THE MODERN MOVEMENT IN NEW SOUTH WALES
A THEMATIC STUDY AND SURVEY OF PLACES

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MODERN MOVEMENT ARCHITECTURE IN NSW
Roy Lumby

Precursors

The Modern Movement didn’t emerge fully fledged after World War II. Its influence could be seen well before then. One early precursor is architect George Sydney Jones’ flat roofed houses, which boasted cubic massing, useable flat roofs and open planning. The work of Frank Lloyd Wright was published here, as was the Melbourne work of Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin, whose winning entry in the 1912 competition for Canberra introduced advanced town planning to Australia. The Griffins’ 1920s houses at Castlecrag offered innovative architecture to Sydneysiders via compact, efficient flat-roofed dwellings carefully related to their sites and each other, but for many years their significant example was rarely acknowledged.

In the 1920s and 1930s young architects went to Britain, Europe and America to work, study and experience advanced Modern Movement architecture at first hand. Amongst the most important were Sydney Ancher, Arthur Baldwinson, Walter Bunning and Morton Herman. If travel was too difficult there were imported journals and books. Sydney journals Building and Decoration and Glass reported on the latest architectural trends, while society magazine The Home paved the way by constantly reporting on all things modern in England and Europe.

In the 1930s NSW’s finest Modern Movement buildings included hospitals, particularly those of Melbourne architects Stephenson & Turner. Sir Arthur Stephenson travelled to America and Europe to study the latest hospitals and was greatly influenced by their modern design. Landmark hospitals in NSW include Gloucester House and King George V Memorial Hospital for Mothers and Babies at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, Missenden Road, Camperdown. The Modern Movement shows in their sleek exteriors and clean efficient interiors flooded with healthful sunlight and fresh air. Both Stephenson and the buildings were internationally respected.

The United Dental Hospital in Chalmers Street, Surry Hills in 1947. The building was enlarged into its present form a couple of years later (NAA, J Brindle photograph, image number A1200, L9158).
The modern Movement influenced many building types in NSW. Perhaps the finest early Modern Movement house is Sydney Ancher’s Prevost House in Kambala Road, Bellevue Hill. Its rounded forms, roof terraces, open plan and circular dining area reflect Ancher’s travels through Europe - the dining room was lifted from Mies van der Rohe. Ancher became a most important post-war architect, designing beautiful, influential houses. Arthur Baldwinson was another young architect with direct European experience. His first local domestic job was the Collins House in Barrenjoey Road, Palm Beach, clad in stained timber weatherboards above a stone base, on a steeply sloping site. It was considered “modern in the true sense of the word”, embodying the latest ideas in contemporary design.5

Wyldefel Gardens in Wylde Street, Potts Point pioneered medium density housing. Engineer and importer William Crowle was inspired by residential developments he saw in Germany and commissioned architect John Brogan to document two rows of spacious, very modern apartments separated by a landscaped court. The apartments tumbled down the site, the roof of one forming the garden terrace of the apartment above. Meanwhile, Aaron Bolot’s multi-storey Ashdown in Elizabeth Bay Road, Elizabeth Bay introduced sleek European curves and flush wall planes to high-end apartment living.
The Modern Movement affected commercial architecture. For instance, cinemas designed by Guy Crick and Bruce Furse for the Kings theatre chain came close to the advanced cinemas of prominent Modern Movement architect Erich Mendelsohn, while Samuel Lipson and Peter Kaad’s streamlined Hastings Deering building in Riley Street, Woolloomooloo showed a pronounced debt to the Modern Movement, as did the horizontal bands of steel-framed windows and all-glass cladding of the Royal Exchange Assurance Building in Pitt Street, Sydney, designed by Melbourne architects Seabrook & Fildes.
In 1932 the NSW Chapter of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects (RAIA) awarded its first annual Sulman medal honouring architectural excellence. The 1938 Sulman went to Frederick Scorer’s Newcastle Municipal Incinerator (since demolished). It was the first Modern Movement building, the first industrial building and the first by a non-Sydney architect to win. The following year the medal went to the uncompromisingly modern Manly Surf Pavilion (since demolished) by Eric Andrew and Winsome Hall. The architectural establishment was coming to grips with the Modern Movement.
A short-lived research group, the Modern Architectural Research Society (MARS) was founded in 1938. Among its founders were Walter Bunning, Morton Herman, Eric Andrew and Arthur Baldwinson. They were all in England when a MARS Group was founded there in 1933 to discuss and resolve the problems of contemporary architecture. The NSW MARS Group aimed to further the Modern Movement cause by integrating social sciences, architecture and planning, but was disbanded at the end of World War II.6

