

# A predilection for variety

*Profile of a designer*

MICHAEL DICKINSON

**G**ORGE FREEDMAN has lived in Australia for 23 years but remains a New Yorker, not in a loud sense, but in the urbanity of his work and demeanour. And that has been a rewarding experience for this country.

'He's been incredibly significant in Australian interior design, says Iain Halliday, the designer whose star seems to be rising rapidly in Sydney and who, like so many other young designers and architects now making names for themselves, worked at one time for Freedman. 'He's taken aesthetic risks, he is a genuine identity and his whole persona is very strong. He hasn't compromised. Not many people in the design business cut that sort of strong image.' And according to Glenn Mircourt, 'George is one of the finest designers in this country and holds rank with the best at an international level.'

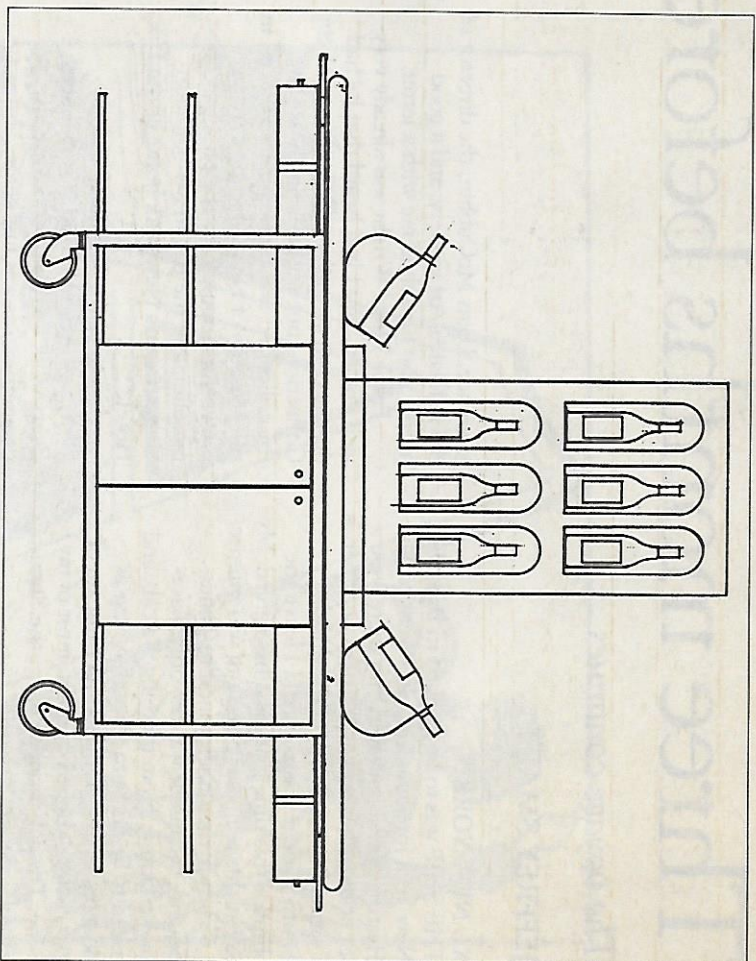
Freedman is probably best known as a colourist — the man who painted Sydney in multi-hued bright highlights in the '80s (for a friend's one-room apartment). Freedman combined eleven different colours) but that diminishes his all-round design brilliance. When you commission Freedman you get a wealth of experience in impeccable detailing, historical allusions, deftness with a wide spectrum

of materials and an overall finesse in combining all the various elements. And there are often bonuses. George laughs a lot and clearly is not above having fun with

travelling. For many years he and his partner Neville Marsh travelled regularly to India. Their relationship with the subcontinent began by accident: Neville won a trip in a raffle in 1978. Says George, 'My initial reaction was that it was the most exotic place I'd discovered where I could speak English.' He kept returning because of what he describes as 'the sheer voluptuousness, variety, depth and the realisation that it wasn't frightening.'

Back in Australia, 'home' for George for the past 20 years has been an old country house on a south coast hill top. 'It's the place I've lived in longest' he says. From his first day in Sydney in 1969, Freedman's city homes and offices have been close to the city centre — Woollahra, Woollomooloo, Redfern, Surry Hills and now East Sydney. 'I love the lifestyle in Sydney. The temperature. The look of the place. And where I live and operate has always been close to "the wonders of Sydney." But it's the somewhat weatherbeaten stone cottage on the south coast that represents 'home' for the designer. The weekend was, and remains, more an unpolished retreat from the city, a place to relax and for George to practice another skill for which he is renowned — cooking.

