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Fifties fusion

Mid-century units transformed, p4

New chapters in old storeys

Good bones make many '50s units ripe for a facelift, writes **Jane Burton Taylor**.

'Smart, thrifty and carefree! That is how apartment living was billed in the 1950s. These flats, or "home units", as they were newly named, signalled a social shift in Australia. For the first time, apartments were considered a real alternative to houses, largely because people were then able to get a mortgage to buy them but also because they were being designed with many of the characteristics of houses.

The change was driven in part by developers, who witnessed the new postwar prosperity and baby boom. It was an era when many of today's big-name developers, such as Lend Lease and Mirvac, started out, says Caroline Butler-Bowdon, a co-author of *Homes in the Sky*. "People like Dick Dusseldorp of Lend Lease believed the average person should be able to afford their own piece of real estate," she says.

Today, many of the buildings from this era endure as the most popular in the city. Most are in need of an upgrade, though – there are issues such as "concrete cancer" to deal with and many individual owners are looking at revamping and updating interiors.

EARLY STARTERS

The original shift to living in apartments was fuelled by a variety of factors.

"Rent had been pegged at 1939 levels but this rent control was relaxed in 1954," Butler-Bowdon says. "And then there was the

introduction of strata title in 1961. That allowed people to take out a mortgage. That was the biggest force in really changing our housing map forever."

Sydney was certainly never the same. According to a story in *Constructional Review* titled "Home Unit Buildings Change Sydney's Skyline": "Between '59 and '64 some 50 or more multi-storey home-unit buildings have been built onto the slopes and along the escarpments of... well-known harbourside locations."

Immigration played its part as well, because people coming from Europe had been living happily in apartments for at least a century.

Postwar migration also delivered the architects and the philosophy and a streamlined aesthetic of modernism. Many of these architects tried to design apartments as they would a house, considering how spaces varied in feel and how interiors related to views and – appearing for the first time – balconies.

A senior lecturer in architecture at the University of NSW, Paul Hogben, cites the work of Harry Seidler, who designed some of the most popular buildings of the day, including Ithaca Gardens, Gemini and Aquarius.

"Though they were minimal in size and did not have large living spaces, Seidler gave the same design considerations to his apartment buildings that were being applied to his house designs," Hogben says.



Maryam Gusheh, also of the University of NSW, similarly talks about Seidler's work. Following the lead of Le Corbusier in his *Unité d'Habitation* in Marseille, Seidler explored the use of split-level apartments.

"He used different lighting qualities, the possibility of outdoor spaces and different levels to make the apartments more like a house," Gusheh says.

This new breed of architects also put new ideas of planning into place. Many opted to use concrete-slab construction, which allowed big spans of glass.

They broke with interwar traditions and oriented living spaces to the sun and views and



Radial plan... strips of lighting in the living room ceiling. Photo: Sharrin Rees

typically chose classic palettes of raw materials.

"Concrete framing with brick and glass infill, that was the formula," Butler-Bowdon says.

"It was a distinctive aesthetic

expression and you can see it anywhere on the harbour."

THE PROS

Many of the buildings are in some of the best vantage points Sydney has to offer.

They are structures with great bones and often their materials, such as steel-framed windows and face brick, are still in fashion.

For owners today, there is much to capitalise on and some things that probably need updating.

Gusheh says although the apartments should be made more comfortable, for example, she would choose to keep their original materiality. "In the '50s, there was a desire to achieve a timeless look,"

MORE ROOM FOR THE VIEW

When architect Christopher Polly was called in to renovate an apartment in a building by Ancher Mortlock and Murray at Darling Point, he tried to make the most of the unit's character.

One of three penthouses added in 1960, after the rest of the building, the apartment had a slightly awkward plan: long and roughly L-shaped. It was perfectly oriented for outlook and aspect, though, and had big expanses of glass and a deck facing north-east over the harbour.

"I looked at a lot of high-rises with beautiful views out to the heads," says owner Sue-Ella Prodonovich.

"Here you can hear the view! You hear people chatting as they kayak." Polly says the most restricting aspects of the unit were the service areas. "They were quite small and based on '50s planning," he says.

The kitchen was constrained by a column but it was too expensive to remove, so he designed around it. The original kitchen faced north but amazingly had an extractor fan filling up its only window. Polly removed the fan and replaced this wall with one large window and a door. Because the plumbing could not be changed, he positioned the new extractor fan beside the column and ran it into a service riser.

This central service riser was useful, Polly says. He thickened the



Open-minded... (clockwise from above) Sue-Ella Prodonovich at her Darling Point apartment; the building's exterior; the new, adjustable louvres on the deck; the deck and the spectacular views. Photos: Sahlan Hayes, Brett Boardman



wall against the riser and was able to conceal a fridge and storage.

He also opened up the kitchen to the terrace and dining room. He reinvigorated the exposed deck too,



introducing adjustable louvres and adding a barbecue.

The renovation, which involved significant structural work with poor access, cost about \$450,000.

"Kitchens tend to be tight spaces, disconnected from the more social areas of apartments," he says. "Where possible, renovators are inclined to knock out internal kitchen walls to enhance spatial connections."

Victoria Judge, of Smart Design Studio, who recently renovated a '50s Darling Point unit designed by Aaron Bolot – known for his curved building on Macleay Street – says the unit had the characteristic good bones but needed tidying up.

Like the Potts Point building, this apartment had a curved plan and Judge sought to complement this.

She opened up the kitchen to the living room, so giving it a harbour view and making both rooms feel

more spacious. She also designed a curved kitchen bench and bulkhead (for airconditioning) and added ray-like strips of lighting to the living room ceiling, emphasising the radial plan.

Judge used the best formula for anyone seeking to renovate a '50s or '60s apartment: take advantage of its best qualities and carefully redress its drawbacks.

Ultimately, though, when you add up the positives, there may not be as much change needed as initially thought.

Homes in the Sky: Apartment Living in Australia, by Caroline Butler-Bowdon and Charles Pickett, is a Historic Houses Trust publication.