During the second half of the 1930s refugees from troubled Europe included architects with Modern Movement experience, backed by university degrees and sometimes well-established careers. Many came from Austria and Hungary. They included important figures such as Hugh and Eva Burich, Henry Epstein, George Molnar, Hans Peter Oser and Hugo Stossel. Life was not easy for them – they could not register as architects until they were naturalised and their qualifications were not recognised. To make things worse, getting work became increasingly difficult as World War II took hold. The Federal government introduced severe restrictions and building effectively ceased. Architectural practices closed and many architects enlisted for war service.

Planning for the Future

During the war governments began thinking about post-war recovery. Australian cities, towns and country regions were considered badly planned and many people were suffering hardship because of the Great Depression. Sadly, high aspirations were soon diluted but Modern Movement architecture matured here against this background.

The Commonwealth Department of Post-war Reconstruction was formed in 1942. It established an Advisory Town Planning Committee, which predicted a better post-war Australia achieved through comprehensive planning. The family was fundamental, its home the “nucleus of social organisation.” Major planning initiatives were based on the Commonwealth Housing Commission’s work. It concluded that development should not be left to private enterprise, supported decentralising industry and recommended a Commonwealth planning authority.7 Ideal decentralised towns with civic centres, health, community, recreation, education and cultural facilities, and industry located away from homes were promoted. Neighbourhoods would focus on open space and include a school, church, community centre and play areas.8 These broad visions ultimately gave way to an ambitious welfare housing program.

In NSW, established decentralisation policies carried into the post-war era. The 1945 Town and Country Planning Bill allowed local councils to prepare planning schemes in the hope this would assist decentralisation and give control the locals. Town planning incorporated English concepts such as green belts, garden cities and community facilities. The Cumberland County Council was established in 1945, with responsibility for planning in the Sydney region. It was followed by local council amalgamations in 1949. The Cumberland County Council Planning Scheme was ratified in 1951 and reformed planning across Sydney but not all of it was implemented. The Council was disbanded in 1964 because of factors such as unanticipated population growth and conflicts with government departments, and replaced by the State Planning Authority.

The immediate post-war period was dominated by austerity and shortages. Wartime controls were maintained to ensure building supplies went to urgent projects. In 1950 restrictions on new houses, flats, hospitals and schools were lifted, opening the way to the explosion of construction that accompanied the 1950s and 1960s, when Modern Movement architecture came into its own.
Spreading the Word

There were several reasons why Modern Movement architecture took off. One was the arrival of more migrant architects from Europe. Another was university architecture courses adopting their new professors’ and teachers’ methodologies. Sydney University gained highly regarded Hungarian architect George Molnar in 1945 while H Ingham Ashworth became Professor of Architecture and Denis Winston became foundation chair in town and country planning in 1949. Frederick Towndrow became Foundation Professor of Architecture at the new University of Technology (later University of NSW) in 1949. All three were from England. Many young architects travelled to England and America to work and study after graduation.

During the war architects thought long and hard about conditions at home and how to remedy their deficiencies. Influential books such as John D Moore’s *Home Again!* (1944) and Walter Bunning’s *Homes in the Sun* (1945) called for radical overhauls - best-practice Modern Movement cities, towns and houses would make Australians better people and Australia a better place. A number of books promoting modern Australian houses came out in the 1950s and 1960s, while Robin Boyd’s *Australia’s Home* (1952) put modern houses into an historical context. His *The Australian Ugliness* (1960) severely criticised what thoughtlessness and American commercialism had done to the country. Popular journals such as *Australian Home Beautiful* and *Australian House and Garden* underwent “an almost religious conversion to modern design”9 as it became one of their staples in the 1950s.
The *Sydney Morning Herald* regularly and responsibly reported on architecture and published George Molnar’s witty and pointed cartoons - a commentary on the foibles of Modern Movement art and design, its adoring public and their lifestyle.

