

UP CLOSE

Modern twist to historic houses

Talented European architects, who emigrated to Sydney last century, have left us with some unique and striking homes, writes *Caroline Jumpertz*.



Sydney's north shore is dotted with houses that are extraordinarily beautiful examples of modernist European architecture. However, many are under appreciated and therefore under threat, according to two of the people behind an exhibition that may challenge our understanding of these homes.

Rebecca Hawcroft, curator of The Moderns: European Designers in Sydney (at the Museum of Sydney until November 26), and Paul Morey of Modern Houses, an agency that specialises in selling modernist homes, agree that if we don't recognise these gems, we risk losing them.

"Those buildings represent a direct transfer of European design to Australian shores," Hawcroft says. "These houses that we haven't noticed but have been sitting among us in suburbia, represented an influx of European designers and their clients."

"The way the people lived in them was a direct translation of Europe into Australia that hasn't been acknowledged before."

Morey adds: "Unfortunately we're losing some of these houses ... I've seen some horrendous things, some really quite shocking examples of pulling down something that's beautiful, and putting up things that are not."

So why did these dwellings spring up on the north shore in the first place? The simple answer is immigration. Intellectuals, including designers and architects, fled religious persecution before and during World War II, to the benefit of Australia.

"We were quite blessed in this country to have an influx of that intellectual property," Morey says.

Many Jewish intellectuals fled an increasingly hostile Europe in the lead up to World War II, however Australia remained something of a closed shop for architects until after the war. These émigrés called themselves designers or project managers because they were restricted from practising as architects.

Following the war, the immigration boom coupled with a housing shortage meant the north shore, with its affordable housing lots,



Rose Seidler House in Wahroonga, designed by Rose's son Harry, is one of the north shore's finest modernist homes. (Right) Henry Epstein's Hillman House in Roseville.



(Main picture and above) Rebecca Hawcroft at the Fombertaux House in East Lindfield. Pictures: John Applebyard

The north shore stayed important over the next two decades as a place where you could buy a lot then build a house

became home to many émigrés who designed and built their own dwellings.

One example is Henry Epstein, who was registered as an architect immediately after the war, and built a very modern structure, known now as the Hillman House, in Roseville.

Another was Ernst Kerner, who had an established career as an architect and town planner in Ostrava, Czechoslovakia, but who moved to Sydney in 1938 and started over. He built himself a modernist house in Mosman and an apartment building in Cremorne, but the war halted his work. He died in 1966 having never resumed work. Despite being

The north shore's modernist gems

The Fombertaux House, at 23 Kurroo Ave, East Lindfield, is an authentic example of late modernism. Designed in 1966, it has remained in the family for half a century.

"It's really a gem," says Paul Morey of the classic modernist home that is on the market – to the right buyer.

Its architect, Jean Fombertaux, worked on Macquarie St's William Bland Centre (1990) and several other important Sydney buildings. For his family home, he explored a grid design of 16 steel columns which support concrete slabs, which spiral upward through the design.

Morey says when it was being constructed, locals were concerned by the steel framework and a rumour took hold that it was to be an industrial construction, possibly a mechanic's building. The story goes that Fombertaux fanned the flames by putting up a Michelin banner, but when it was finished the banner disappeared and the rumour was put



Jean Fombertaux, one of the talented European architects to come to Sydney.

to rest – it was to be a family home.

The reception to other modernist homes was similar, Morey says.

"When Harry Seidler started building houses in this country, they weren't greeted easily, they were considered odd," he says.

Other north shore houses of note include the Hillman House in Findlay Ave, Roseville, designed by Dr Henry Epstein and Kafka House in Lindfield, designed by Hungarian-born Hugo Stossel for Austrian-born furniture designer Paul Ernest Kafka.

The Moderns: European Designers in Sydney, Museum of Sydney, cur Philo and Bridge streets, City, to November 26, free with museum entry fee, \$12, conc \$8, sydneylivingmuseums.com.au The exhibition's companion publication, *The Other Moderns: Sydney's Forgotten European Design Legacy*, is on pre-sale at \$49.99.

famous in his field in Europe, he is virtually unknown here.

"That was an expanding area of Sydney," Hawcroft says of Sydney's north. "Most of the houses that we're looking at are post-

World War II, and the north shore was consolidating then."

The result was the semi-rural outskirts in the north knitting together with an explosion of mid-century construction, thanks to

immigrants with a taste for modern design which offered a stark contrast with the Federation style and California bungalows that dominated Sydney's suburbs.

"The north shore stayed important over the next two

decades as a place where you could buy a lot and then build a house, so you see the most exceptional design in architects' own houses," Hawcroft says. "The north shore also has those steep sites, often rocky and tricky,

which led to creative design solutions."

Morey considers himself a custodian of the heritage-listed French Forest house that he owns. His business is designed to make purchasers aware the house they're buying has historical significance, so there's no risk of destruction due to lack of knowledge.

But while Harry Seidler is a household name, and his Rose Seidler House in Wahroonga is a well-known example of the modernist European design aesthetic, it's Seidler's lesser known, but equally skilful contemporaries including Epstein, Kerner, Hugo Stossel and Hans Peter Oser, that the exhibition seeks to highlight.

"The thing about this exhibition is, people all know who Harry Seidler is, but these chaps have made just as much of a contribution (to Sydney)," Morey says.

He also wants councils to identify these significant houses, and preserve some of the better examples. He has gone so far as to map the buildings of note, with Sydney Living Museums, to assist the historical preservation project.

Hawcroft believes the minimalism coupled with humour could explain the renewed global interest in mid-century modern design.

"It's very simple, with a real truth to materials, but also quite fun," Hawcroft says of modernist design.

"The minimalism appeals to us, but it's not hard line; there's a softness with the materials, such as timber as well as the nostalgia for that time in history."

Up Close