



George Freedman



A long way from Brooklyn

*Left: George Freedman in full flight. Partner Ralph Rembel looks on bemused. Photography by Garrie Maguire.
Above: State Bank, Martin Place, Sydney 1983-86: lift foyer on executive level. Photography by Willem Rethmeier.*

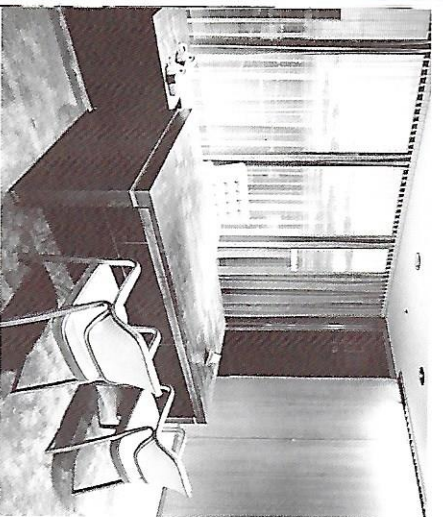
Interview

In the eighties, George Freedman and Neville Marsh were

Sydney's hottest interior design team. When they dissolved their partnership near the end of the decade, Neville declared that he was weary of it all. It wasn't true: given the challenge of designing the rooms for a resort in Bali, he proved that his inspiration was as fresh as ever. Meantime in Sydney,

Freedman, a transplanted New Yorker, has kept on producing quality work that continually generates excitement.

MONUMENT not only profiles Freedman: in a separate section we pay tribute to Marsh, and ask younger architects and designers what they gained from working for Marsh Freedman Associates.



Bank of New South Wales, General Manager's office, 1969-70. Freedman's first job in Australia, for Knoll. Photographer: Max Dupain



Hodgson house, kitchen and family room 1970-71. Photograph courtesy of George Freedman

M: Was it a culture shock to come from the sophistication of New York in 1969 to Sydney as it was at that time?

GF: I had been told that Sydney was a provincial city. And in many ways – professional ways – it was. I was sent by Knoll to do a project for the Bank of New South Wales. The best commercial interior design work in the world at that time was probably being done in New York or Chicago. So I noticed a big difference. Here, there was a kind of trail idea of what I had been used to, and local design was all rough. It was also regurgitated design as opposed to being fresh and spontaneous, and there was a kind of meanness in materials and finishes. Everything was reduced to the doing things the cheapest, easiest, most convenient way. If there appeared to be any kind of problem it was kind of dismissed, and most of the interiors had that look about them. There was a kind of thinness to it all.

M: How did you find the clients from the Bank of New South Wales at that time.

GF: We were asking a conservative banking company to look at themselves in another manner and have interiors that were unfamiliar. And they were mostly receptive. But I got a few surprises too. For instance, part of the presentation was that the desks for everyone were to be planes of glass sitting on columns, so there was to be this world of waters, unlike the desks that they were used to, desks that they could look behind. They asked if I could come and have a discussion

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GF: It's a struggle. Yes, it's a struggle to review the result, and you have that beautifully, but it's never easy. I'm not worth the struggle.

M: The firm has varied in size from that of Neville, when you were in p

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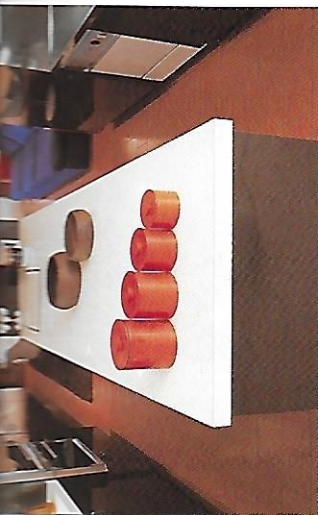
GF: We were asking a conservative banking company to look at themselves in another manner and have interiors that were unfamiliar. And they were mostly receptive. But I got a few surprises too. For instance, part of the presentation was that the desks for everyone were to be planes of glass sitting on columns, so there was to be this world of wafers, unlike the desks that they were used to, desks that they could hide behind. They asked if I could come and have a discussion with them and they told me the desks were a real problem for them. I said 'Why?' 'Well,' they said, 'people will see our socks.' I realized then that a plane of glass on a stick was beyond where they could go at that time, and so they got a beautifully designed fascist desk instead.

M: What about Sydney itself?

