

HOME / SYDNEY

Modernist Ode



Text

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Images

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There is an evocative image taken in the late 1970s by celebrated photographer Max Dupain that captures a just-visible silhouette of architect Reuben Lane, his quiet presence framed by the soft curves of his most recognisable project. It's an image that says everything about the architect who ran his own race away from the media spotlight, in stark contrast to the landmark house that demanded attention even while under construction on the rocky shoreline of Salmon Haul Bay in South Cronulla.

Completed in 1973, the home was named 'Apollo Gate' by the Breen family in recognition of the Greek patron of light, truth and music, the reference adding depth to the complex free-flowing curves that go beyond mere stylistic gesture. The Breens' brief shaped the interior's dramatic double-height 'performance space' designed for live chamber music, and the sculptural lines of the structure take form from there. Its fluid white stucco walls created places for dining, lounging and living, crowned by the undulating rooftop that opens and closes around gardens and rooms below, and was by all accounts so complicated to construct the builder finished it by hand, guided by Lane's precise timber maquette.

The commission came in the decade after Lane had returned from travels around the world where he had met architectural luminaries and worked for his hero Oscar Niemeyer, while Brazil's most famous modernist was building the country's awe-inspiring capital; the project would harness this experience and lead to a significant addition to Sydney's body of modernist architecture. While Niemeyer's influence can be seen in the building's undulating curves, Lane also embraced the philosophy of the Sydney School: its split-level plan, soaring interiors, expressed materials and connection to the landscape explore gestures that are both wildly poetic, and solid and grounded.

'In architecture school I became enamoured with the work of Oscar Niemeyer,' Lane remarked, writing about the impact of the Brazilian architect in the monograph *Reuben Lane: A selection of architectural works 1960–2000*. 'He

differed from the other International School architects in his love of the curve and organic forms. This sensuousness in curvilinear forms, and his subtle changes in rhythm and patterns, was to become an enduring idea... The fusion of nature and architecture found its own expression in my own work... Coming back to Sydney at the start of the 1960s with these influences, I landed squarely in the Sydney School.'

Almost half a century later and despite a number of unsympathetic tweaks, those ideas remain embedded in the bones of the building and would draw in Shane and Lyn Noble, who describe their relationship with the house as a 'journey of discovery'. 'We were attracted to the house for its outlook and position, which is the genius of Reuben Lane — you have perfect sight lines and every room has a view of the water, yet you also have privacy,' says Shane. 'Living here, we saw how the two were so intertwined. We started digging, reading and learning, and we got very into Brazilian modernism and designers Jorge Zalsupin and Joaquim Tenreiro.'

Working closely with interior designer Brendan Wong and landscape architect Matthew Cantwell of Secret Gardens, the couple would begin a design collaboration that Wong describes as a 'conversational exploration', involving carefully unpicking layers of unsympathetic additions and looking for ways to take the house forward. 'When Shane called to introduce himself, he had barely finished his first sentence and I said, "I know exactly where the house is. I've been there",' Wong recalls. 'Around 2010, I had a friend take me to look at it. It was vacant, and I peered in through the windows and thought it would be such a dream project. It was meant to be.'

For the team, taking the building forward meant spending time undoing changes, working to connect the house with the landscape and delving into its history. 'We found the concept drawings, and it was important for us to try to envisage what the architect would have wanted,' Shane explains. Lane's drawings served as the starting point for Wong's work over the next four years. The kitchen's 70s L-shaped plan

Previous page

Almost half a century after its completion, the new owners of Reuben Lane's 1973 South Cronulla Apollo Gate residence worked with interior designer Brendan Wong and landscape architect Matthew Cantwell to bring it into the present, with the aim of connecting the building with its surrounding landscape

This page

The building shows Oscar Niemeyer's influence on Lane, but also reflects the philosophy of the Sydney School. The flowing shape is firmly anchored at the front of the building by several tall concrete columns, a nod to the neoclassical form that inspired it

Next page

The singular house sits above the shoreline of South Cronulla's Salmon Haul Bay, a small rocky inlet located at the entrance to Port Hacking



was carefully reconfigured within the original structure, its once half-height window opened to views of Hungry Point. Dark, pokey bedrooms were transformed into large, light-filled spaces overlooking Port Hacking. The original curvaceous bathrooms were restored, and the once damp and disconnected kids' playroom reimagined as an entertainment area energised by the garden and connected to a new pool.

'The approach was to blur the boundaries a bit so the new work could be a little bit ambiguous,' explains Wong. 'That's not to say we were trying to replicate the original, but the new elements needed to be authentic and bring contemporary function to the house while not suffocating the structure. For example, the living spaces have a very generous volume but the transition to the bedrooms had a jarring proportion, so spatially I think the house is more balanced now. I particularly love the main living space — it's quite vast in terms of volume, height and scale, but it also has a comforting feel to it. There's something about the handmade timber ceilings and the intentionally imperfect rendering, and in a more literal sense the carved bench seat by the fireplace, which has warmth and allows you to retreat and cocoon.'

That boundary blurring has also sublimely drawn the garden inside via the colours and lushness of tropical Brazil and the sculptural planning of its most famous landscape architect Roberto Burle Marx, channelled here through Cantwell. Lane would approve of the palms, tree ferns, cactus, succulents and large elephant ears that catch the breeze and dapple light throughout the house, the pond filled with colourful carp that greet you at the front door, and quiet courtyards that provide retreat and a microclimate protected from the southerlies, their scale balancing the grandness of the main event. 'Good architecture just makes you feel good, and what we have done by making it a more contemporary house to live in has secured its future,' enthuses Lyn. 'Yes, the bones are strong, so the house will be here for at least another fifty years,' agrees Shane. 'It's been good fun and an adventure for us, and I'm pretty confident the house will get to a hundred.'







Previous page
The main living space features dramatic volumes, all accentuated by the uniform colour palette that blends architecture and mid-century furniture

This page
The organic curves of the fireplace niche and carved bench contrast with the formal lines of the Jorge Zalszupin armchairs and Branco & Preto MR7 sofa

Facing page
In the living room, a 1970s marble console by Angelo Mangiarotti highlights the sculptural form of the stair



This page
High above the staircase hangs
Connecticut-based artist Emilia
Dubicki's *Blackbird Road*

Facing page
A clutch of 1960s Brutalist Brass
Flower sconces by Svend Aage
Holm-Sørensen decorate the wall
behind a DS-600 sofa by de Sede.
In the foreground sits Gio Ponti's
D.153.1 armchair for Molteni&C





Facing page
Overlooking the bay, the dining area gets its colour from Barlas Bayla's Bangle dining table, chairs by Rodolfo Dordoni for Minotti and a glass work commissioned from artist Brian Hirst

This page
In the upper-level kitchen, a Murano glass and gold leaf chandelier from Jean-Marc Fray French Antiques captures the light above a custom walnut, brass and marble island by designer Brendan Wong, who also designed the rounded corner sofa



This page
The master bedroom's ensuite features a striking Marcio Kogan-designed bath from Agape and a custom walnut, shagreen and brass vanity by Brendan Wong Design



Facing page
The view from the master bedroom is framed by a pair of 1970 tapestries by Brazilian artist Emiliano Di Cavalcanti



This page
Circular stepping stones create a playful entrance that complements the organic forms of the roofline

Facing page
The entrance garden is set below the road level, creating a microclimate that helps cool the home





This page
Succulents and cacti were selected
for their sculptural qualities
and minimal maintenance
requirements

Facing page
Descending lawn platforms lead
to the fire pit, offering sweeping
views of the bay. The circular
fire pit area and angled retaining
walls were inspired by the house's
architecture

