



THE MAN WHO BROKE CONVENTION

FORMER LEND LEASE CHIEF ARCHITECT NINO SYDNEY HELPED CHANGE THE FACE OF MID-20TH CENTURY RESIDENTIAL ARCHITECTURE IN SYDNEY, ONE MODERNIST DESIGN AT A TIME.



Still driven by his passion for architecture, he localised his qualifications at the University of Sydney and won a prestigious award.

By age 29, Mr Sydney had secured a position at Lend Lease Group.

“My first job was to design several houses for the future Lend Lease project home division,” he said.

The first home Mr Sydney designed was the Beachcomber, an elevated house on stilts that he had been eager to design since his early university days.

Lend Lease accepted the radical design, which led to the creation of Australia’s first modernist, affordable project home.

Four months later, five Lend Lease project homes, including the Beachcomber, were built in a display village in Carlingford, north-west of Sydney.

“We worked incredibly fast and started from scratch,” Mr Sydney said.

“There were no names for the houses, we had no specifications, we hadn’t done any great research.

“We designed the houses, then they were built, furnished, decorated, landscaped and costed.”

It was 1961 and home display villages were unheard of.

“Nothing like this village had ever been created in Australia, or anywhere in the world, as far as I know,” Mr Sydney said.

Mr Sydney also enjoyed the opportunity to include a few radical ideas for the presentation houses that had never been seen before.

Large internal feature walls painted in bright, primary colours; special marble tables; and Mr Sydney’s own design of light fittings were creative touches he had the freedom to include.

From the moment the display village opened, enthusiastic crowds of people inundated the site, creating traffic jams and attracting widespread media attention.

“People liked that they could go into the fully-furnished display houses and walk through and sit down in the lounge rooms,” Mr Sydney said.

The homes were affordable at an average price of £4000 and finance was an innovative new, optional, part of the package.

A deposit of just £200 could secure buyers their piece of the great Australian dream.

Created to cater to the hilly Australian landscape and to take advantage of ocean and bush views, the Beachcomber’s elevated design proved popular.

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At 20, young architecture student Nino Sydney was bursting with ideas. He would often speak on the phone at his desk, engaged in conversation, while doodling his latest designs.

Born in Croatia and schooled at the largest university in south-eastern Europe, the University of Zagreb, Mr Sydney enjoyed a rich and inspired education.

“Our professors had worked in the main centres of Europe, including Berlin and Vienna, so we were close to what was happening,” he said.

Mr Sydney and his student friends

admired the works of architectural greats such as famous French architect Le Corbusier and German-American Ludwig Mies van der Rohe.

Mr Sydney would spend hours sketching what he describes as “boxes of matches on sticks”.

“I was bursting for the opportunity to do such a design,” he said.

Following university, Mr Sydney took a job as an assistant architect in Germany and secured several awards in European competitions.

Then in 1956, he moved to Australia in search of adventure.