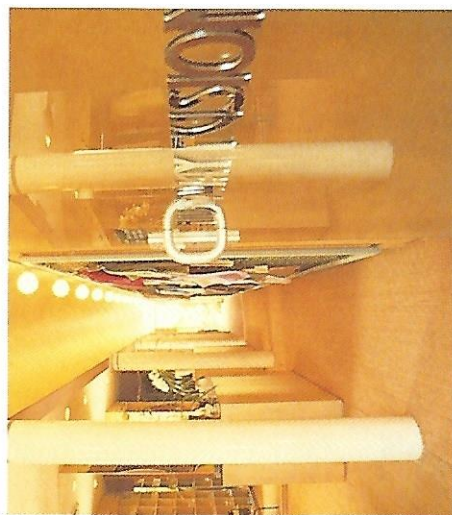
GF: I had no preparation for the physical vitality of the city and its people, and I was delighted and overwhelmed. I also met Neville Marsh in that first five week period that I was here and I decided to rearrange my life and come back and live with him, which was not planned. So the delight of Sydney and the excitement of Australia wasn't a primary reason for me moving here. But it was wonderful that my discovery of Australia and my discovery of Neville came along and each supported the other.

M: You appear to have made easy transitions between large corporate projects and domestic work. Has that range of jobs been planned? Or did it happen by accident?

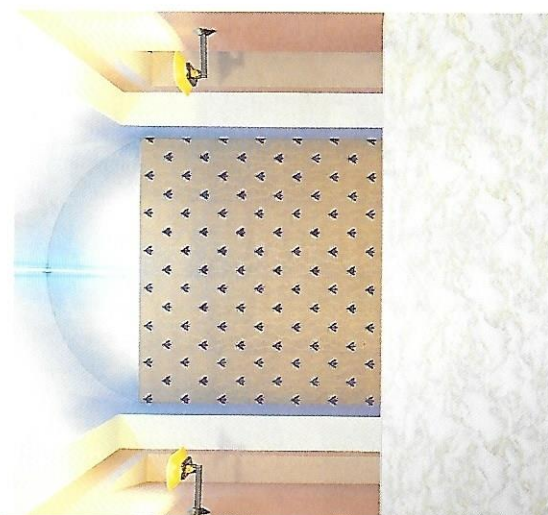
GF: By accident. All by accident. And I like both. When I'm doing domestic jobs I like the people. I like the scale. I like the interaction - the daily interaction with the clients and the way you build up the design for them. At the same



Hedgson house: kitchen and family room 1970-71
Photograph courtesy of George Freedman



Five Way Fusion Double Bay 1983
Photograph courtesy of George Freedman



Order Imports showroom: reception area 1983
Photographer: Tandy Rowley

time. I like enormously the abstraction of corporate work where you build a concept in terms of the preconceived image you have of the corporation and a developed idea of what you feel their image should be. Of course, the design process is less interactive than it is in domestic work. But both have their fascination.

M: Do you have a set working method, or does it vary from job to job?

GF: It's always the concept first, then planning and volume. And in developing the plan and the volume, specific materials start becoming possibilities. Is it an outer public space, inner public, private? Whatever it is, the materials start announcing themselves.

M: Your use of materials is obviously a talent, but how did you develop that talent, and who were the chief influences on you?

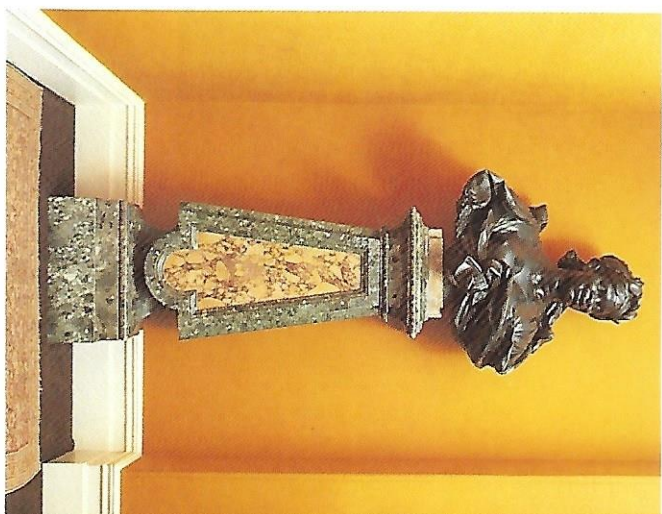
GF: Well, Florence, Knoll, of course, whom I worked for, and Mies van der Rohe, Phillip Johnson, I.M. Pei. As a youngster in New York, I was exposed to their work and was fascinated by the combination of beautiful things. I also had the opportunity to spend time in Europe and had entree into good houses and saw beautiful things side by side and liked it. And very often what I did was the result of seeing something and liking it and thinking 'let's try it'.