Exhibitions promoted innovative planning and architecture. Amongst the earliest was the Town Planning and Housing exhibition in 1944 showing “plans and models of homes and communities suitable for Australian conditions” along with photographs of the latest American homes. People were certainly interested - an American Housing exhibition was said to have attracted 200,000 visitors nationwide while one promoting fibro attracted 250,000 just in Sydney, Newcastle and Brisbane. David Jones’ Gallery staged an amazing number of exhibitions on modern architecture and art. “America Today” in 1948 included houses by leading west coast architects. Sydney University architecture students’ work was displayed during the first half of the 1950s. There was an exhibition organised by the NSW chapter of the RAIA in 1956. Sculpture in architecture featured in 1957 and in 1960 developers Civil & Civic staged “Sydney of the Future”.

Farmer & Co’s Blaxland Gallery also hosted important exhibitions, such as the 1961 “15 Houses by Sydney Architects”, introducing recent Modern Movement design alongside the emerging Sydney School, and was the setting for the 1964 *Outrage* exhibition. This graphically drew attention to Australia’s squalid built environment and was symptomatic of the questioning and social upheaval later that decade.

In 1954 the Institute of Architects staged a significant national conference. It was attended by Walter Gropius, a father of the Modern Movement, and supported by an exhibition at Sydney Town Hall designed by Harry Seidler that included his prefabricated House of the Future. It stirred up immense public interest.
A House for Everyone

At war’s end Australia faced a shortfall of more than 300,000 dwellings. Costs inflated as the building industry struggled (and failed) to meet demand. Rapid population growth, materials shortages, restrictive controls and labour shortages all contributed. Until 1952 timber houses were restricted to 111.48 m² (12 squares), brick houses to 116.13 m². Lending institutions were very conservative, only advancing about 50% of the property value. They maintained uniform standards for building construction right up to the 1970s. Flat roofs were discouraged and components such as insulation were not necessarily required. All this encouraged minimal houses moving towards Modern Movement ideals, which consequently gained general approval.

Prefabrication promised benefits. The combination of standardised machine-made components, low cost and modern appearance was a dream of Modern Movement architects but remained elusive. Amongst the more notable efforts were made by the Vandyke brothers, Dutch migrants who established a contracting firm here in 1923. In 1936 Christopher Vandyke patented the Sectionit system, fibro-lined sandwich panels that could incorporate doors and windows, which was used extensively before and after World War II. From 1938 the Vandyke Brothers built houses for munitions workers at Littleton, a Lithgow suburb, based on the Sectionit system. The prototype was known as the Duration House.

Another brave attempt, Arthur Baldwinson’s Beaufort House, was far less successful. Baldwinson started designing it for the Victorian government in 1943. A modular steel prototype was erected in Melbourne in 1946. 5,000 were ordered but only 23 were built.
The Commonwealth Experimental Building Station at Ryde, in association with the NSW Housing Commission, began researching prefabricated houses in 1944. However, an agreement was signed in March 1951 for the supply of 5,000 British prefabricated houses destined for Sydney, Newcastle and Wollongong. The Housing Commission also built Vandyke houses in the 1950s.
Houses offered a rich field for experiment to the rising generation of architects. Melbourne architect Peter McIntyre compared them to Christian soldiers with a new vision of the world, where progressive Modern Movement architecture would change the world for the better. Houses were also how migrant architects could establish reputations.

Henry Epstein’s Hillman House in Finlay Avenue, Roseville, is a fine example. It was commissioned by tailor Chaim Hillman and his wife Florence, illustrating links between migrant networks and Modern Movement design at this time. Continuous bands of steel framed windows and extensive roof terraces, common features of advanced pre-war European houses, were created by stacking rectangular prisms at right angles to one another. The interior of the house was originally fitted with built-in furniture by Austrian migrant Paul Kafka, perhaps NSW’s most significant furniture designer during the 1950 and 1960s.

