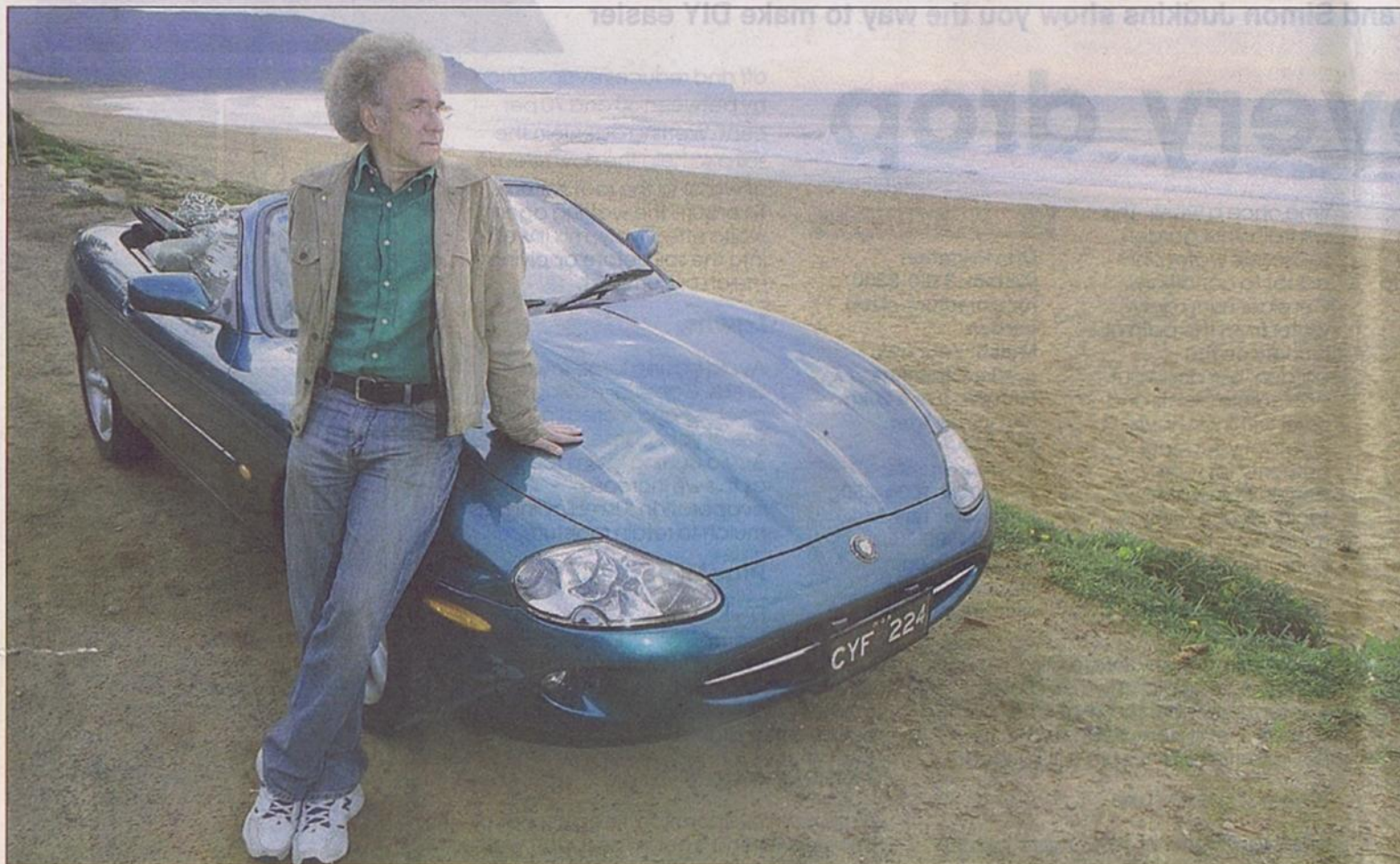


Designer's steep



The successful business of building designer Peter Downes is based around northern beaches homes.