M: You are also noted for your insistence on fine detail. Have you found it a struggle to get craftsmen, tradesmen who will give you the detail that you absolutely demand?

GF: It's a struggle. Yes, it's a struggle. You have to give creative information, you have to check the process, you have to review the result, and you have to demand the finishes. There are numbers of people capable of delivering all that beautifully, but it's never easy. It is always a struggle. But it's never come to a point where I felt, 'oh the result is not worth the struggle'.

M: The firm has varied in size from time to time. How have you felt that this changed your working role? And that of Neville, when you were in partnership?

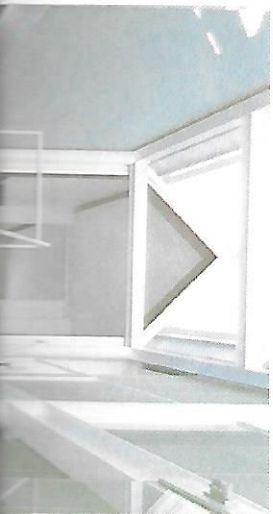
GF: When Neville and I started together there seemed to be a lot of people around the office and all of a sudden my role became that of 'design director' and Neville and I had to balance out what I was doing as design director and what he was doing in terms of decoration and colour. Neville had an aim, a goal, which was that we should be the best design group in Australia. And I think we achieved that. But in doing it, we became a quasi architectural practice. We were doing a lot of architectural interiors and everyone on the staff was either an architect or a graduate architect or a near graduate architect and Neville felt that he did not have those skills, and it is an irony that to become what Neville wanted, he was kind of made redundant, which certainly was not the intention.



Marsh Freedman Associates' premises in Queen Street Woolahra: detail of dining room 1975
Photographer: Warren Croser



Chong surgery: reception area
Photographer: Sam Marshall



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M: But he obviously did have those skills he felt he lacked.

GF: Of course he did, because when it came for him to do Amandari with Peter Muller, all the skills were there. And in the interior design work he did on that project, he was in total control and it was masterful.

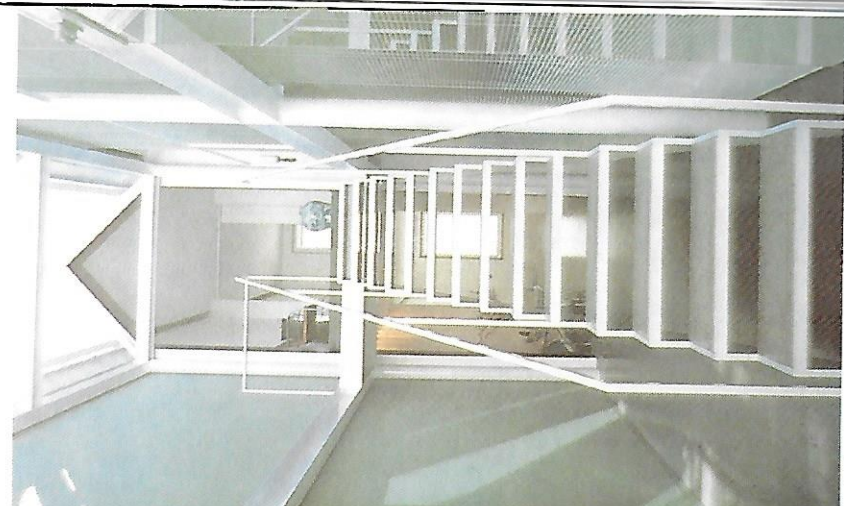
M: You've a long history of collaboration, not only with Neville and others like Glenn Murcutt and Peter Stronach, but also with people who've worked in your office, and they universally say you've trained them well. Have you consciously gone about doing that, or is it a case of just working together and letting it happen?

