

Many apartment blocks are erected without regard for the fact that people have to live in them, says property developer Peter Winton.

His conversion of Sydney's old Marist Brothers' High School (see following story in Journal Comment) is a reversal of this attitude—a celebration of aesthetic, functional design.

Putting People First



Interior decoration was carried out with skill and imagination by Marsh Freedman Associates. Furnishings are subtle and create private areas; all accessories have been chosen with great care, with lighting placed for maximum visual effect.



“There are a lot of mistakes being made with apartment blocks. What is happening to a lot of Sydney architecture now is the 1980s version of the ‘architecture’ of the ‘30s . . .”

The unit shown here is one of the top floor units in the three-storey ex-school building.

Opening the area up to space and light was one of Winton’s top priorities. There are few walls and open plan levels take the place of conventional ceilings, with the different levels linked by a catwalk.

Standing on the floor of the unit, one is aware of the limitless possibilities the area offers, of the care and inspiration that has gone into its metamorphosis from a time-worn classroom into an elegant living space. ♦



Top: The simplicity of the bedroom structure gives it potential for innovative decoration. Above: Spectacular night-time view over Sydney from the top floor apartment. Right: Interesting angles and corners are characteristic of the apartments.



Journal Comment

Using the unlikely structure of an old school, Sydney property developer Peter Winton has created 12 residential units from a series of classrooms. The conversion shows sensitivity and restraint.

Ringling the Changes

Something of an aesthetic vacuum is being created in inner Sydney streets by the exodus from suburban to inner city living.

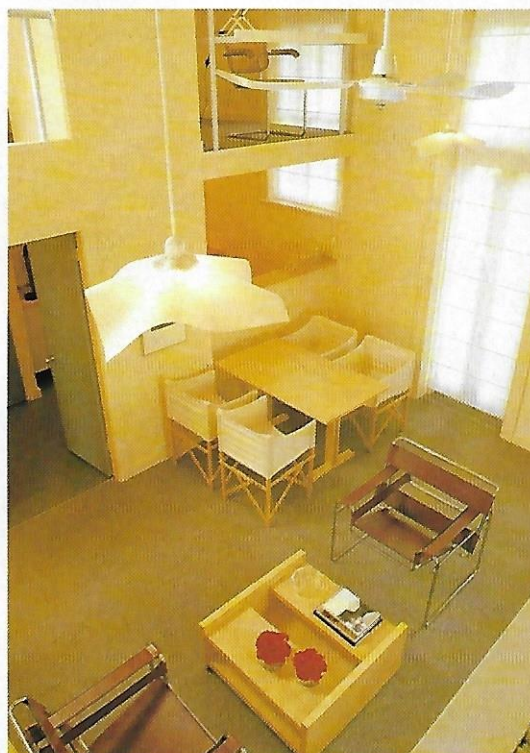
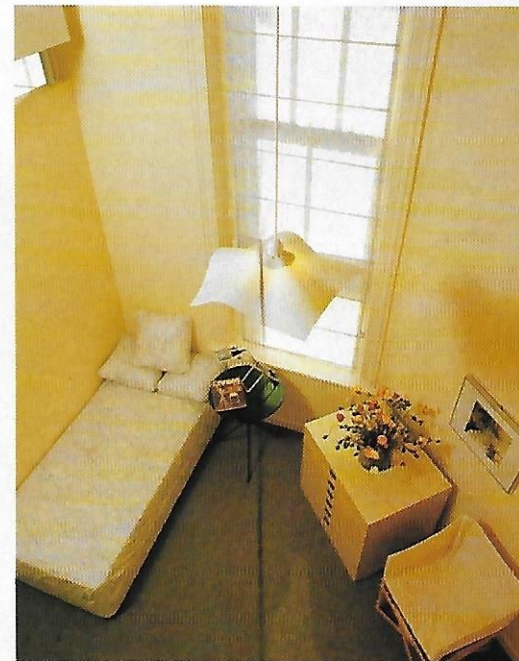
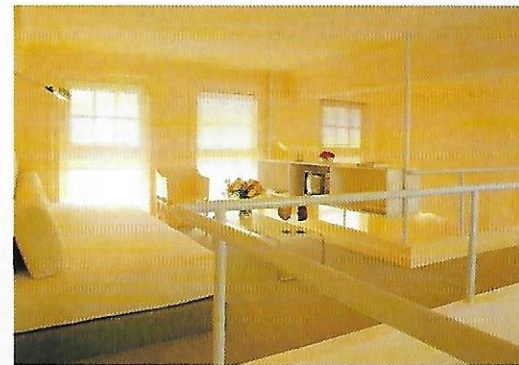
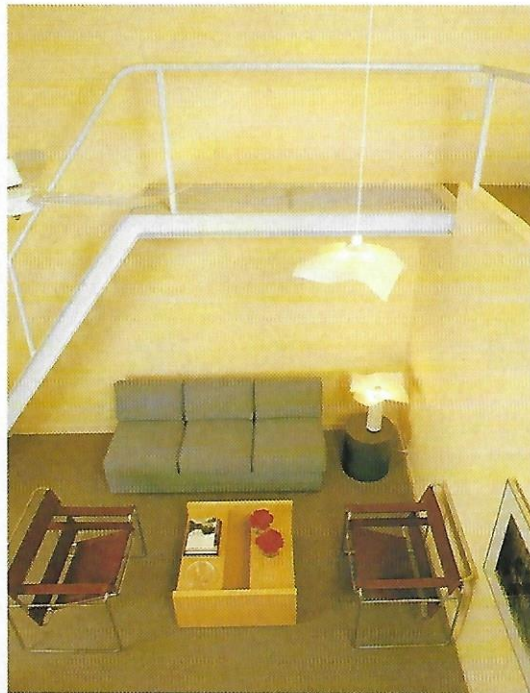
The little (suburban) boxes that Peter, Paul and Mary used to denigrate in their music have grown up to become big city boxes. As high rise on high rise apartment blocks they still toe a grey and soulless line, visual assaults on, and insults to, lovers of fine architecture. Their stand against the now distant and newly "disadvantaged" suburbs is too often one of ugliness.

