

World's priciest home: O.C. designer creates a plan for \$500 million L.A. 'giga-mansion'

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Four years ago, Paul McClean was working out of his garage.

But his business outgrew that setting, and now the Irish-born home designer has an office in Orange's Old Towne, a staff of 10, two office dogs (Luna the German shepherd and Bruce the Chihuahua) and a reputation as one of the most talented creators of contemporary homes in Orange and Los Angeles counties.

Oh, and he also is designing a 104,000-square-foot "giga-mansion" in Bel Air that's a contender for most expensive home on the planet.

"The asking price will be \$500 million," mansion developer Nile Miami told Bloomberg News last spring.

McClean's path from Laguna Beach architectural assistant to designer of West Los Angeles trophy homes has been a steady progression fueled, colleagues and past clients say, by his eye for detail, his talent with pencil and paper, and his unflagging professionalism.

McClean said he never set out to produce what may be Southern California's biggest and ritziest mansion. He merely dreamed as a wee lad in Dublin of designing beautiful homes. And California was his mecca, since that's where three of his biggest heroes – Frank Lloyd Wright, Richard Neutra and Rudolph Schindler – were based.

"To me, L.A. is all about contemporary architecture. It always has been," McClean, 47, said during a recent interview at the one-room, 20-by-40-foot office he shares with his office manager and project managers.

"It's just great to design homes in such a fantastic climate and to take advantage of the ocean and city views," McClean said. "I got off the bus in California, and the first thing that struck me was the light. Our houses are all about light. Light and water."

The producer

McClean arrived in Laguna Beach soon after his 1994 graduation with an architecture degree from the Dublin Institute of Technology. He worked several jobs before eventually going to work for Horst Architects as a design assistant.

His work led him to make numerous presentations before Laguna's rigorous Design Review Board, where he earned a reputation for shepherding innovative projects through a complex approval process.

"He managed the very difficult task to design a home his clients wanted and follow the many rules, codes and design guidelines the city of Laguna Beach has for building (and) remodeling a house," said Ilse Lenschow, who sat on Laguna's DRB for 16 years. "He progressed ... because of his professional conduct, exceptional ability and talent."

"He could draw beautifully," added Laguna Beach architect Horst Noppenberger, who hired McClean. He "had a very strong hand when it came to pencil-on-paper sketching. ... He could capture the spirit of the building, the spirit of the place."

Soon, property owners began asking him to design their homes, leading McClean to strike out on his own. In 2000, he founded his own firm.

His business took off. After 15 or so years, he has designed 50 to 60 homes, he said. He's been so busy, he has postponed the last of eight tests he needs to pass to become a licensed U.S. architect. His firm, McClean Design, has a licensed architect on staff.

In 2008, his business began to move from Orange County to the hills above Los Angeles' Sunset Strip after a Laguna Beach client sought his services for a house on Blue Jay Way. It sold for \$10 million in 2009. That lofty price during the height of the recession generated more business. People figured he must be doing something right.

His clients included celebrities and luminaries such as Irish real estate investor Paddy McKillen, who commissioned McClean to design two homes in Laguna Beach, plus five others for himself and family members in Los Angeles.

The twins who accused Mark Zuckerberg of stealing their idea for Facebook, Tyler and Cameron Winklevoss, paid \$18 million for a McClean home on Tanager Way in 2012. Another home in Hollywood's Bird Streets sold for \$39 million.

Another luminary was Nile Niami, an actor and independent film producer known for "The Watcher" with Keanu Reeves, and "The Patriot" with Steven Seagal.

At some point, Niami went from movie maker to spec home builder. And in 2009, he hired McClean to design a home remodeling job in the hills above the Whiskey A Go Go. It later sold for \$8.25 million.

Eventually, Niami hired McClean to design at least six other homes. Then, the producer called on McClean one more time after buying a tear-down on a 4-acre lot in Bel Air, just west of Beverly Hills. This project would be McClean's biggest yet.