GF: I think basically it's a case of working together. And respecting what other people can do. When my present partner, Ralph Rembel, was at the University of New South Wales, Glenn Murcutt was his tutor, and he told me once that for a while he despaired that this boy was ever going to come up with anything, and then all of a sudden, one day, there were the drawings. Like magic. Ralph works it all out in his head and it comes on to the board fully realized as opposed to putting down the whole thing and working it over and over on paper. And the result is a kind of thorough freshness, which is very nice. So everybody has a right to their own working method. But all the people

Marsh, Freedman Associates' premises in Queen Street Woollabra, detail of dining room 1975
Photographer: Warren Croser



Chong surgery, reception area
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Marsh, Freedman Associates, Bourke Street Woolloomooloo, staircase at rear 1980 (renovated in association with Glenn Murcutt)
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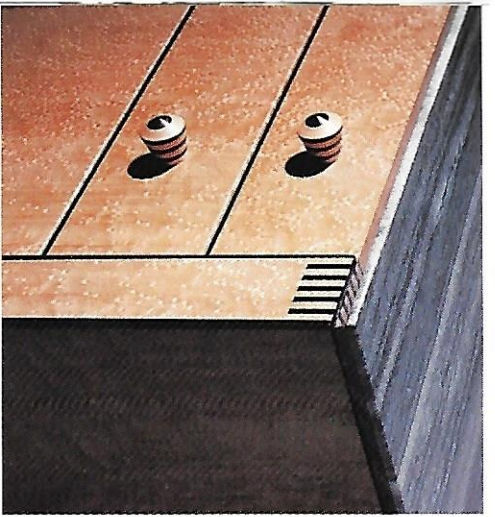
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Detail, chest of drawers 1983
Photograph courtesy of George Freedman

who've worked successfully for the firm have had one thing in common - they've all been dedicated. Wanting to do it, wanting to participate in the experience. And it has given me a great pleasure, because there's been a lot of lovely interaction. And it was like watching flowers grow - seeing people develop into full bloom.

M: In the eighties, about the time you did the State Bank in Martin Place, there seemed to be a feeling that Marsh Freedman were the 'flavour of the month' in interior design. Did you feel that, and if so, how did you feel about it?

GF: There was that feeling and you got the impression that people would come to us to be 'Marsh Freedmanized'. There was also a thing of being fashionable. And then there were some experiences when we realized - this is probably true of domestic work more than anything else - that people came to us because we were 'a good investment', that what we had done to properties in terms of design and finish and rearrangement provided a sensible return. It's curious, incidentally, that we found that the people who came to us for 'financial' reasons were sometimes the ones who were most difficult about fees. Just a curious little phenomenon.

M: After designing 'Kraanerg' for the Sydney Dance Company in 1988, would you like to work in theatre more?

GF: I'd love to do more theatre work.

M: What particularly appeals to you about it?

GF: I like the idea of getting the brief, conceiving the design, seeing it completed, everything happening in six weeks. Some of the final detailing for the SDC was done on site, sketching on walls simply because things had to be rearranged and we had to make decisions then and there. So it wasn't necessarily what we had originally planned but it worked out quite beautifully and the result was quite satisfactory.

M: If you could work on anything in the world, what would it be?

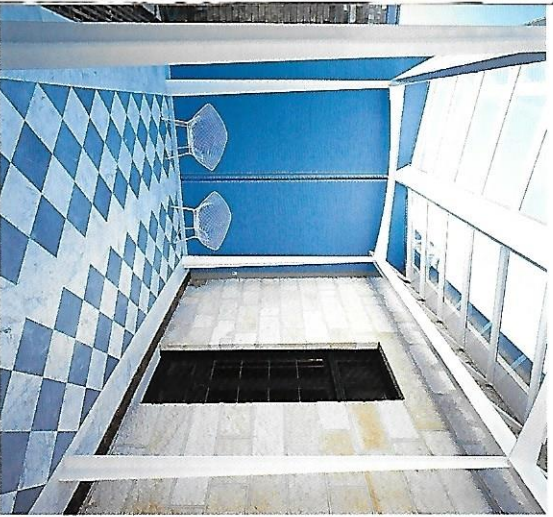
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M: What've you got on the drawing board?