Sometimes architects were thwarted by local government. Sydney Ancher’s groundbreaking Poyntzfield in Maytone Avenue, Killara, was intended to have a flat roof. Ku-ring-gai Council deemed it objectionable so he gave the house a pitched roof. It was still good enough to win the 1945 Sulman Medal. Open living areas were separated from bedrooms and spilled out onto terraces and then into the garden where many mature trees were retained. These characteristics were common to Ancher’s ground-hugging houses, which integrated indoors and outdoors through verandahs, terraces and expansive openings. He admitted to the influence of Mies Van Der Rohe and Le Corbusier and his houses offered owners a richer way of living through intelligent architecture responding sensitively to site conditions.

In 1947 Warringah Council was affronted by what it considered an ugly flat roof on Ancher’s cutting-edge weekender in Molong Street, North Curl Curl, known as Windy Drop Down. In the celebrated landmark court case that followed Justice Bernard Sugerman came down in favour of the house and defended an architect’s right to contemporary design, which was considered to be in the best public interest. Nevertheless advanced houses were routinely opposed by councils up to 1955.
One of the most important architects in Australia during the second half of the twentieth century arrived here in 1948. Viennese-born Harry Seidler fled with his family to England to escape Nazism but he was interned and shipped to Canada. Seidler came to Australia via America, where he studied and worked under major Modern Movement figures - former Bauhaus Director Walter Gropius, former Bauhaus teacher Josef Albers and Bauhaus-educated Marcel Breuer.

Seidler came here because his parents, who arrived in 1946, asked if he could design a house for them. The Rose Seidler House in Clissold Road, Wahroonga, is one of the most important 20th century houses in Australia, based on a house he had designed under Marcel Breuer. It caused an absolute sensation. People would drive over on weekends and trample the site, peering through windows and doors at its interiors and furnishings. For Seidler it opened the door to a flood of residential commissions across NSW, Canberra, and as far away as Darwin. The house introduced Marcel Breuer’s “bi-nuclear” planning here - living and sleeping areas are separated from each other by an internal court and linked by an open family room, NSW’s first. It won Seidler his first Sulman Medal in 1951, no mean achievement for a recent young arrival outside the mainstream.
Seidler designed exemplary Modern Movement houses throughout his long career. He quickly came to grips with the fierce Australian climate, illustrated by his bi-nuclear country house in Quirindi. Intense summer heat and bushfires were addressed through solid masonry walls, concrete floors and a ventilated roof cavity. Deep roof overhangs shaded glazing and walls were extended to shield outdoor areas from hot winds. Seidler’s family home in Kalang Avenue, Killara, indicates how his work (and Modern Movement architecture) evolved. It is a dramatic glass and concrete building on a steep bushland site designed in collaboration with his wife Penelope, and widely regarded as one of Australia’s outstanding houses. It is important in part because of its innovative structure. Concrete block piers support floors stiffened by balcony rail height parapets that allow long cantilevering terraces, onto which internal spaces spread out. The flow of space in the house moves vertically as well as horizontally.

Two early houses by Harry Seidler: model of the innovative bi-nuclear house at Quirindi (left) and the 1951 Sussman House at Kurrajong Heights (nla newspapers – Sydney Morning Herald, 19 January1954, p.13; Architecture, Volume 42 Number 2: 71, April-June 1954).
Many architects designed exceptional Modern Movement houses in the 1950s. Here are a couple of examples to show what they did.

Arthur Baldwinson’s work is epitomised by his own compactly planned home in Carlotta Street, Greenwich. It seems to sum up the way his thinking evolved after setting up his practice in 1937 but may also reflect some Seidler influence.20 Constructed of brick with a shallow-pitched butterfly roof, open planned living areas opened onto a cantilevered verandah maximising view potential and shading the lower level.

Here Baldwinson used Modern Movement discipline in a relaxed and informal way, appropriate to local conditions. Light harmonious colours were used in principal living rooms and strong bright colours in casual spaces.

Young architect John Brindley designed his family home in Castlecrag with a bi-nuclear plan where a breezeway, paved in the same material as outdoor terraces, separated living areas from bedrooms. It responded to a site blessed with beautiful views and established eucalypts. Substantial rock outcrops dictated changes of level that were reflected in the slopes of roofs. The house and its surrounds were a unified relaxed whole, a varied setting for pleasant and comfortable family life.21

By mid-decade advanced architect-designed houses shared common features. The dining area was part of the living room, directly linked to the kitchen (a “small efficient factory”). Bedrooms were separated from living areas and children’s and parents’ bedrooms were segregated. There was a tendency for each bedroom to have an ensuite or open directly into the main bathroom. Houses were becoming transparent and light-filled, giving more apparent space and merging interiors with sites - a well-designed house was in harmony with its immediate environment.22
Eastern (street side, left) and western (river side) views of Arthur Baldwinson’s family home (1953). The bold statement of the western side of the house gives way to a relaxed and informal disposition of fenestration on the eastern side (SLNSW - Arthur Baldwinson photographic albums, Volume 6, PXA 372).