Picture: MARTIN HUNTER TSB08008

Amanda Davey

BORN and bred in Sydney's west, building designer Peter Downes says he developed a love for the coastal lifestyle when as a young boy he would spend his summer holidays on the south coast with his parents.

So enamoured was he with the surfing culture that in the early 1970s he bought his then-new wife to Newport with the aim of buying land, building a house and starting a new life on the northern beaches.

However, as so often happens, sometimes the best-laid plans do not see the light of day and it was not until many decades

later that he was able to realise his dream.

Hampering his efforts to buy into the area at the time was a distinct lack of support from the banks, which were unwilling to lend money on the only type of site Mr Downes could afford; a steep slope overlooking the beach.

Ironically, these same sites are now worth more than \$2 million, but 35-plus years ago it was not uncommon for banks to refuse mortgages on the sloping sites due to geo-technical risks.

Disillusioned and frustrated at not being able to borrow just \$10,000 to buy land, Mr Downes finally upped and left the northern beaches, settling in

Campbelltown - which made his wife happy, but not him.

"I was absolutely gobsmacked by the area (Newport) and even today it blows me away," he said

"I could never get it out of my system."

One wife on and a decade later, he came back to the beaches in 1983, bought a fibro shack, renovated it over five years while working full-time as a mining engineer and somehow managed to make a name for himself in local circles as a building designer.

"I had been a leading project draftsman and site manager when I was in the mining industry,

but I started to get requests from neighbours to do up their houses. I established my own business in Manly Vale doing bottom-of-the-market stuff like decks and minor renovations, until some years later when a friend bought a block at Bilgola Beach and asked me to design a house to maximise the site," he said.

"That was in 1983 and I've been creating homes ever since."

With numerous design awards under his belt, Mr Downes now specialises in designing homes for steep slopes, citing four major changes that have occurred since the early days to enable him to do so.

"The first major change since

the 1970s is improved awareness of geo-technical, civil and structural engineering issues," he said.

"Pittwater Council's recently upgraded Landslip Hazard Policy was originally instigated by Warringah Council in response to numerous houses sliding down the slope in the early '70s.

"Since the introduction of that policy, a geo-tech report has been mandatory on any site considered to be at risk.

"The geo-tech engineer is obliged to thoroughly analyse all risks associated with the site, including hazards further up the slope such as unstable land and boulders, and failing retaining walls."

"Once the project has been completed, the site is often much more stable than it was in its natural state."

Mr Downes added that increased land values had also contributed to the dramatic change of heart from both lenders and borrowers alike, justifying the extra building costs.

From \$10,000-\$15,000 in the early '70s to several million dollars today, these sites often boast some of the most spectacular views in Sydney, so it's hardly surprising that we now pay a premium for what is considered prime real estate.

Then there is the scarcity of land issue, which has also changed the way sloping sites are viewed with demand far outweighing supply.

"The northern beaches has been recognised as one of the best places on the planet to live, and the amount of land available is geographically limited," Mr Downes said.

"Changing demographics and work practices mean more people do not have to commute to the city, so the distance from the CBD is much less of an inhibiting factor."

learning

curve

"Predictably, the flat or moderately sloping sites were used up first so with time, the only available vacant sites are the previously unwanted steep ones."

And the fourth major change to the way we now regard available land, according to Mr Downes, is the revolution in Australian residential architecture.

The past couple of decades have seen a general trend away from the brick-and-tile mentality and cold-climate architecture that resulted from our history of colonisation to houses that suit the beaches' semi-tropical climate with its informal lifestyle and iconic building materials, such as corrugated iron and weatherboard.

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“The trend towards light-weight construction suits steep sites perfectly as the houses can be designed to be supported on strategically-placed posts on concrete piers, rather than on the continuous and expensive footings needed for masonry”

for masonry, which results in major cost savings."

While Mr Downes is energised by today's coastal architectural styles, his only gripe right now is the impractical size of homes in the area.

"We are still doing houses that are unnecessarily big and I guess that is for resale value," he said.

"But I predict that there will be a move away from these oversized homes to something more manageable for most families."