

# Rickard Studio

*by Bruce Rickard*

Two reflections – by Lollie Barr, and Peter Lonergan and Hugo Chan – capture the story of Rickard Studio, a home shaped by a lineage of thoughtful design by eminent Sydney architects Ian McKay and Bruce Rickard.

*Photography by Brett Boardman*

REVISITED

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01 Carefully sited on a sandstone escarpment, Rickard Studio is a synthesis of architecture and nature. Artwork: Stephen Coburn.

02 Both sons of eminent Australian architects, Sam Rickard and David McKay developed a lifelong friendship.

03 The original kitchen joinery designed by Bruce Rickard is a testament to his timeless design sensibility.

Words by  
Lollie Barr

Dematerializing back into a sandstone escarpment in Sydney's Woolloomooloo like an optical illusion sits the last home and office of revered architect Bruce Rickard. After Bruce's death in 2010, his son Sam Rickard bought the property, now known as Rickard Studio, from the family trust and added his own design aesthetic, garnered as an award-winning production designer in the film industry and as an interior designer.

Ascending the steel staircase and entering into the light-infused, miraculously spacious 100-square-metre one-bedroom studio, you immediately sense Bruce's emotional resonance. The fusing of the natural world with organic materials and the interplay of indoor and outdoor create a home that feels distinctively contemporary, despite it having been designed 45 years ago.

Not only is Rickard Studio the last in the lineage of homes designed by Rickard, but its conception also illustrates the tight concentric circles that ringed the architects of the Sydney School, their projects, their homes and their families.

During the sixties, this influential group of architects flouted the principles of modernism determined by the Bauhaus, ultimately creating an Australian branch of organic materialism. In turn, they came to shape the way Australians related architecturally to our unique natural environment. Bruce was a central figure in the Sydney School, counting artist Brett Whiteley and architects Peter Muller, Harry Seidler and Ian McKay among his friends.

Ian and Bruce were close confidants, sharing a healthy respect for the visionary architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright (as well as an office space during the seventies) that creatively charged the Sydney School movement. The pair were also neighbours in self-designed homes. Continuing the family ties, Sam Rickard is lifelong friends with Ian's son David McKay, an artist and an award-winning production designer.

It transpires that Bruce and Ian both had a hand in the design of Rickard Studio, making it a unique collaboration that would eventually come to include Sam Rickard's contribution.

The Rickard Studio story started in 1999, when Sam discovered the property and convinced his father to purchase it. "Dad's practice favoured sloping bushland sites. Given the steepness of the Woolloomooloo property and how it seamlessly blended into the environment, I recognized the obvious synergy. However, at the time, it could have been described at best as a granny flat."



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04 Bruce Rickard transformed the property, which was originally a tiny office designed by Ian McKay, into a space for living, complete with three bedrooms, a kitchen and a bathroom.

05 Brush-box timber seating that hugs the perimeter of the living room embodies the importance of community in Bruce's personal life and practice.



After requesting plans from council, Bruce discovered that the structure had initially been designed by Ian McKay as a small office with a car park on the roof. Ian's design hallmarks remain evident in the form of the bespoke timber windows, which demonstrate his interest in Japanese architecture.

With his masterful sense of space, Bruce took the existing structure and extended the property to accommodate three bedrooms, a kitchen and a bathroom.

When Sam took possession, he wanted to retain the integrity of his father's design. "All of my father's projects are designed for people and for socializing. I wanted to honour that," he says. "Dad would host legendary long lunches and dinners at the house with his large circle of friends that included architects, artists, writers and film industry people."

Bruce's conviviality is evident in the interchange between inside and outside spaces, as demonstrated by the cantilevered seating in brush-box timber that edges the perimeter of the kitchen and the living room. "Dad loved creating spaces for people to meet. I have wonderful

memories of people sitting along the bench at parties. Then you'd have a group sitting at the kitchen bar, which relates to the living room, where you'd find a couple of people in deep discussion."

Sam also reconfigured the space, opting for fewer but ultimately much larger rooms. "I converted the three-bedroom home into a one-bedroom house with a study. I kept my father's kitchen as it was. It's such a timeless design that, [even] after 20 years, it didn't need updating."

