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Sydney's ghost mansions

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The lights are on, but nobody's home

They rank as some of the most expensive and lavish homes in the world, occupying the highest priced real **estate** in this city, but these vast trophy homes lie unsettlingly silent - welcome to the eerie world of Sydney's ghost mansions.

Some of Sydney's most extraordinary homes have spent years in dormancy, their wealthy owners opting to live in their "other" homes, often dotted around the world.

Among the most impressive ghost mansions remains the vast Packer pile in Vaucluse. The edifice has been compared to everything from a shopping centre (Erica Packer) to a mausoleum (a neighbour).

Worth at least \$100 million, the largely subterranean palazzo has remained practically untouched since its intended occupants, James and Erica Packer, ended their seven-year marriage a year ago.

Instead, neighbours report it is the sound of leaf blowers and the footsteps of security guards patrolling the huge 3334 square metre home and grounds that can be heard these days, with neither of the Packers nor their three young children, whom much of the house was specifically designed around, choosing to live there.

Those same neighbours endured 18 months of construction, including massive excavation works that made the **site** resemble an open-cut mine, the cavernous hole filled with a winter garden, wellness room, gym, sauna, a **commercial** kitchen, expansive living quarters for staff, 22-seat cinema, a room described as a "dance hall" and a 13-car, soundproof garage with living areas spread over six levels.

Also having sat unlivid in for years is Altona, its former owners Deke and Eve Miskin opting for the warmer climes of Byron Bay. The pile was **sold** last year for \$52 million to Chaimovich Investments Pty Ltd, whose sole director and shareholder is Xiuzhen Ding, a 75-year-old born in **China** who lives in Melbourne.

Aside from a random photoshoot, neighbours say there has been no life at the **property** since it changed hands, and when PS last visited Altona, the designer furniture was covered in dust protectors.

Trucking magnate Lindsay Fox spent millions renovating the historic Boomerang mansion in Elizabeth Bay after paying \$21 million for it in 2005. But for all the effort, and controversy, considering he had not sought council approval before some of the work commenced, Fox has barely spent a night there. Instead Boomerang has become something of a function centre rather than a living, breathing family home.

Over in Point Piper, Mandalay sits empty, and is on the market with a price tag around the \$60 million mark. The house was bought by William Webb, a former tobacco **company** boss, and his wife Marijke, in 2004 for \$20 million. The Webbs reside in Melbourne, with Mandalay barely occupied for the past decade.

The Barford **estate** in Bellevue Hill also sits empty. Owner Ian Joye has had the place for 25 years but these days Hawaii is home. With an asking price of \$60 million, Barford is more of a celebrity holiday home for the likes of Will Smith and Jay Z.

Former headhunting queen Julia Ross moved out of her Italianate mega mansion Villa del Mare in Point Piper years ago, having put the place - famous for its remote-controlled billiard table that sank into the floor - on the market for \$40 million. Yet to find a buyer, Ross lives in Europe.

As one real **estate** agent told PS: "Point Piper, Vacluse and Bellevue Hill are practically ghost towns ... there are so many trophy homes sitting empty it's almost incomprehensible. The lights might be on, but ... there's most definitely no one home."

Sydney flocks to Paris for fashion frolics

There were a few familiar faces in the crowds this week in Paris for the haute couture fashion shows.

Sydney is home to several women who would be considered aficionados of this most elite world of fashion. In fact, they are such good customers, the various fashion houses shout them a luxurious trip to Paris to see the collections first hand.

Eastern suburbs decorator Blainey North was a guest at Giorgio Armani's Prive collection show, along with racing royalty Francesca Cumani, who was hosted along with her Scone-raised fiancé, polo player Rob Archibald, who was once voted by Vanity Fair magazine as one of the world's sexiest polo players. Cumani and Archibald are preparing for their wedding in Tuscany in August.

Word around Paris suggested Cumani will be wearing a tailor-made Armani wedding dress on her big day. Armani is known for creating such gowns for favoured clients, including Danielle Spencer when she married Russell Crowe.

Also spotted in Paris was Ashley Dawson-Damer, along with Erica Packer, no doubt making a decent dent on her \$100 million divorce settlement from James Packer. Erica has a penchant for Dior gowns, including the one worth \$50,000 she wore on the cover of Vogue Australia earlier this year, which was completely see-through.

Baz Luhrmann and Catherine Martin turned up to see Karl Lagerfeld's show for Chanel, while Sydney designer Anna Plunkett, the pink-haired half of kooky local label Romance Was Born, was also at Kaiser Karl's show.

