

Finding Nino

FOR ABSTRACT ARTISTS BILLY GRUNER AND SARAH KEIGHERY, LIVING THE DREAM MEANS OWNING A FAITHFULLY RESTORED 1960S PROJECT HOUSE IN THE NSW BLUE MOUNTAINS.

By Kirsty McKenzie, photography Ken Brass

It's received real estate wisdom to buy the worst house in the best neighbourhood, but even the agent selling the property thought artists Billy Gruner and Sarah Keighery were mad when they bought their lower Blue Mountains home without an inspection.

Billy and Sarah were looking for a country home west of the Blue Mountains when they stopped in Faulconbridge for a coffee and spotted an ad in an old magazine.

As huge fans of mid-century Modern style, Sarah and Billy knew instantly that the house, a Beachcomber designed in the early '60s by architect Nino Sydney for the fledgling Lend Lease Corporation, was exactly what they were looking for.

"We'd admired Beachcombers in other locations," Billy recalls. "Although the agent told us it was the ugliest house in the Blue Mountains, we knew it was just what we were looking for. It had been on the market for two years so the site was very overgrown, but because we were familiar with the design, we knew that anything that couldn't be repaired could be replaced. As it turned out, the only thing we had to do was replace the Oregon beams which had been white anted. The rest was a matter of clearing up the site and cleaning up the interior."

Croatian-born Nino Sydney was one of many post-WWII migrants who made their mark on Australia. A devotee of ➤







Modernist architects including Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer, Nino brought a European sensibility to the Australian environment when he arrived in 1956. He found a like mind in his employer, Dutch engineer Dick Dusseldorp, the founder of Civil and Civic, the financing arm of what became the Lend Lease Corporation. Dick's motivating mantra was that the designer should be hired by the contractor rather than the other way around and in 1961 his first request of Nino Sydney as Lend Lease's main architect was to create five designs for Australia's first project home village in the Sydney suburb of Carlingford. True to his "less is more" aesthetic, the Beachcomber Mark 1, an elevated "matchbox" that could be sited on almost any block, was one of these designs.

"As far as I'm concerned Nino Sydney was the hero of suburban life," Billy says. "He shifted the ground for ordinary Australians by designing *prêt à porter* houses that could be built for less than £4000, which was a realistic spend for an ordinary family at the time. Nino had a reputation as being a 'builder's architect' because his plans were simple, could easily be read and therefore could be delivered on time and on budget."

The Beachcomber design was affordable and low-maintenance with steel supports and a top structure in timber and it perched on stilts which suited bushy and rocky settings. In another concession to the changing face of Australia there was space underneath to accommodate that other new accessory of family life, the car. The Beachcomber, or variations of it, became the generic for elevated homes and by 1963, when Sarah and Billy's home was constructed for Russian immigrants, the Dimitrof family, it was Mark 2 of an eventual four Beachcomber variants. ➤



CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT: Sarah and Billy channel Palm Springs chic in the garden; it wouldn't be mid-century Modern without a flamingo or two; contemporary artwork bench by Peter

Holm sits with a long board on the front balcony overlooking the wilderness of the Blue Mountains National Park; a Parker dining suite has pride of place in the dining room of the Beachcomber house.





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CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Sarah and Billy stay on brand right down to the cubes of cheese, cabanossi and Jatz crackers; the living room includes Featherstone his and her chairs, an orange velour Parker suite, a red sofa by Fred Lowen and a '60s composite coffee table. A large painting by David Aspen hangs alongside the reel-to-reel tape machine on a Parker cabinet.

In total, there were about 200 Beachcombers built up and down the east coast of Australia. But as far as Sarah and Billy have been able to determine, theirs is the only one surviving with its original kitchen and bathroom.

For Sarah and Billy, buying the Beachcomber in 2008 was a perfect match. As an abstract artist with a PhD in art theory, the Australian mid-century Modern era is Billy's "period". Sarah, always a collector, or a hoarder as her mother called her, can't remember a time when she didn't love the mildly mad minimalist aesthetic of the '60s she grew up with. "Sarah's parents were fabulous with a capital F," Billy explains. "Sarah's mum drove a purple Cortina and she was famous as a flamboyant entertainer."

