

# THE POWER AND THE GLORY

Photography by Willem Reithmeier

*The architect or designer, like the objects he or she designs, is never neutral.*  
*In this article, TONY FRY looks at the executive levels of the State Bank and shows how power is exercised by design.*

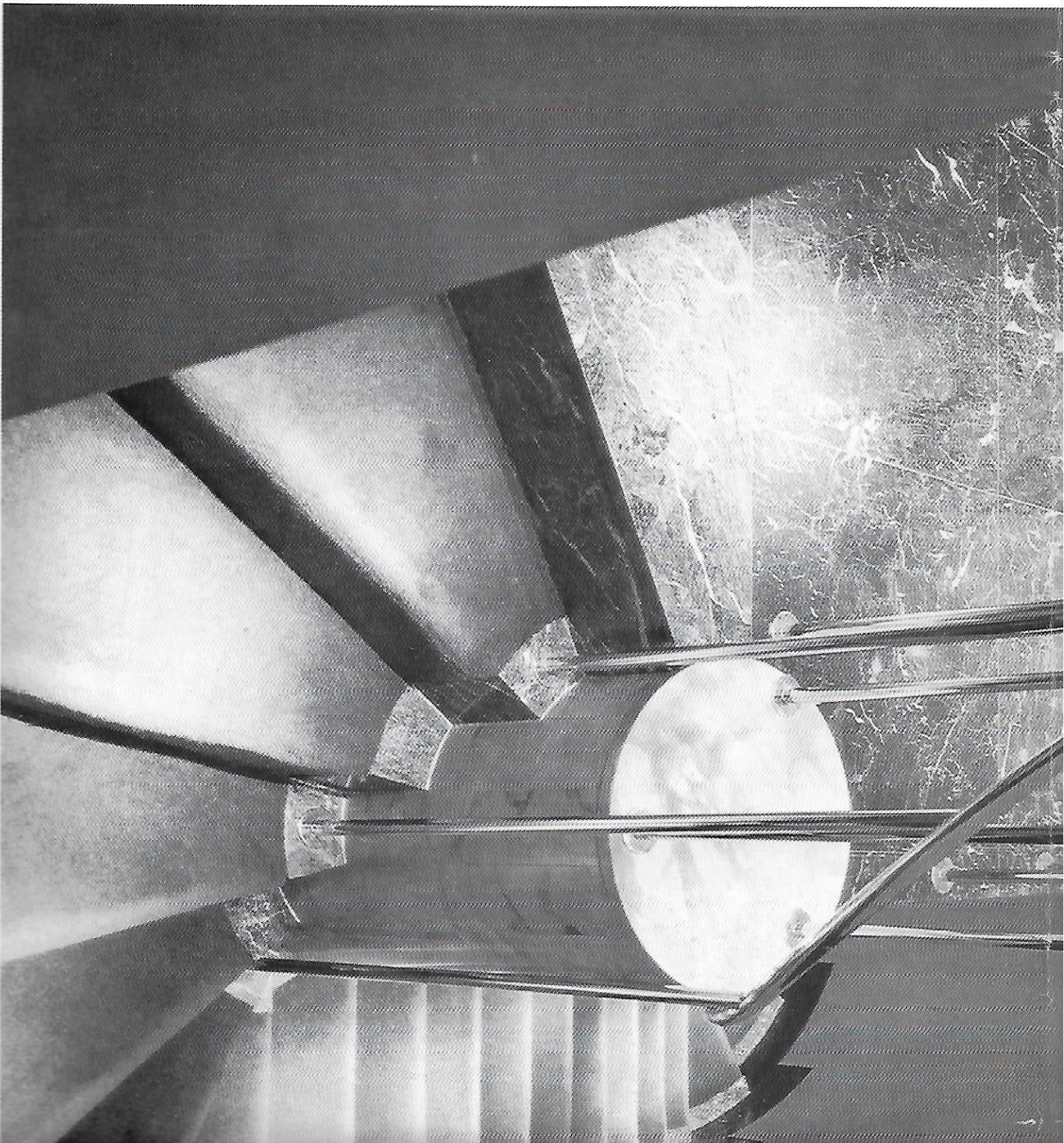


**H**igh Style has been brought into the service of high finance in many ways over many centuries. Over the past few decades a new phenomenon has arrived — the management and outward visual display

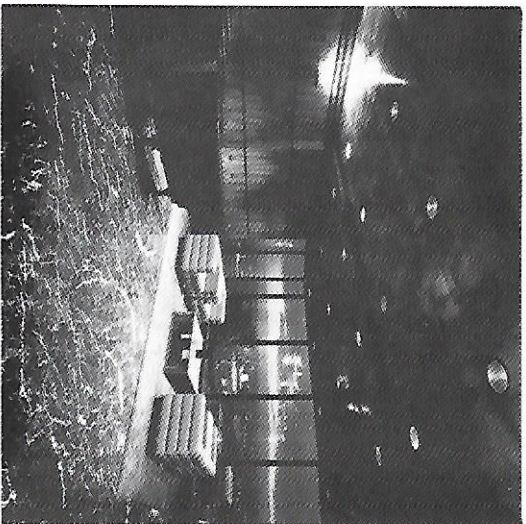
management and outward visual display of designed social appearances by corporate culture. This extension of design into everyday life marks a significant arena for the production of new cultural values by large corporations. It had many proto forms — Henry Ford's early twentieth-century philosophy on work, morality, domestic life, alcohol, tobacco and its communication to workers as instruction in the way they should live, is a clear and significant instance of the rise of such a culture.<sup>1</sup> The State Bank of New South Wales represents a contemporary and local example of an advanced application of corporate culture — as both a style of management and outward appearance. It evidences a moment well beyond the model found in Ford's crude directives. This is nowhere more apparent than in the executive suites on the 35th and 36th floors of its Sydney head office in Martin Place.