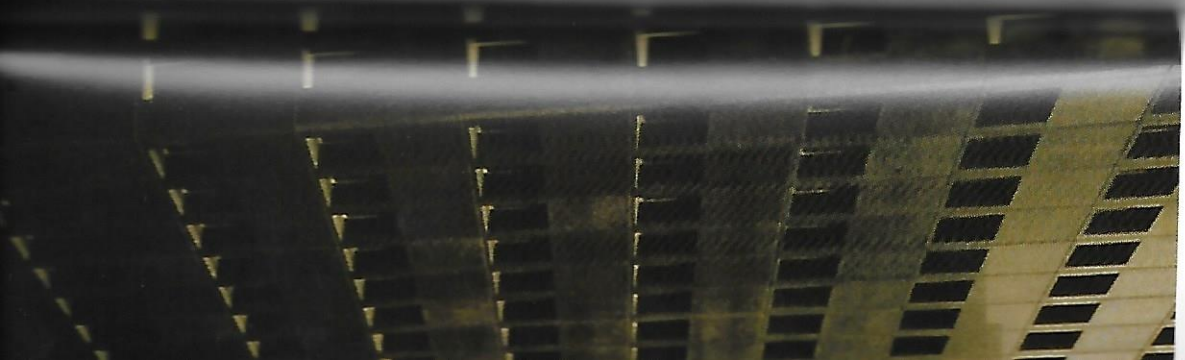
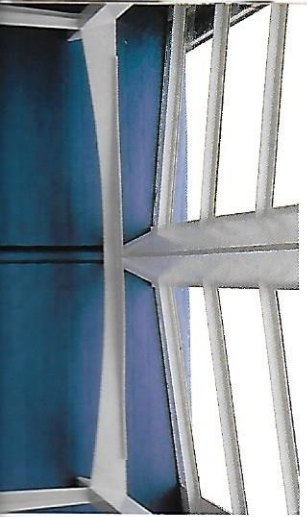
GF: Two houses and an apartment. Comfortable size projects for a practice with just the two of us.

M: What's your favourite monument?

GF: I guess the Pantheon is one because it's the first structure I ever entered and reeled back gawping in pleasure



Marsh Freedman Associates, Cleveland Street
offices, once again in association with Glenn
Murcutt 1985. Photographer: Willem Reihmeier



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GF: I guess the Pantheon is one because it's the first structure I ever entered and reeled back gasping in pleasure. The very first time I went to Rome I went there probably six times in four days, and I was stunned at the scale and the light and the whole feeling of it. I was drawn by the space and how it is all so ... contained as an interior. It's the interior, you see, that draws me. And there's the triumphal arch at Prospect Park in Brooklyn, where I grew up. It's a nineteenth century structure done by John Duncan, who also designed Grant's Tomb. I was always intrigued by the neatness of it, and although it is small scale, I thought it was grand. Recently I went back and saw it again, and though the parks are in neglect in terms of planting and maintenance, the space is still absolutely wonderful and it was kind of exciting to think that I still found it grand.

M: Is it easier being George Freedman in Australia today than it was when you first came out here?

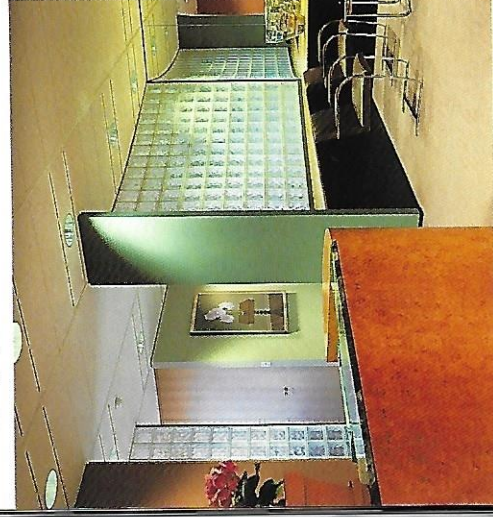
GF: Well I'm certainly not a novelty any more like I was then, but it's hard to compare, because I've grown up, Sydney has grown up, and interior design has grown in leaps and bounds. It's now very very sophisticated. When I first came here, I was very shy, and as well as being the young man who came to do the Bank of New South Wales, I was Neville Marsh's boyfriend, and it took me quite a long time to become George Freedman. And then that became an established fact and I was quite happy. I had become an Australian.



Marsh Freedman Associates: Cleveland Street offices, once again in association with Glenn Murcutt 1985. Photographer: Willem Rethmeier



Cleveland Street premises: detail. Photographer: Glenn Murcutt



Leighton construction Offices, reception area 1982. Photograph courtesy of George Freedman



Roof garden of State Bank, Martin Place

Photographer: Andrew Rankin

Photograph by arrangement with The Sydney Morning Herald