

MY HOUSING CAREER with

Col James and Mick Mundine

On the 23rd of October 2009, the Australasian Housing Institute held a special ceremony to honour the housing achievements of two of its members and celebrate their unique 35-year partnership.

Colin James AM, Director of the IB Fell Housing Research Centre at the University of Sydney, and Michael Mundine, CEO of the Aboriginal Housing Company (AHC), were presented lifetime achievement awards at a special ceremony by Her Excellency, Governor Marie Bashir. Tributes to two of Sydney's most prominent Aboriginal rights activists and social housing advocates were given at the Redfern Community Centre, in the heart of inner-Sydney's Aboriginal community known as the Block.

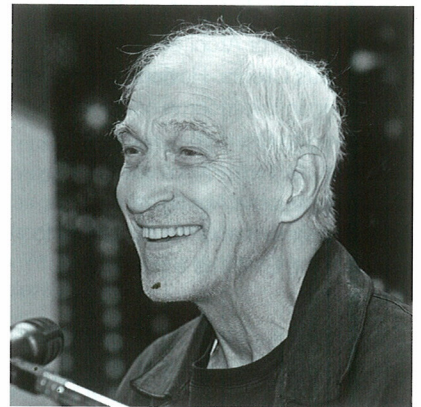
The Institute's CEO, Joan Ferguson, said both men had made incalculable contributions to housing Indigenous people, the homeless, squatters and other disadvantaged groups over the past four decades. She said they had both been central to establishing, running and fighting the battles of Redfern's Aboriginal Housing Company (AHC) – the first housing collective in Australia. "We believe their brand of principled activism is necessary for a healthy housing system," Ms Ferguson said.

"Col James has recently retired from his teaching position at the university and we wanted to do something special to recognise the enormous amounts of time and energy he has given to social housing causes over the years," she said. "And of course there can

be no overstating Mick Mundine's tireless leadership and work on behalf of Redfern's Aboriginal community. Their unique 35-year partnership on the Block is a cause of inspiration and celebration."

Col James also became the inaugural recipient of a Lifetime Membership of the Institute. The architect, teacher, activist and community builder recently left his 40-year career as Senior Lecturer and Coordinator of Housing Studies at the Faculty of Architecture at the University of Sydney. That career began with studies at Sydney Technical College and the University of NSW, from which he proceeded to a scholarship at Harvard where he gained his Master's in Architecture.

While at Harvard, Col was especially influenced by the Team Ten Primer – a group of international architects who proclaimed that architecture should serve the needs of the poor, not the wealthy. Returning to Australia in the



Col James



Mick Mundine



The award recipients with Her Excellency Governor Marie Bashir, relatives, friends and supporters.

mid-60s, he established the Archanon organisation – or Architecture for the Anonymous Clients. Having committed to working in low-income housing, Col moved to Darlington, not far from the Block, and joined not only Sydney University, but the Aboriginal civil rights movement and the campaign to establish the Block as a grass-roots community.

He was soon involved in the struggle to set up the AHC, which succeeded in 1973 with support from the Whitlam government. Col and his cohort of university students were then able to set to work with the local community on the design and construction of appropriate housing. Since then he has been deeply involved in other high-profile community campaigns, including the fight to keep public housing in Woolloomooloo and the Broadway squatters. The latter has led to the CRASH (Construction Industry Relief and Assistance for Sydney's Homeless) initiative, which seeks to engage the private sector property industry in supporting homeless persons with medium-term shelter in vacant buildings in Sydney city.

Col James is known as one of Australia's most energetic thinkers and innovators in housing and urban planning. He has published on, proposed or implemented a range of housing designs and tenure models over the decades. His work has had a major focus on low-cost and sustainable building (including houses made of cardboard!). Col was also one of the founding members of the Australasian Housing Institute and has been an ardent promoter of professional standards and recognition for housing people ever since. His wide-ranging work has previously been recognised with:

- a Member of the Order of Australia for services to architecture and to the community in 1994
- the President's Award at the Royal Australian Institute of Architects' Awards for his contribution to the profession, to the academic world and to the cause of architecture in society in 2003
- the University of Sydney Alumni Award for Community Service in 2006.



Col James and Mick Mundine with fans from Darlington Public School.

He continues to serve as a key consultant to the AHC and has played a central role in developing the proposed master plan and 'superior housing' for the area, known as the Pemulwuy project.

Co-incidentally, Michael Mundine arrived in Sydney in the same year that Col James returned from Harvard. Born in Grafton, the self-described 'bloke from the bush' spent his early life roaming the missions up and down the NSW coast. He saw work in mines, cattle yards, corn and cotton fields – a world away from the inner-city urban landscape that would come to dominate most of his life.

Mick's new life began when he befriended the man he would come to call 'Uncle Charlie' – the late Charles Perkins. He soon found out how difficult it was in those days for Aboriginal

people to get proper housing in Sydney and joined the struggle for change. In 1974 Mick's brother was already working at the Aboriginal Housing Company and encouraged him to join – and thus Mick's fate was sealed.

He started out as a painter, working on the first batch of houses purchased by the company with the Whitlam government grant. He was soon promoted to foreman for all the building work on the Block; just a few years

later he got his first desk job when he was appointed as the company's office manager – and soon after the assets manager. In 1983, with the encouragement and support of the outgoing manager, the Board of Directors took a leap of faith in a still young Aboriginal man from the country and made him the Chief Executive Officer.

Since those times Mick has done everything from managing

property acquisitions, renovations and demolitions, to coaching the next crop of footy players, to personally evicting violent drug addicts. His status as a community leader and 'local legend' is highlighted by past and present directorships of such organisations as the Redfern Aboriginal Medical, Children's and Legal Services, the CDEP program and involvement in many non-Indigenous community groups.

Most recently Mick Mundine and Col James have led a mammoth struggle to implement the Aboriginal Housing Company's grand vision to renew and re-develop the Block – the Pemulwuy Project. Having obtained agreement from all the major parties and stakeholders they now move onto their next challenge – securing the finance to build the right housing for those in need.