The One

McClean reacted in disbelief when Niami outlined his plans for the new Bel Air mansion, a palatial spread his team dubbed "The One."

Niami told Bloomberg News last spring the mansion "will have almost every amenity available in the world."

"We have a very specific client in mind," Niami told "Details" magazine late last year. "Someone who already has a \$100 million yacht and has seven houses all over the world."

The home's price tag of \$500 million would exceed Santa Ana's entire annual budget by \$23.5 million; it comes within \$96 million of Amazon's net earnings for all 2015. And it would shatter the current home sale record of \$301 million paid last fall for the newly built Chateau Luis XIV, a 50,000-square-foot palace set on 56 acres outside Paris.

Some experts say Niami's outsized asking price is merely a publicity stunt.

"It has as much chance of getting \$500 million as \$500 billion," said Los Angeles broker Bob Hurwitz, who sells luxury homes around the globe. "It's ridiculous. It's ludicrous, and everybody knows it's ludicrous. ... It's an ego thing. Every agent knows he's not selling for that number."

How much will it really fetch?

"Based on what it is, north of \$100 million," Hurwitz said. "It could be the greatest white elephant of all time. ... I think (it's sale price) could easily set a U.S. record. I don't think a world record."

But Hilton & Hyland broker Linda May said she fully expects the property's price to top \$301 million.

"It truly is the most desirable and stunning view site," May said.

Now about halfway built, the home towers above Bel Air's Stradella Road the way the Getty museum towers above the 405. A long, curving concrete structure covers the entire lot.

McClellan said it's hard to pin down exact dimensions. But the compound's main house has roughly 74,000 square feet. A guest house, staff quarters and garage make up the balance of the compound.

The home will have 360-degree views from the Santa Monica Mountains to downtown Los Angeles and, on clear days, the shimmering blue Pacific to the west.

A promotional video shows two-story-high spaces, glass walls, decks and a clear-walled pool where swimmers look like they're in an aquarium.

Proposed features include a 5,000-square-foot master suite, a 30-car gallery, a 45-seat IMAX theater, a Monaco style casino and nightclub, a four-lane bowling alley, and a lounge surrounded by tanks filled with wriggling, iridescent jelly fish.

The grounds include four swimming pools, a tennis court and a 20,000-square-foot lawn using synthetic turf.

There's also a gym, a hair and nail salon, a massage room, a water treatment room, a billiards room, a cigar lounge, and outdoor sitting pods that appear to float in a pool at the base of a two-story waterfall.

"It keeps changing. We keep trying to find new things," McClellan said.

Niami's costs haven't been disclosed.

But public records show the assessed value of the property at \$56 million the year after Niami bought it in December 2012, possibly reflecting his approximate purchase price. Average homes of this caliber cost at least \$1,000 per square foot to build, McClellan said, putting total construction costs over \$100 million, not counting furnishings.

"If it sold for \$100 million, ... (Niami) probably would have a terrible loss," he said. "The reality is nobody needs one of these homes. If someone wants to build one of these homes, there has to be an emotional connection. You have to want it."

Walls of glass

Normally, McClellan's homes feature walls of glass that can disappear, marble and clean lines designed to maximize views.

"That's always been the tradition, going back to the 1920s," McClellan said.

McClellan's houses seem to float, said real estate agent Bob Chapman, a former member of Laguna's Design Review Board and Planning Commission. "And because he uses so much glass, he can have curved walls and angled walls. ... He has a tendency to use natural materials, and that softens the look."

"There's a simplicity and often a restraint to his work that I find very appealing," added Noppenberger, his former boss. "His projects are beautifully sited to take advantage of outdoor living and the outdoor views."

Were it not for McClellan's skill in getting their plans approved, Mike and Johanna Ellis might never have built their 3,500-square-foot hillside house in Laguna's Temple Hill neighborhood seven years ago. The review process was so difficult they almost bailed several times. Neighbors got into the act, with some opposed to having the garage at the top of the property and others opposed to a garage at the lower end.