Sam then spent five years deep in landscaping, construction and design. However, at the end of 2019, he decided to sell the property. "Living in a property explicitly designed for your family comes with a deep sense of home and security. Yet this home, in some sense, was never really my place; it was Dad's. His presence sometimes felt like a ghost," recalls Sam. "When I signed the contract to sell, it felt as if I was losing a big part of myself and losing my father all over again. However, I needed to move on with my own life. It feels like the end of an era. Or rather, a bookend to one era and the start of a new one." ©



06 Timber-framed doors retained from the building's first incarnation tempt occupants into the sunny courtyard.

07 The open living room contrasts with the dwelling's more private areas, including the bedroom, which is tucked against a sandstone niche.



Words by  
Peter Lonergan and Hugo Chan

What is the essence of a home at its most fundamental level, if not a sanctuary into which we can retreat from the chaos of modernity to seek tranquillity and refuge? For some, the idea of such peace may conjure up imagery of white sandy beaches and vast expansive oceans, dense forests of foliage or unspoiled snow-capped mountains. For architect Bruce Rickard, however, peace was found not in an escape from the city but rather in architecture as an abstraction of nature, integrated holistically and honestly with its surrounding environment. At Rickard Studio in Sydney's Woolloomooloo, home is a meticulously placed horizontal plane set seamlessly into a crevice above a sandstone escarpment, commanding views over the surrounding bush, the city and the harbour beyond. At once, you are situated within the very heart of Sydney and yet transported away from it. Detached but connected. Isolated but never alone. An integral part of the urban but also an inseparable part of the natural.

Rickard Studio is a hidden jewel that reveals Bruce's lifetime refinement of his personal philosophy of architecture into a highly precise art. This was Bruce's last studio, his last salon and his home for his last decade; a lively gathering place full of life and laughter. The story of the house's presence on the street is just as personal and coincidental as many of Bruce's most profound works. The site, purchased almost by chance in 1999, was a remnant from an adjoining 1970s project by none other than Ian McKay, Bruce's lifelong friend and confidant. In such a personally emotional and potent location, Bruce was able to synthesize the energy, history and intent of the site, transforming it into a pristine encapsulation of his passion in the practice of architecture.

The journey to Rickard Studio is a tantalizing procession from the mundane to the urbane. We find ourselves hard up against the rough sandstone cliff, ascending an unassuming open-tread staircase, manoeuvring through wild foliage and winding our way up toward a humbly recessed,

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08 Two decades after its construction, the house is enveloped in a plume of lush subtropical vegetation.

09 Visitors to Rickard Studio ascend a steel staircase from street-level through willful vines and unruly grasses to the home's main entrance.