"When I was growing up our kitchen was orange and brown and purple," Sarah adds. "While I admit it took me a while to get over all the orange, it came floating back and now I love it. It's such a warm and romantic colour, the colour of sunshine in the morning and late afternoon and the colour of spiritualism as in the saffron robes of Buddhist monks."

Stepping into the home today is a total timewarp, with every detail of the '60s faithfully restored or reflected. The bathroom, with its mauve Laminex panelling channels an "inner caravan", furniture from classic designers such as Parker, Fred Lowen and Featherstone and art works are either from the mid-20th century or inspired by it.

"Except for the fridge, everything is from the period," Sarah says. "The house actually came with a few pieces



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of original furniture and the rest we have collected through the years. Appliances, crockery, cutlery, Tupperware, soft furnishings, even tea towels and table cloths are remnants of a time when things were made to last — and they did.”

In fact Sarah has collected so much furniture that she now runs a retro shop called Pink Flamingo in the Mountains village of Hazelbrook.

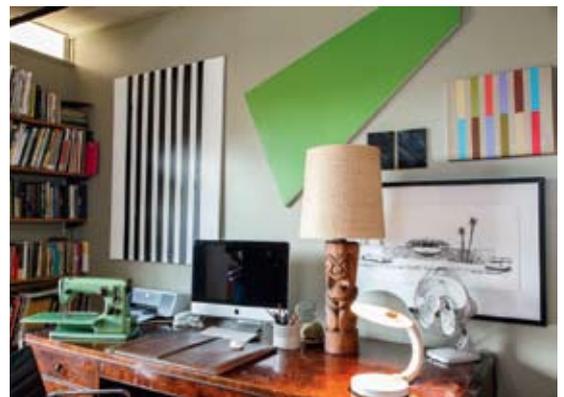
“We bought the shop with the intention to do it up and sell it,” she explains. “But then we found out that the existing use rights expired in two weeks, so we had little choice but to open a shop there right away. We stocked it with furniture we’d collected over the years and were surprised at how people flocked to buy it. By default I’ve become a shop keeper and I’m amazed at how well it has gone. People just seem to connect with mid-century Modern, it feels right to even younger generations.”

Billy and Sarah admit that moving to the mountains from Sydney has involved a “huge cultural shift”, but one that is eased by the existence of the computer. On an early spring day, with the sun streaming in through the floor-to-ceiling glass picture windows that frame views over the ➤



CLOCKWISE FROM OPPOSITE: The kitchen is original to the house including Nino’s custom designed cabinet handles; trivets make a feature on the wall above the cooker; a painting by Sydney Ball frames the hallway; a funky hanger doubles duty as a decorative feature on the wall.





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CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: The bedroom is another showcase for the couple's collection of abstract art; artworks in the guest room include *Yellow Peril* by Ron Robertson-Swann, a sculpture by Ruark Lewis and a pink rabbit by Maïke Mei Lan; the bathroom features its original Laminex panelling; the study is another venue for Sarah and Billy's art collection including one of Billy's own monochromatic works; a green piece made for the space by Kyle Jenkins and a multi-coloured work by Dutch artist José Heerikens.

rugged lower Grose River valley, the joys of living in such an extraordinary location are plain to see.

“It was quite an effort reclaiming the property from years of neglect,” Billy says. “People just used to throw things over the cliff. I think we recovered something like 30 TVs that had been tossed away. But gradually we are restoring the garden. In its heyday Mrs Dimitroff had gardens on several terraces going down the hillside and gradually we hope to restore that. Meantime, it's just amazing to live on a bird flight path. Every night thousands of cockatoos fly over on their way to the Kings Canyon and every morning they fly back again. We don't have domestic pets, but we do have cockatoos, rosellas, wallabies, kangaroos, lizards and possums as regular visitors. I suppose one day we might end up buying the farm we initially set out looking for. But for the time being, this is our version of living the dream.” *AC*