But McClellan, said Johanna Ellis, 56, "was amazing."

"He brought everybody together and made it happen. ... He's a very charming man. He's not like one of these slick salesman you don't trust. He's very authentic."

Hurwitz, who founded the Hurwitz James Co. brokerage in Beverly Hills, complained that contemporary homes are becoming so dominant in his area – all with disappearing glass walls and infinity-edge pools – that soon "there's going to be a plethora" of them.

Still, McClellan is well regarded, he said.

"His stuff's beautiful. ... He's definitely the guy to be designing these big houses."

Making a plan

Over half the homes McClean designs are 8,000 square feet or bigger. About 40 percent are between 4,000 and 8,000 square feet.

Still, a 100,000-square-foot home is a stretch, even for him.

“There are very few homes this size,” McClean said. “We had to think of it in a different manner than other homes. We looked at hotels. We even looked at palaces because that’s what this is, a modern-day palace.”

McClean began the process by looking for how to maximize the lot, which is longer than two football fields placed end-to-end. Gardens, pools and the house itself need to sit just so – to give the home a sense of direction. Where is the best view? How do you accommodate parking? Where does the light come from?

“You analyze that,” McClean said. “Once we’ve got that, we try to instill it with a sense of architecture and a sense of drama. Homes have to elicit an emotional response from people.”

McClean says he spent a lot of time sitting at his desk thinking, imagining. He pondered the design during long walks, on the treadmill, in the shower.

“I spend a lot of time trying to absorb the constraints and let it ruminate around in my half-empty brain,” he said. “And then, I start sketching.”

There are so many extras he needed to take into account. Like commercial kitchens. And a separate room just for flowers.

When you run a mansion this big, “you don’t just go to a shop and buy flowers. You need the equivalent of a florist’s shop coming in a truck,” he said.

The mansion will have about 20 bedrooms and 30 bathrooms, nine of which are staff bathrooms.

“We have a full security center that comes straight from the Death Star,” McClean said. “We have to have secondary corridors so staff can get around. The master bedroom alone is like a large home.”

And a mansion this size “has to be able to entertain on a grand scale. Otherwise, why would you need it?” McClean said.

Too big

Not everyone finds *The One* to be compelling. A San Diego architect recently told former boss Noppenberger she found it perverse to design a house that size.

“Many architects would be conflicted whether or not it erodes the community fabric,” Noppenberger said. “What does it do to the neighborhood, to the pattern of development, the quality of life?”

Residents of celebrity-rich Bel Air have banded together to protest an excess of mega-mansion construction under way. And *The One* was the catalyst, driving residents to form the new Bel Air Homeowners Alliance, said alliance President Fredric Rosen, former Ticketmaster CEO.

Neighbors were upset, for example, that the home’s developer scraped almost 49,000 cubic yards of dirt off the top of the property, requiring nearly 5,000 truckloads to haul it away.

“It’s clearly out of scale. It’s two times (the size of) the White House,” Rosen said. “When you’re building 95,000 to 100,000 square feet, it’s a commercial development – in a residential neighborhood. You’re talking about the top of the community. There’s a discotheque up there, and there will be lots of cars. There’s no remediation for noise. There’s no remediation for traffic. There’s no common sense for the project.”

“What’s to stop a project like that from having 1,000 people show up for a party?”

None of this controversy has harmed McClean’s reputation, however.

Former Laguna Design Review Board member Steve Kawatani called McClean one of the top architectural designers to come to Laguna. In a city filled with architects, McClean’s work was “so fresh,” the spaces he created “full of light.”

He's followed McClean's career from Laguna to Los Angeles, even introducing McClean to his in-laws after the couple lost their home in Laguna's 2005 Bluebird Canyon landslide. But few of McClean's projects are in Laguna anymore.

"Laguna's loss is Los Angeles' gain," Kawaratani said. "He's a very hot commodity."

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