There are exceptions—not to prove the rule, but to prove its need to be constantly broken. In Sydney's Darlinghurst, a remarkable exception has been created inside the walls of an old school. Its master, Peter Winton—best described as an entrepreneurial developer—has succeeded in turning the old Marist Brothers' High School into a magnetic refuge for suburban exiles.

Winton is a difficult man to pin down. His apparent nonchalance is almost excessive. He is the sort of person who wears his clothes as if someone else hung them on him while he was doing something more important. He is deceptively vague and throws cogent statements as casually as others throw away lines. His air of almost apathetic calm cloaks an essential diffidence, so it takes time to discover just how important things are to him.

The Marist High School development is very important to him. He, with his company SAP Investments, took it over from a group of squatters in July 1981 to turn the three storeys of classrooms into 12 two and three-bedroom units.

"The school", as everyone still calls it, is an immediate rejection of architectural monotony. This is helped by the fact that Winton and designer John Bradley had to work





within the framework of National Trust legislation which stipulated that the exteriors of the 70-year-old building remain unchanged. But it is unlikely that Winton would have changed them radically anyway, unless it was to improve them.

“There are a lot of mistakes being made with apartment blocks. What is happening to a lot of Sydney architecture now is the 1980s version of the “architecture” of the ’30s, when buildings were put up with no regard for the fact that people had to live in them.

“We had here a really nice old building to work with, but we needed to work around a few considerations. We wanted to make it a little nicer on the outside within the terms of the National Trust’s legislation. And to make the best use of the interior spaces we needed to make them contemporary and very functional—so we needed to go through the transformation of old on the outside to new and practical inside.”

The care of detail throughout the building is typified by the treatment of the exterior. The building was balconied at the front, but the back was straight up and down. Instead of attaching blatantly new balconies to the back, a piece from the frontal balconies was sent away to have authentic replicas made. The back balconies are clearly newer, but identical in style, so the building’s character is not defaced at all. >>

Far left: Open planning gives an illusion of space in smaller apartments; carefully chosen furnishings and subtle decor by Marsh Freedman Associates keep the interiors light and fluid.

