

Iwan Sunito grew up in a house on stilts in Borneo. Today, as the local pioneer of resort-style apartments, he has two passions: God and real estate.

STORY BY Sue Williams

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IT'S SUNDAY morning and 800 people are flooding into a darkened Sydney CBD cinema. They jostle their way to stand at the front by the stage, and to fill the closest seats as a man's face is flashed on to the massive screen. He's smiling down on them; he looks benign, almost saintly. A cheer goes up in the auditorium.

After a few moments, the image gives way to a two-minute countdown and brightly coloured lights strobe the theatre as the audience chants excitedly along with it, "FIVE...FOUR...THREE...TWO..."

Then the place explodes into pounding rock music played at full throbbing volume, lights blaze on over the stage to reveal a six-person band with five singers, and the whole movie theatre erupts into a flurry of dancing, singing and a chorus of "Thank you, Jesus!"

The man whose face we have just seen in glorious close-up is standing at the front, swaying in time to the music as people reach over to shake his hand. Later he will stride across the stage talking about his life, his faith, his travels and his success - and telling everyone that they, too, can make it, just like him.

The slim, quietly-spoken figure with dark hair in a careful comb-over is today one of Australia's biggest private property developers. And in a country where real estate has become a national obsession, perhaps it was only a matter of time before it became a religion, too.

Iwan Sunito, the co-founder and CEO of the Crown Group (which is unrelated to James Packer's Crown Resorts), has never been a man who has done things by halves. An intensely pious person, he decided 13 years ago to start his own Pentecostal church, the multicultural Sydney Christian Worship Centre.

"I'm not big into telling people what my faith is, but it's also a mentoring thing," he tells me, regarding the crowd with satisfaction. "Every Sunday, I see lives transformed and kids growing. My goal is to create leaders. I try to teach people [how to live] a more balanced life so they can develop their body, mind and spirit. The spirit is the most fragile thing but it's also the most important. Someone with a strong body and mind but a broken spirit will give up everything, but if your spirit is strong, you won't ever give up."

From a childhood spent in the jungles of Kalimantan, the Indonesian part of Borneo, to his arrival in Sydney at the age of 18 to continue his education, no one could have predicted what would become of Sunito. Few, even his close family, imagined this, though: at age 50, he is the head of a massive Australian development company with offices in Singapore and Indonesia and a pipeline of 4000 units worth around \$3 billion on completion.

He now plans to list Crown Group on stock exchanges in Australia and either Singapore, Hong Kong or Shanghai in 2018 to raise more than \$500 million for its next phase of expansion. He is also increasing his focus in serviced apartments, and in these days regularly talked about as a rival to Meriton's Harry Triguboff.

But Sunito's leap from obscurity to property magnate has given him a deep conviction that anything in life is achievable, the confidence to make that his mantra, and the fervour, both religious and secular, to pass it on. When, for example, he decided to write and self-publish a book about his life, *From Borneo to Bloomberg: A Comeback Story and 13 Principles for Success*, he included his own sayings quite unselfconsciously alongside those of Albert Einstein, Abraham Lincoln, Confucius, Henry Ford, Sun Tzu, Nelson Mandela, Winston Churchill and Steve Jobs. When the global financial crisis hit in 2007-08, he decided, counter-intuitively, to expand.

And when he launched his most ambitious apartment building to date, for southern Sydney's Green Square - Koichi Takada's architecturally daring Infinity, which Sunito hopes will one day be regarded with as much awe as the Opera House - he did so with an enormous, glitzy party of more than 2000 guests. Revellers included City of Sydney mayor Clover Moore and, looming over Sunito, model and celebrity Megan Gale.

"It was bigger than *Ben Hur*," he says with satisfaction. "There were still 1000 more who wanted to come. Just like Steve Jobs turned the computer into something fashionable, I wanted to make sure that it wasn't about bricks and mortar, but about statements of prestige and innovation. It was probably the biggest event that there'd ever been in the Australian property industry, and easily the most glamorous."

SUNITO CURRENTLY has three buildings under construction in Sydney: the 29-storey V by Crown in Parramatta; the 25-level Arc by Crown in the CBD; and Infinity. Waterfall, another Green Square development launching this year, will feature the highest water feature in the world (at 22 metres) to run down the side of a building.

