's picturesque Northern Beaches, sits Crane Lodge, the newest and most ambitious project by landscape designers Secret Gardens. The altitude and seclusion are not the only elements that make this site special, it also falls under the Pittwater and Wagstaffe Spotted Gum Forest Endangered Ecological Community, presenting the clients and designers with a unique opportunity to protect and expand a threatened native landscape.

When one thinks of a Palm Beach weekender, they think generally of a beach house, as the tiny community is set on a narrow peninsula with beaches to both sides. Crane Lodge feels more like a Blue Mountains treehouse, hidden amongst a forest of gums and scattered rocks up a perilously steep incline, more than 30 metres above the street. The only thing that gives the location away is the ocean breeze and spectacular view down to Avalon beach and Pittwater Bay below. The brief from the clients was simple in principle, to create a getaway for the family, but proved more difficult in practice. A crane had to be constructed on site to hoist materials up the hill and over the house, and ultimately a footpath needed to be installed up the hill to provide access in concert with the existing inclinor. The other challenge was the presence of the Endangered Ecological Community (EEC).

The Pittwater and Wagstaffe Spotted Gum Forest EEC is listed as endangered by the NSW government, with only 227 hectares of this unique littoral rainforest remaining. The community is characterised by towering canopies of Spotted Gum and Grey Ironbark, interspersed with Smooth-barked Apple, Red Bloodwood, and Broad-leaved White Mahogany. Underneath, Cabbage-tree Palms unite with native shrubs, a strange blending of tropical and Australian bush. Rasp Ferns cling to jutting sandstone formations, as sedges and grasses soak up the moist earth, the occasional grasstree punctuating the air with its tall flower spike. Being so unique and at risk of extinction, the presence of this EEC

sets limits on what species can be planted and prohibits interference with existing vegetation, making it both a challenge and an opportunity for the project, as Secret Gardens Creative Director Matt Cantwell explains. "All of the constraints of the site, the complexity of the site, the steepness, the engineering complications dealing with the trees, all of those constraints actually just created opportunity. It's actually really lovely."

Although more than 2,000 square metres, there was little on site at the start of the project, aside from lonely towering palms, boulders of Jurassic proportions, and smatterings of Spotted Gum forest. Once one looked past the difficulty of the terrain, it was essentially a blank slate, allowing Secret Gardens "to create a great getaway for the family, one that would be restorative for the parents, but that the kids could connect with, and one that was going to get them out of the house," says Matt. The design creates numerous distinct areas across the site, each with a separate amenity while still connected to the overall botanical experience. The yoga deck is a quiet retreat set high amongst the canopy of the trees, while the swing chairs at the front give the sense of floating above the planting. Channelling the wildness of the Australian bush, the design of the planting around these spaces is intended to be free-flowing and unmanicured. Matt describes the intent to create a soothing atmosphere by taking advantage of the coastal breeze to gently sway the surrounding greenery, as soft light is filtered through palm fronds.



An intended atmosphere of tranquility is created with the filtering of soft sunlight through palm fronds and coastal breezes gently swaying the surrounding greenery.

The rear garden is where the fun happens, housing an array of entertaining areas. The enormous rock forms that characterise the sites inclusion in the endangered community are utilised to create discrete areas, each with their own atmosphere, an intersection of the natural and the social. A large rock wall greets one at the edge of the patio leading up a series of steppingstones to a turf-laid fire pit, concealed amongst high boulders and shadowed by a large fig, a coral red circular dining setting to the side invokes the desire to invite a large group of friends. The looming rocks, the canopy, and the peeking view to the rolling hills below give the sense of escaping civilisation, “when you are sitting in that space, it really does feel quite primitive,” expresses Matt. Steppingstones and large sitting rocks are scattered, creating endless opportunities for the kids to interact with the site; “they’ve got wild imaginations, and you want to kind of set those free,” he says.

Another rockface decorated with a wall of epipetric ferns conceals the swimming pool. Determined to not create a suburban feature incongruously dropped into this forest escape, but also limited by the need to not disturb the roots of the nearby Spotted Gum, the swimming pool is conceived more as a “swimming hole.” Consequently, the pool sits in the side of the hill, smooth curved steps lead one down into the water, echoing the gentle curve of the surrounding hardwood timber deck. This motif also meant avoiding the typically offensive, but required, pool fence. Instead, Secret Gardens employed the rock face itself to form part of the fence, extending it with a retaining wall that fades to meet a simple vertical rod fence, painted using micaceous iron oxide. Tucked into the corner of the rock, nestled under free-growing palms, is a cedar-lined stainless steel hot tub, offering yet another luxurious yet elemental means of interacting with the environment.





Rock forms are arranged to create discrete social areas, such as that of the inviting fire pit. Concealed from urban view, there is a sense of escaping civilisation.

While much of the amenity is at the rear of the site, the star of the show is the front garden, where much of the effort was required to restore the Spotted Gum Forest. There is an 50-60 metre climb from the front of the property, therefore part of the brief was to provide pedestrian access. Intending to create an experience as opposed to a trudge as one ascends the hill, the path twists and turns, encouraging a more intimate engagement with the native grasses and sedges that intersperse between the boulders. The aim was also to touch the landscape lightly and not damage the endangered forest, meaning the path became an elevated boardwalk, clad in a mix of timber decking and resin steps that balance a harmony with the natural palette as well as providing excellent grip underfoot. At night, wash lighting underneath the decking boards turns the experience into a magical journey. “The idea is to take the focus away from [the trek uphill] and to provide a journey that’s a welcome option,” explains Matt.

Crane Lodge represents the remarkable rewards of turning difficulty into opportunity. Secret Gardens has taken a steep unreachable site with an endangered ecological community overlay and created a beautiful family escape, one that focuses both on the wellness of the family and the care of this threatened environment.