Freedman was born in Brooklyn but, he laughs, 'I grew up in Manhattan'. He attended New York's Syracuse University School of Architecture without writing a final thesis and worked with Kahn and Jacobs Architects in New York until 1960,



*Furniture design for Treasury Restaurant, Inter-Continental Hotel, by George Freedman*

Level of the State Bank, a kind of post-modern petrified forest and one of the more unusual examples of contemporary Australian landscaping. (And, these days, stupidly hidden from view because of the Bank's sensitivity to its 'public image'). A list of completed projects includes the names of some of Australia's major corporations and many of Sydney's best known citizens and places.

Freedman looked after the Powerhouse Museum's 'colours and finishes', designed Bilson's Restaurant in Circular Quay's Overseas Passenger Terminal and created the 'external colours' for the Australian Pavilion at Brisbane's Expo '88.

Freedman was also chuffed to be asked by the Sydney Dance Company's Graeme Murphy to design the Iannis Xenakis

ballet *Kraemery*. The result was a subtle, abstract and origami-like geometrical set far removed from the luscious inlays and historical allusions he had used recently in executive offices for say, the Stare and Macquarie Banks and Leighton Holdings. 'George knows about lots of things,' says Iain Halliday, with clear admiration for his one-time boss. It shows in his work. Freedman can produce beautifully detailed, almost, Georgian cabinetry. He is equally capable of designing attention-grabbing video shops for the age of Virtual Reality. He clearly enjoys his work.

Home may be an old house on the south coast but Freedman's New York urbanity still shines strongly, mingled with more than a few other influences—all of which make him a pretty talented citizen of the world.

there are often bonuses. George laughs a lot and clearly is not above having fun with his work. For the top two, executive floors of the State Bank, a project Freedman completed in 1987, the Managing Director's bathroom is black and based on one designed some 80 years earlier by Adolf Loos while the deputy Managing Director's bathroom is white and based on a design by Josef Hoffman from about the same time. The notion of Australian bankers crapping in Wiener Werkstätte and neo-classical inspired loos is endearing. It also perhaps hints at a somewhat ironical attitude. Freedman's work for the State Bank was criticised at the time in some quarters for being ideologically unsound, for its opulence and what was taken to be its celebration of the Gordon Gekko corporate culture of the '80s.

But as architecture critic Professor Haig Beck pointed out, 'the interiors of the State Bank are (quite literally in places) a hall of mirrors—a house of illusions.' Beck continued: 'There are metaphors of power and illusion at work here. Or, more precisely, metaphors of power are consistently qualified by metaphors of illusion. With considerable wit (and the silent approval of his client?) George Freedman deftly questions notions of corporate power—even capitalism—with the Ozymandian warning: All power ... is illusory.'

Freedman, 57, is a collector – not so much of objects but of ideas. His rather simple office and home environments in fact camouflage a lifetime of observing and

final thesis and worked with Kahn and Jacobs Architects in New York until 1960, designing, among other projects, interiors for the American Airlines Passenger terminal at Idlewild Airport. During the next five years, travelling and painting in Europe, Freedman exhibited in Amsterdam in 1963 and Brussels in 1964 before resuming his interior design career for the London firm of Tandy, Halford and Mills. In 1968 he returned to New York and joined Knoll International Limited, designing interiors for the US pavilion at the 1969 Osaka World Fair.

That year Knoll also sent him to Australia to design executive offices for the then Bank of NSW (now Westpac). In 1971 he formed a partnership with the local designer Neville Marsh. For some 16 years, until Neville's recent retirement, the firm of Marsh, Freedman Associates was at the forefront of innovative design and George Freedman Associates continues the tradition.

Freedman is presently completing a revamp of the Hotel Intercontinentals Treasury restaurant, a large apartment for a young couple, a small house for a bachelor and some 'pilot' shops for a new Adelaide Weiss venture retailing Australian designed and manufactured knitwear. This versatility is partly a response to economic conditions, but it also reflects the designer's predilection for variety. Those who dismiss him now as a passé, '80s colourist', ('some also make me a passé '70s colourist', he laughs) haven't noticed his other skills. Take, for instance, the Garden

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