Left: The exterior of Marist Brothers’ College has been retained in its original form.

Journal Comment

Once inside, you find it as difficult to pin a covering description on the units as you do to Winton himself. They change from level to level, each an individual toast to some characteristic of the building.

The top level units are the largest. Impressions of expanse and light follow through them, as space opens onto space. There are few walls and the ceilings have been opened up to create upper, open plan levels for storage and study areas. There is little division between upper and lower levels inside the units. A catwalk rather than a ceiling separates the areas so, standing on the floor of the unit, your vision stretches into the ceiling's reaches without being halted halfway.

Lower floor units are smaller—two bedroom rather than three—and front units don't have the same sunny aspect as back units, but each holds its own character.

Throughout Winton's units—throughout all his work—he likes to work on a basis of space and light. When it is there he exploits it. When it is not he creates it. On the upper levels he has gone into the ceiling to exploit available light. On the ground floor, units have had the floor dropped by 45cm.

On the middle and ground floor levels, units manage to hold a little more of the building's character than do the upper units. This is especially true of the front units where the balconies are the originals and set the tone for the apartments. On the second level, balconies at the front of the building may be fitted with timber venetian blinds to control sunlight and add privacy and ground floor units have landscaped courtyards in place of balconies.

The grounds around "the school" have been heavily landscaped to smother traffic noise and to visually protect the units from the passing world.

Winton's work is based on the precept that work must be of the highest standard possible. He chivvies those who work for him, constantly correcting detail and demanding change when it is necessary. "The buying public," he says, "are much more discerning than they used to be and there is no point in trying to sell them short. We are also competing against other developers, which means we must keep our own standards high."