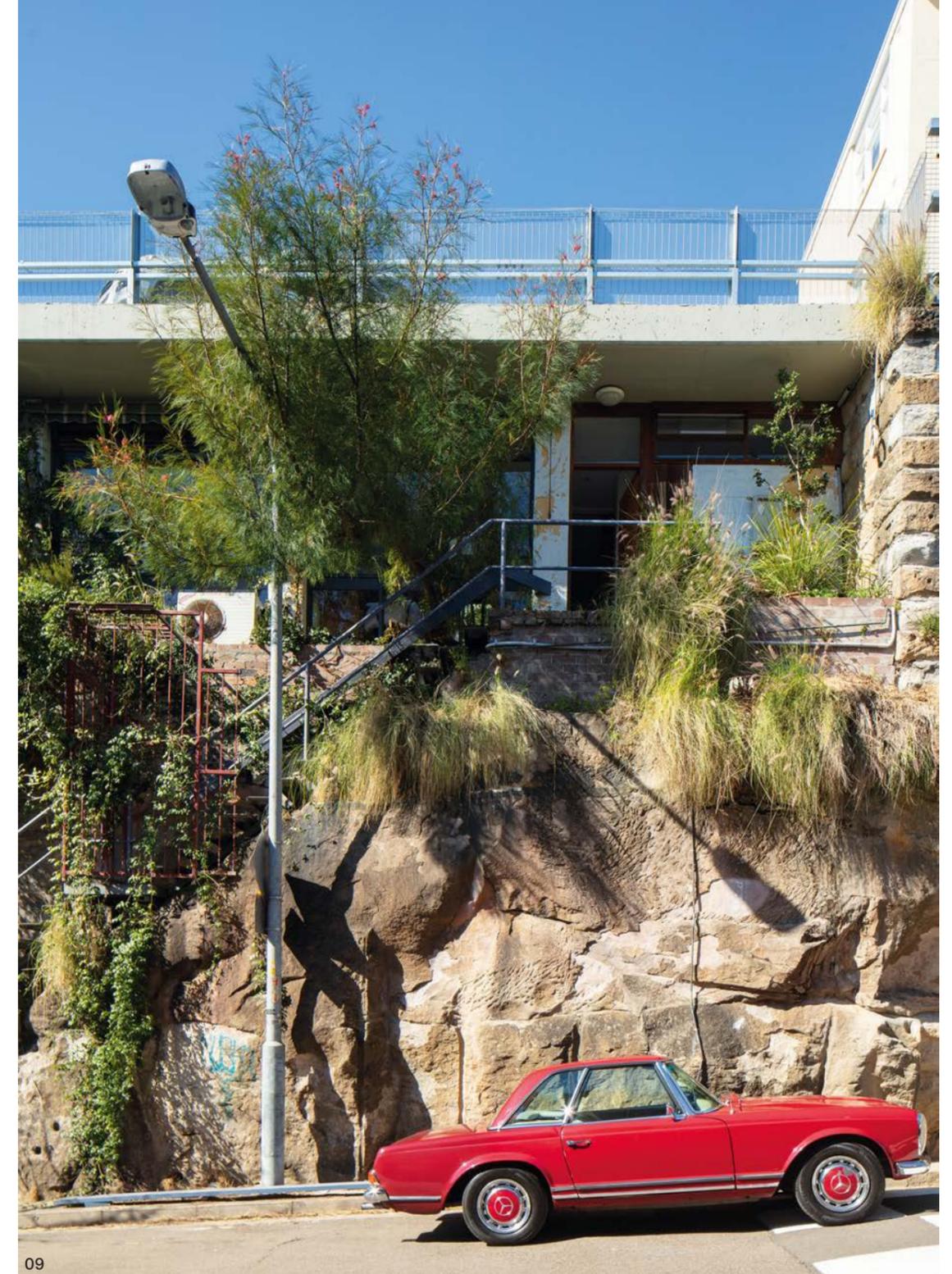


virtually invisible timber porch. At the top of this escarpment, Bruce asks you to pause and reflect, not only on the seemingly perilous staircase you just walked up, but also on the majesty of Woolloomooloo behind you, which extends out toward the now-visible Sydney Harbour.

Crossing the threshold, one cannot help but feel a sense of warmth and of continuity with the natural environment. Like so many of Bruce's now famous houses, from the Rickard I House (1959) to the Curry-Lloyd House (1985), the richness of timber is used liberally, framing your view and guiding you through the almost comically simple floorplan into the primary living space. The house expresses a formal thinness, allowing its social life to expand and stretch within a previously confined cavernous space. The kitchen is strategically located in one corner, half-contained in the living room and half-extended into the courtyard adjacent, bridging this threshold and staying true to Bruce's belief that inhabitation is a constant dialogue between an interior and an exterior experience. Looking out toward the north, we find views of the city and harbour beyond captured effortlessly, the scenes occasionally interrupted by wild flora in the foreground reminding us of the crevice we are standing in. Here, in the central living space, we are at once protected by the home and yet open to the vast expanse of urban wilderness beyond.

Age has only served to enhance and enliven the experience of the house. Wild Australian flora now blooms in its full glory, adding momentary dashes of green to the cool yellows and creams of the sandstone courtyard. The timber doors and windows have acquired a naturally richer and darker patina. This house has certainly not been kept as a jealously guarded, precious artefact. Rather, it exists precisely as a home should always be: like a public square, a social refuge in which family and friends gather, dine and laugh. The house strikes the perfect balance between civic and natural, interior and exterior, public and private.

After almost two decades of ownership by the Rickard family, Rickard Studio now begins its new chapter, with new owners and new stories to be lived. And yet, at its heart will be the ever-present acknowledgement that architecture is a social act, a setting for the theatre of life to be played out beautifully, joyfully and passionately, exactly as Bruce Rickard lived and exactly as he demanded of his life in architecture. ©



Architect  
Ian McKay and  
Bruce Rickard

Project team  
Ian McKay, Bruce Rickard,  
Sam Rickard