W E (Bill) Lucas’ 1954 butterfly-roofed Kearns House in Port Hacking Road, Sylvania, was an early attempt by this young architect to come to grips with sun control and heat, most directly expressed by louvres and deep roof overhangs (Architecture, Volume 42 No 2: 82, April-June 1954).

Hans Peter Oser’s circa 1954 house at Beauty Point maximised view potential overlooking Middle Harbour and at the same time designed a dramatic house that exploited contrasts of texture (glass, stone, timber) and layering of volumes and masses (Architecture, Volume 43 No. 2:36, April-June 1955).
Confident and stylish Modern Movement houses were built in localities outside Sydney, such as this pair in suburban Newcastle: the circa 1960 Pallett House by architect Ross Deamer in Woodward Street, Merewether (left), and a contemporary neighbouring house in Yule Lane (Roy Lumby photographs).

Holiday homes were an important genre of housing during the 1950s and 1960s, as higher wages and more leisure gave people the opportunity to build retreats out of the city. Amongst the finest is the 1968 Baronda at Bega, designed by important Melbourne architect Graeme Gunn. It is a rustic interpretation of the Sydney School, casual in form and selection of materials (left). Holiday homes could also be more conventional, such as this stylish dwelling on the shores of Lake Macquarie (Baronda – NSW Heritage Council SHR inventory; Lake Macquarie house – Roy Lumby photograph).

Some later houses were particularly exciting. The Fombertaux House in Karoo Avenue, East Lindfield (1963–66), designed by Jean Fombertaux, is a slender steel grid supporting concrete floors and concrete panel infill walls. Interweaving solid and void areas illustrate the Modern Movement notion that building structure could free up planning and space – multiple levels spiral around a central stair that allows views up, down and through it. Hugh Burich’s own house in Edinburgh Road, Castlecrag is amongst the most iconic Modern Movement houses in NSW. This highly regarded building is respected for its powerfully articulated and modulated spaces and the creativity of design. Off-the-shelf items were combined with hand-crafted features and wonderful spaces to create a habitable sculpture that is carefully related to its site. It is unlike any other house.
Hugh Burich’s 1972 house has become one of the most celebrated Modern Movement houses in NSW. The internal view shows the ceiling above the living area (NSW Heritage Council SHR inventory – Catherine Macarthur photographs).

Neville Gruzman designed exemplary and individual Modern Movement inspired houses throughout his career, influenced by Frank Lloyd Wright and Japanese architecture. His 1966 Rosenburg/Hills House at Turramurra is a fine example of his sophisticated minimalist glass pavilion. The house was extended by Gruzman in 1983 (Roy Lumby photographs).

In the early 1950s several young architects began to question what was going on, wondering why Modern Movement internationalism was appropriate to Australian conditions. Their response reflects several influences, including the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright and Japan along with the direct undisguised way Finnish architect Alvar Aalto, French architect Le Corbusier and the English Brutalists used materials. The Sydney School began to emerge.