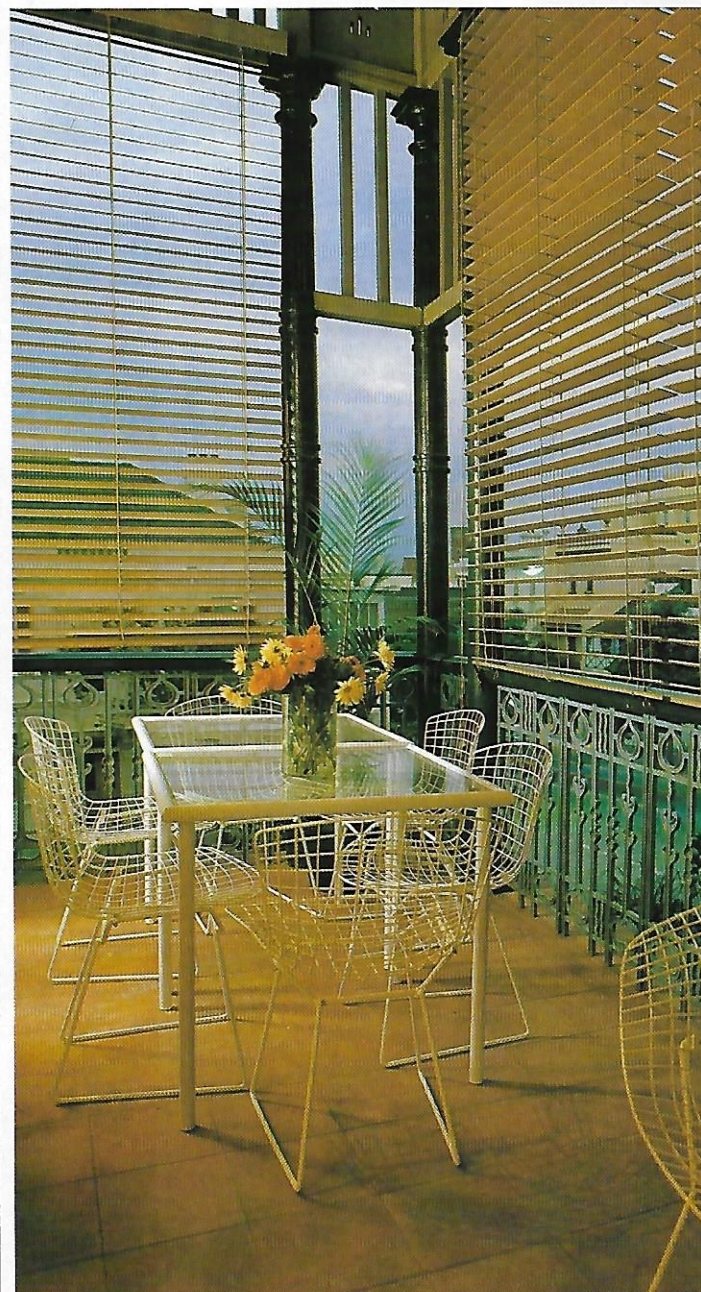
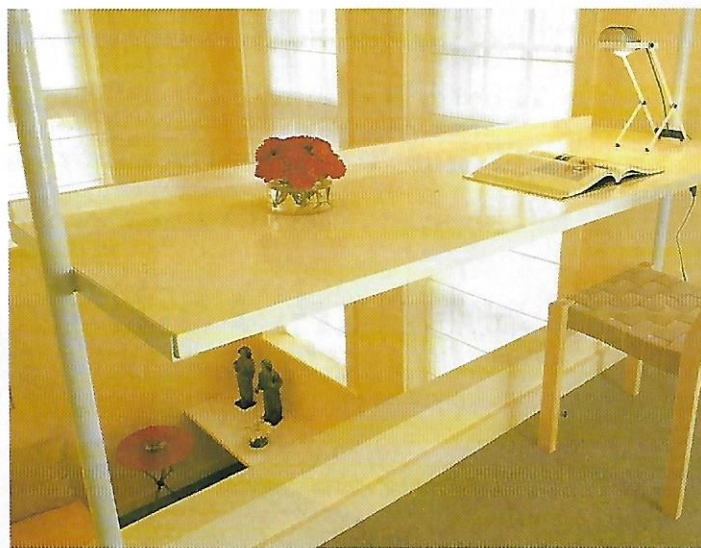
The school is in an area of surprises. A part of Darlinghurst where you continually stumble on sunlit flowerbeds in the middle of tiny side lanes, on beautiful old buildings perfectly preserved—and on hookers watching, for trade.

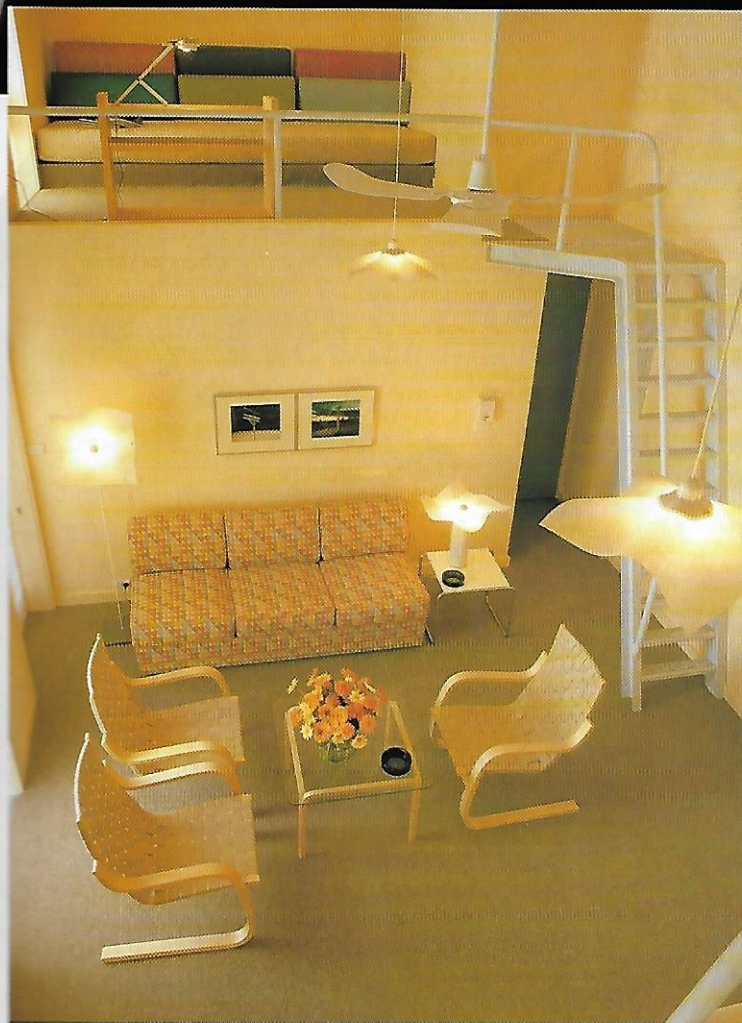
Hookers aside, Winton says he has a love for Darlinghurst—for itself and for its potential as a developer's Eden. His nonchalance almost falls away when he points out the "wonderful old buildings" around and through it; the fact that it is inner city without actually being right *in* the city; and the Sydney City Council's recent efforts to upgrade it to an area of charm.