His supporters praise his vision as a pioneer in Australia of the lifestyle-resort model of apartment buildings, good-quality units with expensive communal facilities like pools, gyms, yoga rooms, lush landscaping, barbecue areas and even piano rooms.

Sunito is also looking at opportunities in Melbourne and Brisbane, and in December signed off on a joint venture with a Melbourne developer for a project in the arts precinct between South Bank and St Kilda.

"That will be the next step in the expansion of Crown Group," Sunito says. "While we continue to see enormous potential in Sydney, Melbourne is carving its own place among the top international cities in the world and is highly regarded internationally for its liveability. We foresee a strong local demand for high-quality apartments with resort-style amenities in Melbourne."

"Iwan is an incredible person," says Chris Johnson,

CEO of developer lobby group Urban Taskforce Australia, which voted Sunito its 2015 Property Person of the Year. "Starting off in Borneo, where he lived in a house on stilts over the water, to studying architecture at the University of NSW, then having the vision to build up the Crown Group to the level it's got to, is pretty amazing. He's a risk-taker, too, in terms of his projects. He'll never do a lowest-common-denominator building; he's always determined to do something different and be ahead of the pack and invent new ways of making projects work. He's really helped elevate apartment living by providing world-class amenities."

THERE ARE others, however, who aren't quite so positive. One agent, who has asked not to be named, describes him as an extremely charismatic individual with a healthy ego who talks a good game but is hard to pin down on the detail. A former employee says he can be terribly demanding, and thinks nothing of calling her and others late at night and at any time on the weekend to divulge his latest thoughts on... just about anything.

A current employee, client relationship manager Kym Rogers, says that's simply standard for Crown Group employees. "If you email anyone at Crown Group at night or on weekends, they'll probably reply," she says. "That's just the difference between a private enterprise and a corporate. Crown Group is a mirror of Iwan's drive, passion and dream. Everyone who works here gets addicted to how unique the company is. Iwan challenges you all the time with his ideas, designs and outcomes and, when you say something is impossible, he says, 'Everything is possible.' He always focuses on the positive and never speaks in negatives. Ever."

A buyer of an apartment at one of his projects, the \$80 million Viking by Crown, also at Green Square, isn't a fan. Dennis Colquitt bought off the plan in September 2010, but was then horrified to discover a new development application submitted by the developer for a change in the 110-unit building's plans to include a "place of public worship", capable of hosting 300 people, seven days a week. "Can you imagine?" asks Colquitt. "That many people... there would have been traffic chaos, not to mention the noise and disturbance. The DA would have allowed services from 7.30am to 10.30pm. We sent off 146 objections."

The City of Sydney council rejected the application, saying the proposal was unclear and would result in unacceptable noise and traffic. Colquitt adds, however, that "they could try it again in any of their buildings. About three months ago, there was a gathering in the building's ground and first-floor commercial tenancies; there was a real crowd there with strobe lights. They ended up setting off the fire alarms, so we threw them out onto the street, like Jesus threw the merchants and money changers out of the temple."

Many of Sunito's employees, friends and family are regular attendees at his services, and he's often persuaded business associates to come along, too. Former NSW premier Bob Carr, once his neighbour and now a friend, was a guest at one stage.

"He recruited me to be party to a couple of charitable functions he's done, and I've been along to his church once," says Carr. "His charities and church are very focused on the community."

Carr sees him as a valuable resource for the country. "There's an emergence of a big middle class in Indonesia, which could be of great importance for the future of Australia," he says. "There have been problems with

Artist's impression of Sunito's Infinity development in southern Sydney's Green Square, designed by Koichi Takada.

infrastructure and government corruption in the past, but who better than Iwan to create better links between the two countries?"

SUNITO STILL has strong ties with his homeland and recently returned for a holiday with his wife, Liana. "I loved it, but I don't think she is so keen to return," says Sunito, father of Samuel, 22, who's studying finance and business at the University of Southern California, Hannah, 20, who's studying art at Sydney's Macquarie University, and schoolgirl Michelle, 14.

His hometown was the then-remote village of Pangkalan Bun in central Kalimantan. Sunito's father employed local kids to cut shingles for roofs for houses, and his mother made cakes that she sold from a trolley she pushed around the streets. Sunito and his brother Nisin - later to become a cattle producer in the Northern Territory - eventually moved to East Java to go to high school in Surabaya, Indonesia's second-largest city.

