

NINO SYDNEY: THE BEACHCOMBER

WORDS: BILLY GRUNER & ANNALISA CAPURRO IMAGES: NINO SYDNEY

Nino Sydney's mid-century designs occupy an important position in Australian architecture, yet a fitting consideration of his work is overdue. No doubt the aesthetic appeal of his Beachcomber Mark 1, originally designed as a project home for Lend Lease in 1961, speaks volumes for itself. While staring into the vast blue haze from the cantilevered verandah of a spectacular Beachcomber Mark 2 in Faulconbridge NSW, one can pause in the cool mountain air to reflect on its extraordinary purist and historically significant styling.

It is no accident the austere metal dwelling sits proudly on a rocky outcrop while jutting forwards of any surrounding property. Nor that the architect raised it high upon slim black steel legs to perch over the native landscape. Facing due north away from the neighbouring Norman Lindsay homestead this house looks directly into a pristine valley and beyond to the World Heritage listed Grose Valley Wold. A growing appreciation of Nino's early radical designs has prompted this article about an impressive architectural legacy.

It is culturally valuable to produce one remarkable building, but what about those who have created a vast array of dwellings that become populist cultural icons? Dr Judith O'Callaghan's essay 'Your House and Mine' discusses the development of popular mid-century display homes, and the subsequent 'project home' industry influencing the broad direction of suburban housing during the post-war period. Nino's significance is noted and his academic contribution is also acknowledged. This is important because his was a contemporary style practice from the outset and certainly one that should not be underestimated for its vibrant currency today by students, academics or mid-century modern fans alike.

Nino came to Australia in 1956 at age 24 with limited knowledge of English and architectural qualifications from Croatia, which were not recognised in Australia. By 1958 he graduated with a Bachelor of Architecture from the University of Sydney and within a few months became Chief Architect for the fledgling Lend Lease Corporation working

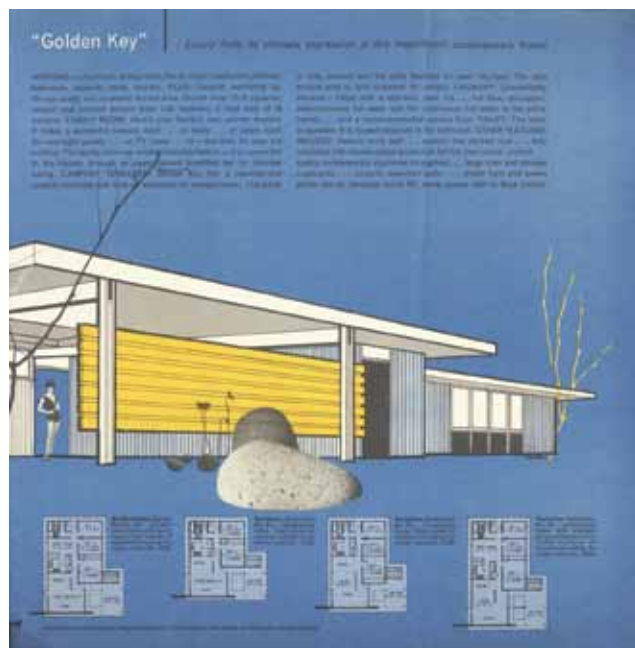
closely with founding property developer and visionary immigrant, G.J. (Dick) Dusseldorp. Nino's success was mostly due to his approach to problem solving; a pragmatic style combined with a radical design sensibility that exuded a calm surety and purposefulness. Significantly, his modern design approach was based on a clear understanding of what could be done to remedy complex matters at construction level. This technique provided a solid foundation that aided his more-for-less appeal customers appreciated in the early 1960s.