There was also great respect for the natural landscape. This may be due to architect Myles Dunphy, who taught at the Sydney Technical College and the University of New South Wales and was a highly committed conservationist. Several of his students, including Bruce Rickard, Ken Woolley, Bill Lucas, Bryce Mortlock, Russell Jack, John James, Peter Johnson, Don Gazzard and Tony Moore, became important Sydney School designers. They all designed beautiful and appealing houses that shared characteristics such as roughly textured bricks, timber and tiles, considered relationships to sites, disciplined planning and spatially complex interiors, often with changes of level. Some key examples follow.
Peter Muller’s 1953 house for Robert Audette in Edinburgh Road, Castlecrag, was a seminal work. A relationship to Frank Lloyd Wright’s work shows through horizontal bands of windows and splayed brick walls and timber boarded fascias. It is important because its spacious, north-oriented open plan is reflected in its picturesque massing (unlike the tight massing of Seidler and Baldwinson houses) and because of the use of natural materials. Muller’s family home in Bynya Road, Whale Beach, was even more radical, preserving beautiful natural site features because he wanted it to feel like living in the site as well as in a house. The result was an unconventional house where inside and outside were interwoven, and trees and rocks became part of the interior. The private, enclosed bedroom pavilion was separate from the living pavilion, where space flowed seamlessly between indoors and outdoors.
The attenuated plan of Russell Jack’s family home in Boundary Road, Wahroonga, is also a response to its site. It has two wings joined at the main entry. The living wing contains a linear arrangement of space while the bedroom wing is buffered from the entry by the bathroom and laundry. The house greets the street with a blank wall, opening out to its wooded site. It won the 1957 Sulman Award. Bill and Rosemary Lucas’ house in The Bulwark, Castlecrag, is a more extreme response to its bushy, sloping site. It is essentially a timber frame supporting a platform with interconnecting rooms running around a central open court. There is virtually nothing but glass separating floor and roof.

Don Gazzard’s small Herbert House in Ellesmere Avenue, Hunter’s Hill, used everyday materials to keep costs down. The house has a U-shaped plan, its central courtyard being screened from the street for privacy. Originally living and dining rooms faced north on one side, bedrooms, kitchen and bathroom ran across the back, and a garage finished off the U. Each wing has a skillion roof whose slope was expressed internally by exposing rafters, adding a sense of space and assisting ventilation. Its simple forms reappeared elsewhere over the next decade. Ken Woolley’s celebrated house in Bullecourt Avenue, Mosman, won the 1962 Wilkinson Award and has become a Sydney School icon. It is relatively complex - a series of garden terraces stepping regularly down and across the sloping site. Spaces are covered by a tiled skillion roof that follows the fall of the site, and enclosed by clinker brick walls. Stepping the floors means that the inter-connected spaces within the house all have low and high sides and raking ceilings.
Don Gazzard’s 1961 Herbert House at Hunter’s Hill (above) and part of the interior of Ken Woolley’s 1962 Mosman home (Herbert House Roy Lumby photograph; Woolley House – State Heritage Register – Ray Joyce photograph).

There were also a few architects treading individual paths and exploring geometry’s creative possibilities. The results were distinctive, if eccentric, such as Peter Muller’s Kumale in Barrenjoey Road, Palm Beach, designed for Arnold Richardson of Victa lawn mower fame. Muller based its plan on circles, which permeate the entire design. Curves also found their way into the work of Stan Symonds, who exploited concrete’s mouldable qualities to produce sculptural and futuristic houses. Ken Willoughby’s decoratively Modern Movement Austwild House in New South Head Road, Rose Bay, is a local landmark, while Robin Boyd’s Lyons house in Port Hacking Road, Dolan’s Bay, was raised above ground level and organised around a central swimming pool, overcoming a difficult rock foundation.

Peter Muller’s 1956 Kumale at Pittwater (left) and Ken Willoughby’s 1960 Austwild House at Double Bay (left) (Kumale – SLV - Peter Wille photograph, accession No: H91.244/379Image No: a22483; Austwild House – Roy Lumby photograph).

Of course, not everyone could afford to engage an architect directly, but there were alternatives.

The Royal Victorian Institute of Architects introduced an innovative small homes service in 1947 under the direction of influential Modern Movement exponent Robin Boyd. It initially offered plans of 40 architect-designed houses for a small charge and was so successful that two years later there were over 100 to choose from. The NSW Chapter of the RAIA opened its Small Homes Service Bureau in 1953, run in conjunction with the Sun Herald and Australian Home Beautiful to provide free information and advice to small home builders. It offered 50 individual modern designs, a package of drawings, specifications, building contract and guidance notes at a considerable saving over normal architect’s fees. One bedroom houses were most popular, followed by two bedroom houses. The most popular material was timber, favoured for low cost and appearance.29