The 16-year-old Sunito turned out to be a terrible student, failing one year completely. He took a holiday in Bali with friends to console himself. While there, he was

countancy at uni, while he decided to study architecture at the University of NSW. The first year was such a struggle, he nearly gave up. In Indonesia, he'd been taught to accept everything he was taught; here, he was expected to question everything. But one of the lecturers, John Gamble, took a special interest in him.

"I remember him well," Gamble says. "He was very keen to learn, and was likeable and talented. I tried to get the students to question things, as it was very important they understood why things were so."

Sunito flourished under Gamble's mentorship and in 1992 ended up graduating with honours. He went on to do a master's degree in construction management, worked for an architectural firm, then quit to set up his own business, designing and building luxury houses in Sydney's eastern suburbs and upper North Shore.

In 1996, he found a piece of land for sale in Bondi Junction for \$5 million and merged his business with those of two friends, Paul Satkio and Anthony Sun, to create the Crown Group, borrowing money from his father to pay his share. They later sold the 10-storey development of 54 apartments and retail spaces on Spring Street for \$28 million.

After this, projects came thick and fast. But in 2008, with a billion dollars' worth of apartments underway as well as his biggest single enterprise - the 245-unit Gallery by Crown in Parramatta - the GFC hit, the residential property market suddenly looked a great deal shakier, inflationary pressures rose, the economy slowed, the global environment threatened to slide into recession and interest rates here were hiked up, the official cash rate reaching 7.25 per cent. Some developers panicked and bailed; Sunito discovered the book *Blue Ocean Strategy*, which outlines how to create "blue oceans" of untapped new market spaces ready for growth, instead of simply battling competitors.

"We applied this concept to the property industry, and it inspired us to do something different from the rest," Sunito says. "We then embarked on the five-star resort development concept, with luxurious foyers and an array of facilities like gyms, outdoor water features, gardens, libraries and movie rooms. That has stood us in good stead ever since, with the ambition of becoming the Louis Vuitton or Bulgari of the building industry."

Sunito comes across as a modest, sweet-natured man who's surprised by how well he's done. But he has a real air of confidence and when he enters functions, he usually does so in the company of an entourage, which gives him even more presence.

"Iwan is soft and gentle, but he really knows his numbers and doesn't give away too much," says his friend and mentor, businessman Benjamin Chow, deputy chair of the NSW Government Multicultural Business Advisory Panel. "He's pretty tough in business and when he does a deal, he likes it to be all in his favour, but there's nothing wrong with that," says Chow. "He is a show pony and he likes the limelight, but he's also very religious, which frames his business ethics."

It tends to frame Sunito's aspirations, too. Professionally, he's working towards Crown Group apartments and its Skye Hotel Suites becoming global brands and his personal ambitions are no less lofty.

"In my dreams, I would love to be able to have a big event, bringing 100,000 people together in a stadium and talking to them, inspiring them to do better," he says. "People are asking me more and more to speak and that's something I love to do."

Those 300 people in a Sydney cinema on a Sunday morning are beginning to look like small fry. Just as Sunito hopes his buildings make the world stop and look, he hopes, one day, he'll make it stop and listen, too. ■



riding a motorbike without a helmet and a truck slammed into him. He spent five days in a coma with injuries so bad his father didn't recognise him when he came to visit. For Sunito, it was a turning point in his life.

"I had a real sense of awakening," he says. "It felt like I must have been spared for a greater purpose. Eventually, I went back to school and went from being the worst kid in the class to the best. I mixed with the top students and changed the way I thought."

In 1984, he came to Sydney to finish his schooling. That was a confusing time, he says: Australians often greeted people with the question, "How are you today?" which, to him, sounded just like, "How are you to die?" "I worked for a while in a pub and people would ask me how I came to Sydney, and I'd say, 'By plane.' But what they meant, I later discovered, was: was I on a work permit, or was I illegal?"

It was at eastern Sydney's Randwick TAFE that he met and married Liana - who is also Indonesian (born in Jakarta) and, like her husband, came to Australia originally to study. She went on to do maths and ac-