It may not look it to the untrained eye, but haute couture gowns take teams of seamstresses hundreds of hours to construct. It's not uncommon for such gowns to sell for the same price as a bedsit in Elizabeth Bay.

NO WORDS FROM MOSS ON ASSAULT

Author and former model Tara Moss has refused to shed any further light on her alleged assault near Hyde **Park** this week. After alerting her tens of thousands of social media followers on Tuesday with claims that she was "bruising up" following the mysterious attack, the leggy beauty, who is in the midst of the publicity trail to promote her latest book, *The Fictional Woman*, assured PS she was "fine" but was adamant there was nothing further to add. Moss opted not to respond to specific questions about the incident or the injuries - minor or otherwise - she says she sustained, despite the significant public reaction to her alarming status updates.

JONES OFF TO SEA FOR PEACE AND QUIET

Clearly Alan Jones would be a different kind of guest to host on your superyacht than Miranda Kerr - for starters, he probably prefers a one-piece over a bikini. But who could blame the radio presenter for wanting a few days' peace and quiet aboard James Packer's supertinnie the Arctic P? PS hears one of the reasons Jones has decamped to the European summer during the radio ratings break is because his neighbour at the dress-circle Bennelong Apartments is undergoing renovations - of the loud jackhammer variety.

FEARS FOR RISING STAR CORR

Friends of actor Ryan Corr have expressed concerns for the emerging star since it was revealed he had been charged by police who allegedly found him smoking heroin in a Bondi laneway. Corr, who has starred in *Packed to the Rafters*, most recently worked with Russell Crowe in *The Water Diviner*. On a set recently Corr was filming a fight scene that one observer described as "really taking it to the edge . . . sometimes what makes people a brilliant actor is what causes their demons". Corr's matter is due in Waverley Court on September 2.

MORE CRUMBS AT PLANET CAKE

Self-anointed Sydney "cake queen" Paris Cutler has seen her empire placed into administration for the second time in two years, with several long-time staff complaining they are owed tens of thousands of dollars in unpaid superannuation entitlements. Cutler, who baked Nicole Kidman's wedding cake and has gone on to become something of a celebrity in her own right, featured in PS in February last year when she was last in financial hot water, facing debts of \$500,000 with her **company** placed in the hands of administrators on Christmas Eve. Burton Glenn Allen has been

appointed administrator, the same **firm** brought in 18 months ago when a new entity was registered and which revealed it intended to honour all existing contracts. Time will

tell if Cutler manages to see her cake empire "rise" again.

Molly finally pens tell-all memoir

Even before he fell off his roof, Australian rock'n'roll personality Molly Meldrum was not known for being the most succinct storyteller.

But even PS was pleased to hear that, after spending about 30 years writing his memoirs, Meldrum's first autobiography will finally be published in November.

It was reported in 1997 that the hatted guru was penning a tell-all expose on the music industry with rock journo Jeff Jenkins. But it never materialised.

Then, in 2000, Meldrum revealed he had been working on his autobiography for 15 years.

While PS has no clue as to what happened to the advance he was reportedly paid by Random House, this column can faithfully report that Meldrum's book is now finished and in the hands of rival publishing house Allen & Unwin.

John Farnham has written the foreword of the book, titled *The Never Ever Ending Story*, which begins with Meldrum falling off his roof just before Christmas 2011 and then focuses on the Countdown years from 1974 to 1987.

In the book, Meldrum writes: "You could probably write a book about the writing of this book. When the book started, Michael Jackson was at No.1 with *Don't Stop 'Til You Get Enough*, Madonna had just landed a job with the Patrick (Born To Be Alive) Hernandez Review, Malcolm Fraser was prime minister and Daniel Johns from Silverchair was yet to celebrate his first birthday."

Meldrum includes stories about Kylie Minogue, Deborah Harry, Iggy Pop, Jimmy Barnes, Patti Mostyn, John Mellencamp, Brian Mannix, John Paul Young, Daryl Somers, Joe Dolce, Plastic Bertrand, Nick Rhodes, Elton John, Madonna, Michael Jackson, Cold Chisel, Abba, Sherbet, Stevie Nicks and Fleetwood Mac, INXS and many others. There's even a lengthy account about brawling with Sid Vicious and Johnny Rotten during a blackout in a London pub after they refused to do an interview. Meldrum was furious, having cancelled a flight for the interview and putting at risk an interview with Prince Charles he had scheduled in Australia.

Miraculously, Meldrum made it back in time to interview the Prince on Countdown, which went on to make Australian television history.

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