It was in the revolutionary climate of that time, and inspired by his earlier studies of Le Corbusier's architectural radicalism, Nino found himself playing a leading part in the development of a burgeoning 'project home' industry in Australia and should be recognised for that and other feats. He produced modest, light-filled, contemporary, easy-living, open plan houses that were delivered at reasonable cost, brilliant. These purist-inspired designs include the striking yet austere Beachcomber that proved well-suited to bush blocks, cliff edges or any other environments, and later the more flamboyant Safari project homes. At Lend Lease he was responsible for design, redesign, costing and building contracting a select array of new project homes including interior elements such as purpose-built kitchens and bathrooms. Nino obtained his own brief in his first few months on the job and delivered all the contracted houses

on time within budget, very credible by today's standards. But his first task was arranging the construction of the Lend Lease Project Home Village with five designs at Carlingford in October 1961. They can still be found there today, which is further testament to the appropriateness and longevity of his original designs.

In June 1962 when Lend Lease organised the Carlingford Homes Fair, Nino suggested commissioning a number of prominent architects including Harry Seidler, Neville Gruzman, and the young duo of Ken Woolley and Michael Dysart. On display at the Fair were 19 houses plus the five standard Lend Lease project homes constructed the year before. These 19 homes were not project homes per se, but were used to promote high quality affordable architect designed houses to the general public. In October 1962, Lend Lease opened its second project homes village, displaying 10 newer home designs. These villages were well-received and thousands of visitors came, with Carlingford becoming the centre for Project Homes. It is important to note Lend Lease was the first company to introduce a project home village (October 1961) - more than two years earlier than developers such as Pettit & Sevitt and Habitat.

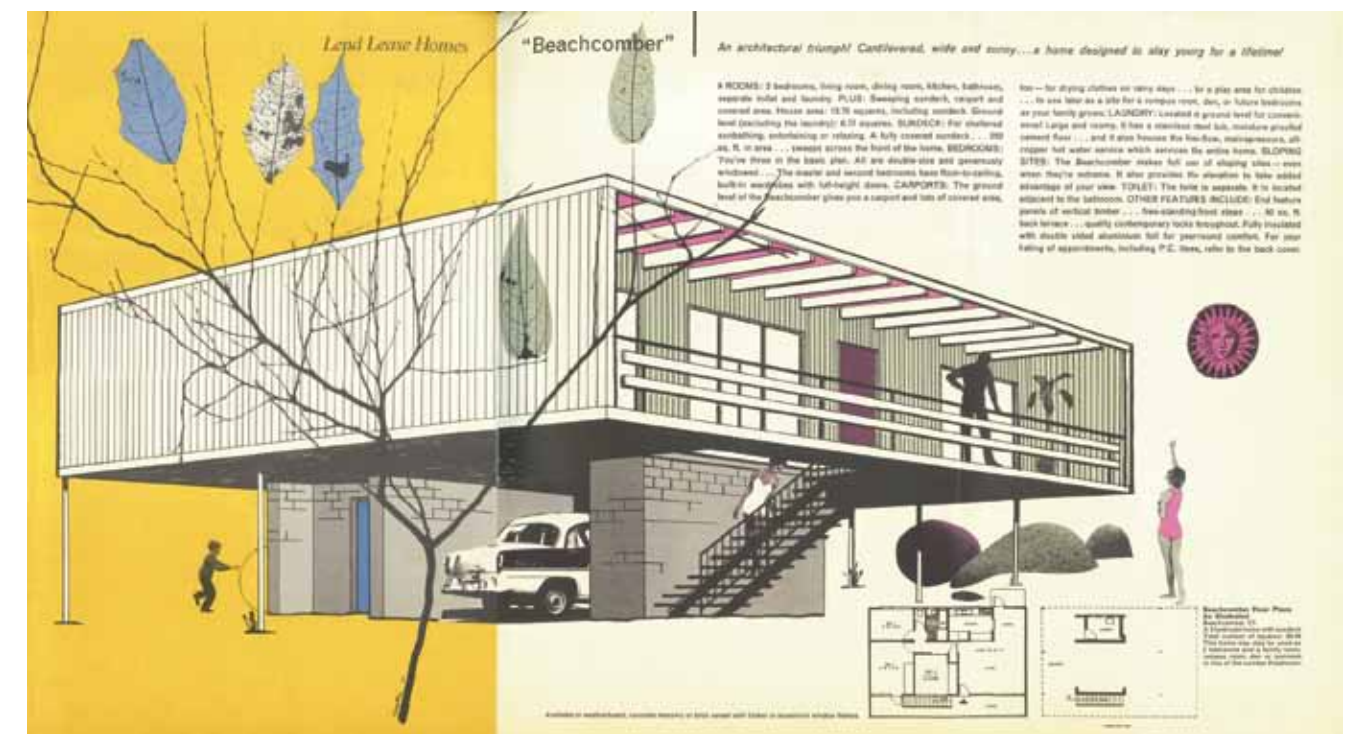
Nino's claim that project homes in 1960s Sydney, "...were second to none in the world" is easy to understand when one stands in the Blue Mountains Beachcomber and surveys



