

• LIVING INTERVIEW •

Continued from page 14

George: "We have been using this furniture consistently for fourteen years. This table in fact [round marble top, centre pedestal] is as old as the company and was designed by Florence Knoll in 1961."

"Now, of course," laments Neville, "the Cesca chair is in every restaurant in town in the most bastardised version. I don't think it matters, as long as you know the difference."

When George Freedman joined the business, it changed direction. A New Yorker, he was sent out by Knoll International to supervise the interiors of the Bank of New South Wales in Martin Place, Sydney, and stayed on when the New York office closed due to the anti-trust laws. "Being an architect, George tended to push us towards more developed and planned interiors, as opposed to the rather undisciplined approach of interior decorating. Now the majority of our work is on that basis." George: "We are doing architectural interiors. Occasionally, in a flippant mood to make a point, we'll refer to ourselves as decorators. Which we are."

Neville: "When you refurbish a house — new carpets, new curtains, new colours, even a new kitchen — it's not a total design operation." George: "Even with complete refurnishing — knocking down walls, changing forms and shapes — it's still decorating because we're not changing structure. It's skinwork. Even if the skin is ninety millimetres thick."

For most of last year Marsh Freedman Associates worked on a huge "skinwork" job for Leighton Contractors. "The architect has done the exterior and services; our role has been to take the empty shell — four floors plus lobby — and create the interiors, totally." For a small firm with only five to seven employees, it's exciting, but occupies a lot of time.

"A lovely stage to be at," George agrees, "but it has its tensions because we want to do other jobs we're offered but can't always take them on. It's the same situation Glenn [Murcutt] has — yes, I will do your house, but I will do it in eight months."

"The clients we can do beautiful things for are those who give us time," George says. "Because we are artists, and we're slow, even when we've started, the development of the design can take a full month or even longer."

"An interior is not a set piece. It's a three-dimensional enclosure, it has to have a relationship with the space you go into next and the space you have come from. There has to be a progression of ideas."

"The most frustrating thing here," says Neville, "is that the interiors of most houses are so badly proportioned." Not the fault of the owners but of the architect or builder. "Some early buildings were superb — look at Elizabeth Bay House — but somehow the quality was lost. All those Professor Wilkinson buildings are beautiful on the exterior, but the interiors are quite badly planned."

("Troglodytish," George whispers to the tape.)

"Our building codes and laws have always been very restrictive. The American buildings with spaces one longs for — frame houses built in the affluent outer suburbs of cities — are better proportioned because they're not so expensive to build."

"Construction in Australia is very expensive. Quite often people can't afford to spend money on the interiors because they're too busy making sure the exterior is solid."

George Freedman's use of colour is innovative, often painterly in its complexity. "I treat interiors as paintings," he says, revealing that he was a painter for a while. He retired from architecture when very young and painted for five years, then went into interior design seriously. "A friend and I left New York and rented a house in Spain for \$3.33 a month. I learnt so many things. How to cook on a wood stove, help cats give birth, live on \$10 a week, drive a deux-cheveaux car . . ."

"I also learnt a great deal about how to use colour, how colours react one against the other and what to do with colour. I like putting one colour against another and making it change because of the juxtaposition. That's what interests me most, more than making two colours harmonise. Colours should fight, quarrel, make love . . ."

Their advice to the young and/or colour innocent: don't buy a neutral carpet and lock yourself into the beige syndrome. Neville elaborates: "I'm doing some work for a couple of young doctors — one is the child of some friends," he adds hastily, clearly anticipating a flood of penniless young. "We'll buy some paper lanterns, use a bit of paint, push the furniture around. It's important to do that for young people. It's education, in a way." George asks if it is education, or if it's simply making compromises.

"People are terrified of simplicity," Neville believes. ". . . it is actually the hardest, most elegant thing one can achieve. I can't abide pretension, that crystal chandelier syndrome."

"It's clearing a lot of things," Neville replies. "For instance, we'd use Noguchi lanterns instead of expensive light fittings because they are the best of their kind." George agrees with that. "Always get the best of its kind, regardless of cost. Instead of buying a \$6 piece of junk, buy a beautifully conceived paper lantern at \$35, designed by a wonderful sculptor, so you have a fabulous light-sculpture in your place rather than just a light."

"People are terrified of simplicity," Neville believes. "They seem to think it indicates that they can't afford something, but simplicity is actually the hardest, most elegant thing one can achieve."

"I can't abide pretension, that crystal chandelier syndrome — just as you hear people talk about a chicken-and-champagne dinner, as if it's the ultimate."

George: "Both of us are quite happy to use exotic materials, wonderful veneers, wonderful marbles, wonderful paint finishes . . ."

"And a good crystal chandelier if it's suitable," Neville allows.

". . . but the workmanship has to be perfect, and the relationship of the item to its surroundings has to be in harmony."

Good decorating is also knowing what to leave out, Neville says. "One dresses and then takes something off. It's a great art, putting things together, a gift. Look at the wonderful rooms that Colefax and Fowler have done in England. They're scholarly, fantastic."

As with all artists, Marsh and Freedman's ideas and inspirations spring from many sources, almost from the air they breathe. On trips overseas they collect beautiful rooms the way others gather postcards: a rotunda in the Vatican Museum; a superb little French boudoir in the Metropolitan Museum in New York, which they thought so perfect that they asked the curator for the plans; the work of Sir John Soane, England's eccentric, innovative eighteenth-century architect, with which George has been enamoured since student days. "Soane used mirrors beautifully. The eighteenth-century French did too, and the Adam brothers," he says. "I'm fascinated with mirrors. They are the most inventive space makers and definers."

"Well done, there are never too many mirrors, but they have to be beautifully handled," Neville cautions. "You can't just plaster them on the wall, with silver buttons all over them. They have to be nicely detailed. And what's the mirror going to reflect? There has to be some reason for reflection, such as space expansion or illusion. We've done a few

rooms recently where we've mirrored the tops of the rooms above panelling, so you don't feel as if you're in a strict enclosure."

George: "Or put some slivers of mirror down the corners of a room so that the wall continues on for ever, passing into the next space — which doesn't exist of course, but does in illusion."

Neville: "Trickery."

George: "Theatre. A little bit of drama in our humdrum lives."

"It's what magicians do, isn't it?"

"Interior spaces should be magic. They should not be merely enclosures. They should be joys, all the time." □