This development has an empathy with the surroundings which gives it immediate appeal. And although Winton gazes into the ceiling and almost yawns when he says he's "really very excited about it", you know he really is—and that he really does have something to be excited about. ◇

by Anne Barrowclough
photography Peter Bateman

Bottom right: Timber venetians are slung from first floor balconies to control light and shade. They lend the apartments a '20s feeling.





Far left: A study area looks over the living area. This page: Steel ladders are a feature on first floor apartments, giving interiors a touch of high-tech.

A MATTER OF SKILL— an expression of taste

Peter Winton's work shows that inner city development and good design are not mutually exclusive. But the Marist project is still one of too few good developments against too many bad ones.

Sydney architect Robin Dyke joined us in condemning some of Sydney's inner city developments, saying they are insensitive and tasteless.

He picked out three:

- Broughton House, one of the city's first office-to-apartment block renovations, "has been wrecked externally. Whether they've done nasty things inside it is another matter; I haven't been in there yet. I'm not sure if I want to."

- Pier One, Sydney's attempt at another Fisherman's wharf, "is a disaster of disasters. They were forced to keep the exterior but the way they have designed the place internally prohibits any

appreciation of the building as it was. It is ugly and gaudy and they have paid no heed to the building's structural potential. I think it is the most insensitive renovation ever carried out in Sydney."

- One of the more recent developments in Oxford St. Darlinghurst (not Winton's), he dismissed as a "piece of Surfers Paradise plonked in Darlinghurst."

Dyke said he had not yet been inside Winton's development but from the outside it looked as if it had been done well.

"If someone has to keep the exteriors of a building intact and he has the good sense to turn that necessity into a valuable aesthetic asset, it's fine," he said.

"It should be easily done but it is often ignored."

"The developer, the designer and, to a much lesser extent, the available finance, are the dominating influences on a building's aesthetic appeal", he said. But he conceded that many developments are, out of necessity, tailored to a certain market rather than to any aesthetic "fantasy" the designer might naively indulge in.

He also stressed that budget consideration should play a minimal part in the visual appeal of a building's structure.

"It does usually depend on who you employ to design the building. Forty different architects will come up with 40 different designs—basically

you get what you employ.

"But some developers just don't care what the thing looks like, as long as they can keep the budget down. They don't want to pay for quality.

"This is ignorant and stupid.

It is no more expensive to have a good design than a bad design. A badly designed building is more an example of lack of skill than anything.

"The major cost of a building comes in the finishes. If you have a 5000 square metre building, the basic structure will take up about 20 per cent of the total cost. If you start increasing the stands in a structure, or making it work a bit harder as far as stress goes, you will have to pay more, but at most about 10 per cent. That means there is no financial excuse for having an ugly structure.

"It is simply lack of skill and lack of taste."