Golden Key, Lend Lease Homes for 1962 brochure



Pan Pacific, Lend Lease Homes for 1962 brochure



Beachcomber, Lend Lease Homes for 1962 brochure. Lend Lease issued a colourful 12 page marketing brochure in October 1961, it was 12 pages in a large 365mm x 315mm format. Thousands of these brochures were given to interested customers, and the brochure was titled Lend Lease Homes for 1962

the construction details and space extending features still so contemporary today. An original 1961 advertisement designed by Nino illustrates the quality of that first farsighted promotion that resulted in an influential production of around 200 Beachcomber 1 to Mark 4 models. Importantly, the Beachcomber's design simplicity doubtlessly prompted other architects/builders also eager to supply affordable quality designed homes. Nino modestly commented that he did not mind his plans being enjoyed by smaller freelance builders, architects or corporate firms. And that what made the designs attractive was the fact they were "well-planned, cost-effective and easy to build". The majority of Nino's designs featured open planning, exposed beams and large windows. These details cleverly extended the modest scale and flooded the houses with light.

All the 200 estimated homes were delivered punctually via an innovative Lend Lease financing package, another first for its time. Never before had such a simple and attractive

package of designs been presented at genuine low cost, less than 4000 pounds in 1961. It was a winning combination of finely constructed design, delivered cheaper and faster than anything else before. In fact, so successful was the promotion, the project home arm of Lend Lease continued well into the 1970s, during which time Nino designed dozens of other custom and high-end executive homes.

Fortunately, there are still many examples of Nino's work scattered across NSW, ACT and Victoria. Few people would have predicted these project homes to endure as affordable Australian mid-century icons. Nino's designs, like the Beachcomber and Safari, illustrate the long-term benefit of modest, well-designed suburban housing. Lend Lease with Nino at the helm led the project home revolution in the early 1960s. Nino's Beachcomber was nothing less than an affordable and popular version of the 'house of tomorrow' concept, which he lovingly describes as, "...an opened matchbox on stilts".

Nino Sydney's post-war legacy lies not only in his significant contribution to the average Australian home buyer, and their discovery of a new approach to home design, but also the ability to achieve an affordable and better way of living. Most importantly his forward-thinking designs can teach us much today about living smaller and living smarter.

Author: Billy Gruner and his wife Sarah, are restoring a 1963 Beachcomber Mk 2 designed by Nino Sydney. Billy is a contemporary artist, curator and director of the SNO Contemporary Art Centre, Sydney. www.sno.org.au

Author: Annalisa Capurro is an interior designer and a design educator in Sydney. She owns the award winning Jack House (1956) in Wahronga, NSW

Nino Sydney was the chief architect of Lend Lease Homes from 1961 until 1972. Since 1973 Nino has been in private practice, the majority of his work is in residential architecture in NSW



*The authors Beachcomber Mark II (c1963)
Faulconbridge, Blue Mountains NSW*



Exterior of a Beachcomber Mark 2. Carlingford NSW, Oct 1962. Photographer unknown



Beachcomber dining room, lounge, and kitchen area. Photographer. David Moore for Lend Lease