Retail stores and popular magazines joined in. Grace Bros published plans in the Daily Telegraph. Myer’s sold plans published in the Australian Women’s Weekly, which set up home planning centres in department stores in state capitals and staged the Australian Family Home Competition in 1958. This was won by young Sydney architects Ken Woolley and Michael Dysart.
At the peak of Australia’s 1950s housing boom one third of new houses were owner-built. From 1945 to 1955 major cost rises and severe rental accommodation shortages forced many to become home builders. The post-war baby boom meant a lot of houses were needed. Simple building forms and inexpensive materials were a great help. Fibro was used because it was cheap, light and easy to install while flat roofs were easier to build and used fewer materials than conventional roofs. The Modern Movement helped – because its aesthetics were partly inspired by mass-produced materials and efficient use of space, it offered a stylish way to save money through clever planning and low-cost materials. Local government provided a bit of help when ceiling heights were dropped from 2.7 to 2.4 metres and houses became more comfortable because the NSW government insisted on insulation in houses with the lower ceilings. However, open plans were resisted by parents with babies and noisy children/teenagers. The advent of television in 1956 also worked against them.

Another way to get an architect-designed house was a project home. The first project home by a NSW architect was W J McMurray’s 1958 “Sunline.” It was a modest timber structure with a shallow pitched roof, three bedrooms and a combined living-dining room that opened onto a terrace to maximise space, and used Stegbar’s innovative Windowalls to maximise light. The following year Sun-Line Homes offered a second house by Geoffrey Lumsdaine. Many variants of this house, with its low-pitched roof sweeping down over the carport on one side, followed.
Peter Muller designed a neat 12 square project house for Craftbuilt Homes that had a “good sense of space, enclosure & shelter” and a flexible plan to suit the needs of individual families. 

Extract from an article on the Sun-line project home showing a general view of the house and its plan (left) and Peter Muller’s compact design for Craftbuilt Homes, 1960. It had concrete block walls and Tilux slate shingles on the roof (Sun-line – nla newspapers, Australian Women’s Weekly, 3 February 1960, p.22; Craftbuilt – SLV, Peter Wille photograph, Accession No: H91.244/3782, Image No: a22468).
In 1960 the Master Builders Association staged the Parade of Homes at Cherrybrook Gardens estate at West Pennant Hills, featuring 35 architect-designed houses. Lend Lease opened a home demonstration centre at Carlingford in 1961. Among the houses was Nino Sydney’s classic Beachcomber, a house on stilts echoing the Rose Seidler house. The unprecedented 1962 Carlingford Homes Fair at the Kingsdene estate, Carlingford, followed, launched by Lend Lease and the Australian Women’s Weekly. Lend Lease bought several hundred hectares and commissioned Clarke Gazzard & Yeomans to design a subdivision.

There were 24 display houses designed by architects such as Ken Woolley and Michael Dysart, Harry Seidler, Don Gazzard, Neville Gruzman and John Ley. It was a staggering success, with enormous crowds turning up and traffic jams extending for kilometres. Many of the houses showed Sydney School characteristics - split levels made some suitable for sloping sites, while clinker bricks, bagged brickwork with white paint, exposed timber and tiles were all to become commonplace. Housing was becoming another off-the-shelf consumer item.
Nino Sydney’s Beachcomber, 1961. Nino Sydney, a migrant from Hungary, was chief architect for Lend Lease Homes at this time. (NAA, Ern McQuillan photograph, image no. B941, HOUSING / CONTEMPORARY / ALUMINIUM / 1)

Houses designed by Harry Seidler (left) and Neville Gruzman (right) at the Kingsdene Estate (Roy Lumby photographs).

Pettit + Sevitt, established in 1961, offered the high watermark of project home design and employed Ken Woolley and Michael Dysart (who later worked for other companies). The company preferred split level houses because they fitted easily on the sloping northern Sydney sites favoured by their target market, and their Split Level and Lowlines became staple products. The quality of the houses was high enough to win RAIA project home awards, introduced in 1967. They were commended for a high standard of accommodation and planning, and their restrained appearance. Other notable architects such as Bruce Rickard, Russell Jack and Oser, Fombertaux & Associates, designed equally high-quality project homes. By 1962 there were 25 larger project building companies operating in Sydney. The houses offered good value because they were based on standardised components and bulk buying of building materials supplied to sub-contracting builders. Market research was undertaken to make sure houses were attractive to customers. The market boomed until the 1974 property crash knocked many builders out of the game.