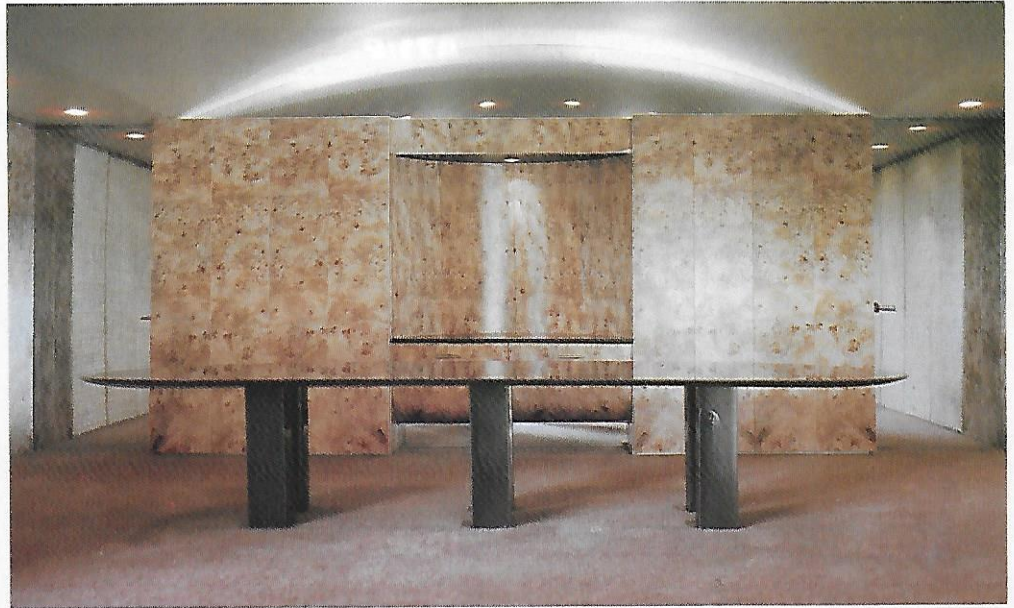


INDOOR DRAMA

Betsy Brennan picks her way through a conversational labyrinth to reveal the attitudes of two of Australia's most inspired interior designers.



Left: George Freedman and Neville Marsh (no longer in football jumper) in their Sydney interior design offices, a building recently re-designed by architect Glenn Murcutt. Above: design by Marsh Freedman Associates for the handsome new boardroom for Leighton Contractors.

George Freedman wears a luscious coffee cream-coloured, thick-knit sweater in raw silk, boat-necked, possibly Italian, to our interview.

Neville Marsh appears in an old, frayed football jumper.

Both outfits set off to perfection their glowing tans — or is it the effect of the pale grey walls throughout their offices?

"White, not grey," says George, delighted. "You can use absolutely pure white and have the most colourful space."

The two-storeyed corner building in Sydney's Woolloomooloo was redesigned for them recently by architect Glenn Murcutt, a great friend. George leans down and speaks confidently to the tape recorder: "He called us inspired and inspiring clients."

The interior is now a wide-open architectural space radiating light even on a grey day, with walls of glass, steel piping, cut-back upper floor and minimal colour. There are blue bands around a double glazed window (why don't we use this as a temperature control more often in Australia?), and an aubergine panel below a skylight which is fine-lined in a myriad raindrops.

The football jumper was not affectation but common sense: "I got soaked on the way," Neville explains.

Talking to Marsh and Freedman on their home ground is a bit like wandering into a Pinter play. Hapless interviewer: "Do you take

set parts of the project, or does the design process ebb and flow?" Neville: "Ebb and flow! Marvellous! I'll be ebb and he'll be flow." George: "Do spell it Flo."

But when they are serious they are very serious designers indeed, without the obvious trademarks and mannerisms of lesser lights, but with recognisable hallmarks of their own. They display an overwhelming sense of unity and completeness. A lack of empty show. Urbanity, polish, *calme et luxe* where it's evident that materials are as carefully worked out as space delineation. A superb grasp of the nature and importance of colour and lighting. Above all, a connoisseur's approach to finish and detail which is more European than Australian. How is it achieved?

"You've got to stand up and say, 'this is what I want'," Neville advises. "It takes a lot of nagging, a lot of pre-planning."

Restrained is a word often used about their work: he disagrees. "The exterior colours for the Magnus, Nankervis & Curl building, which houses Macquarie Galleries, are anything but restrained." But the big splashy chintz is not their genre? "People don't identify us with that sort of work, but we like it from time to time. I did it recently in some rooms in Hunter's Hill, and at Bob Oatley's house, Edenglasie at Muswellbrook.

"The type of work we do seems to appeal to people who have a fairly good education in terms of understanding design. Even

the ones who are very rich tend to want a very simple interior."

George describes the second house just completed for a wealthy client as being "very simple, beautifully done, nice and esoteric. But it's small scale and all minimal, there's nothing flashy. This wasn't a purposeful thing on the client's part; it simply represents what he is."

By contrast they have recently been briefed to do a house for clients who want to spend a lot of money to have "a really super interior". The brief: we've made it and we want the house to look as if we have. "Very practical," approves George. "But they don't want it to appear vulgar."

Marsh and Freedman were pioneers in the late sixties with their approach to quality workmanship and pared-down design. To some extent they still are. "I think we're getting more work in this field now because of the existence of furniture companies like Artes, Arredorama and Mobili. Over the last eight years they have educated the public a lot. You couldn't sell a Cesca chair ten years ago." Neville indicates the Marcell Breuer tubular steel chairs we're sitting on. "People would say, kitchen chairs. They didn't understand contemporary furniture, they had no reference for it. They were still understanding Victorian things — didn't know about real antiques, either; they were locked into really mundane furniture. Now they're looking for designers who can create interiors around these superb products." ▶