

text George Freedman
portrait Brett Boardman

INTERVIEW WITH GEORGE FREEDMAN

Did you always want to be a designer? And who or what were the major influences in your early years?

I suppose the answer is yes, of course... When very young I helped paint the backdrop for a performance at summer camp and then with that limited yet ego-satisfying experience under my belt I volunteered to design and paint the backdrops for a school play the following winter. The result was a success and highly praised, which was great fodder for a callow youth. From then on I kept on painting and designing and making costumes out of paper and discarded curtains and bed linen, which I had stashed away in the basement of our house in Brooklyn. My father discovered my hidden treasure and asked me to show him the 'collection'. His comment was, "Do you think they are well-made?" Was it the beginning of the pursuit of perfection? This eventually brought me to study architecture at Syracuse University where I discovered four of my nine allowed muses. These being Mies van der Rohe, Paul Rudolf, Craig Ellwood and Florence Knoll, whose published work showed me a purity of form, an interrelationship of spaces and an adventure in colour that I had not previously been aware of.

In your younger days you travelled the world painting. What was the catalyst that made you decide to return to the world of interior design? After university I worked with Kahn and Jacobs Architects in New York and was seconded to assist (dogbody) the chief designer of the interiors department. This was a wonderful revelation for me. I was quickly initiated by being assigned to produce a colour scheme and finishes

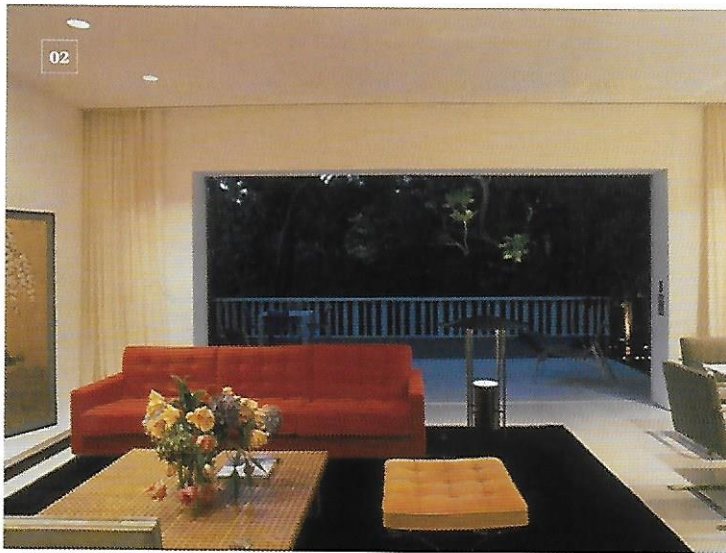
selection using no less than 32 beiges. The lure of adventure, however, took me to Europe. For a while I lived and painted on the island of Ibiza, then went to Amsterdam and found a new experience in the northern light. There I had a one-man show, which received some nice, and one glowing, reviews and some modest sales.

We were living on the very vague smell of an oily rag and friends in England suggested we move there and find 'real work'. My partner started teaching art history at Leicester University and through a series of introductions I found a wonderful position in interiors with Tandy Halford and Mills, which was the real beginning of my career. I had the privilege of working with a brilliant architect, Ronald Cuddun, who opened my eyes to form, balance and the discipline of detailing. After three years in London I decided to return to New York with the goal of working either with Skidmore Owens and Merrill, I M Pei or the Planning Unit of Knoll Associates. Ironically, both Knoll and I M Pei each offered me a job on the same day. Pei for a project in Dallas Texas and Knoll for a project in Sydney Australia and the very idea of Australia took my total fancy.

What was Australia like when you first arrived from New York? How did you find the design scene in Australia in the 1970s and what made you decide to stay and establish Marsh Freedman?

The Sydney project was the executive offices and board accommodation for the Bank of New South Wales, which we at Knoll designed and which was documented in Sydney by Peddle Thorp and Walker. I was sent here





GEORGE FREED- MAN

01.
State Bank of New South Wales Sydney
1984-1986. Photography by William
Rethmeier.

02. 03.
Sydney House, New South Wales, 1995-
1996. Photography by Sharrin Rees.

to present the design to the board and supervise the documentation. Not long after my arrival my introduction to Neville Marsh completely rearranged how I thought about my life.

From my limited perspective the local interior design scene in 1970 had Marion Hall Best as the leader supplying Cassina, B&B and Knoll furniture and Marimekko fabrics, as well as locally designed contemporary furniture by Gordon Andrews and Clement Meadmore from her shop in Queen Street, Woollahra. There was Russell Whitechurch distributing Artek and other furniture at Castlecrag. Interior design as an adjunct to architecture seemed not to be strong, but there were many very talented decorators concentrating on more traditional domestic work. It seemed that architects such as Harry Seidler, Douglas Snelling and the brilliant Guilford Bell more often produced contemporary domestic interiors. On the completion of the Bank of New South Wales project Neville Marsh and I started working together under the banner of Neville Marsh Interiors producing interiors for Partnership Pacific Ltd, the Bank of America and Morgan Guarantee, plus numerous domestic clients. In time we decided to rename ourselves to reflect the changing design philosophy of the practice.

Has there been one particular moment that stands out as a key design moment in your career?

Perhaps two – one while at university, [when] I first visited the Knoll Associates showroom on Madison Avenue designed by Florence Knoll and

the next entering the Pantheon. Each took my breath away and each has remained a lasting image and feeling.

If there has been one project that made a difference in your career what is it and why?

Again I must say two – the first being the State Bank of New South Wales in 1984/85 because it was the full flowering of Marsh Freedman Associates, both in terms of design focus and assembled talent, and unfortunately it was the catalyst for the disintegration of Neville Marsh's and my relationship.

The second is a small house in Sydney Ralph Rembel and I designed in 1995/96, which is precise in detail and form and execution and the beginning of Freedman Rembel.

You have been generous with your knowledge and fostered many fledgling design careers. What would be the most important lesson that you hope you have imparted to these young designers?

This is a very difficult question indeed. From time to time I see one of the 'fledglings' and sometimes they tell me of a lesson they feel I have passed on to them and each time what they tell me is a surprise.

What I believe we always discussed was that design always had to solve the brief, had to excite and had to go beyond the expectations of one's client. And each design should teach us something new about our thinking and capabilities.