What I am going to do is to explore some of the ways in which *space*, *power* and *design* are configured in the conception and form of this corporate environment. It follows that the work of the designer, George Freedman, will not be commented upon within its own terms; that is, as an exercise of applied eclecticism, aesthetic play, displayed taste or any other mode of the functional disengagement of design from power that can be and usually is the product of a review. For a standard account of the interior design, the reader is directed elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> One problem, however, does connect with such accounts and needs to be put in place. This is the question of authorship, which I am partly going to leave open for the reader to reflect upon. The open question, to be more precise, is this — *what actually is being authored and therefore should command the attention of criticism?* My own response to the question follows:

A few days ago I was looking at the catalogue of *High Styles: Twentieth-Century American Design*, an exhibition (note: sponsored by the Chase Manhattan Bank) held at the Whitney Museum, New



Main staircase between floors.



Reception area, 35th floor.

York, in 1985. While there are shifts in reference and period, walking into the State Bank suite was like stepping into this exhibition, but with one major difference — its procession of style is not in the context of a museum but in a functioning space of finance capitalism. The use of corporate space for such an overt statement of conspicuous cultural consumption is not an example of a 'museum without walls', after all, all that appears as old is new in this spectacle of the simulacrum. Neither is the project simply evidence of the arrival of the 'new Medici' — the offices have not just become works of art. Rather, 'art' has been further employed in working for capital. Cultural capital (by which I identify the economic applications of the cultural knowledge and taste of the 'cultivated' person) has clearly been shown to have a market value.<sup>3</sup> Rather than this just being mobilised by the individual, we are now seeing it as a feature of the working of corporate culture.

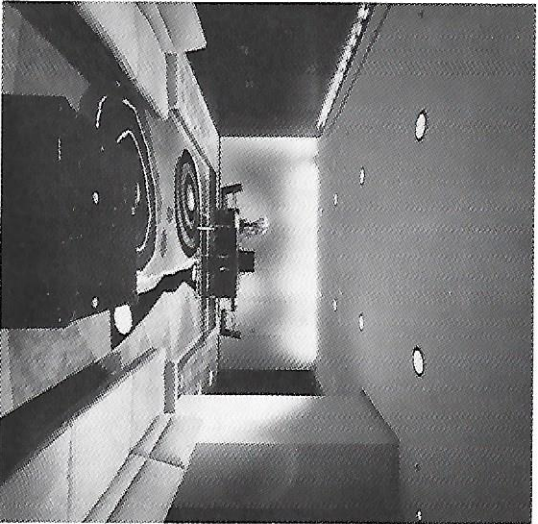
Money speaks through the nature of the semi-private spaces of the inner sanctum of the Bank's hierarchy. This is, however, only one decodable reading of what we find on levels 35 and 36. Just as cultural capital is one of the ways an individual projects status, so it is with the bank. To prime real estate and high quality architecture is now added 'a centre of excellence' of the standards of 'good taste'. To the moneyed and powerful who enter executive territory, one readable message is that 'we have the biggest cultural phallus in town'. We strip the competition. Male gender is not evoked without awareness here, for what is addressed is a male world of paternalism, manifest as patronage, dispensation, sexual division of labour and inscribed gendered space.

Another readable message in need of comment here is the use, by design, of cultural forms to maximise the territorial advantage of negotiating from your 'home base'. This is done to great effect by the application of George Freedman's skills. Visitors find they have to place themselves in the hands of those assigned to guide them through the

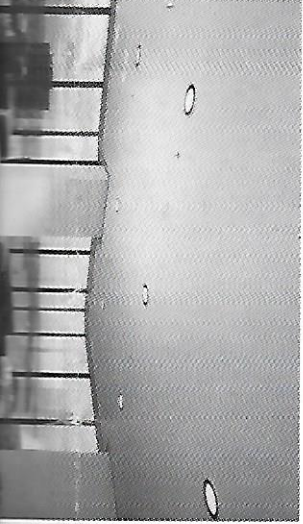
Insider perceptions are also not insignificant. How, where and in what setting employees view top management is an important feature of the way the power structure of corporate culture reproduces itself. In these terms the executive suite exists as myth (a meaningful fiction) as well as an actual and potential photographic image. It represents and is represented as the seat of power. It is an object which enables the cultural and economic division of the corporation to be rendered into visible modern material forms. Here the visual, as object and gaze, is a productive instrument to signify ranked status within the professional managerial class who populate the building (and all other State Bank buildings).

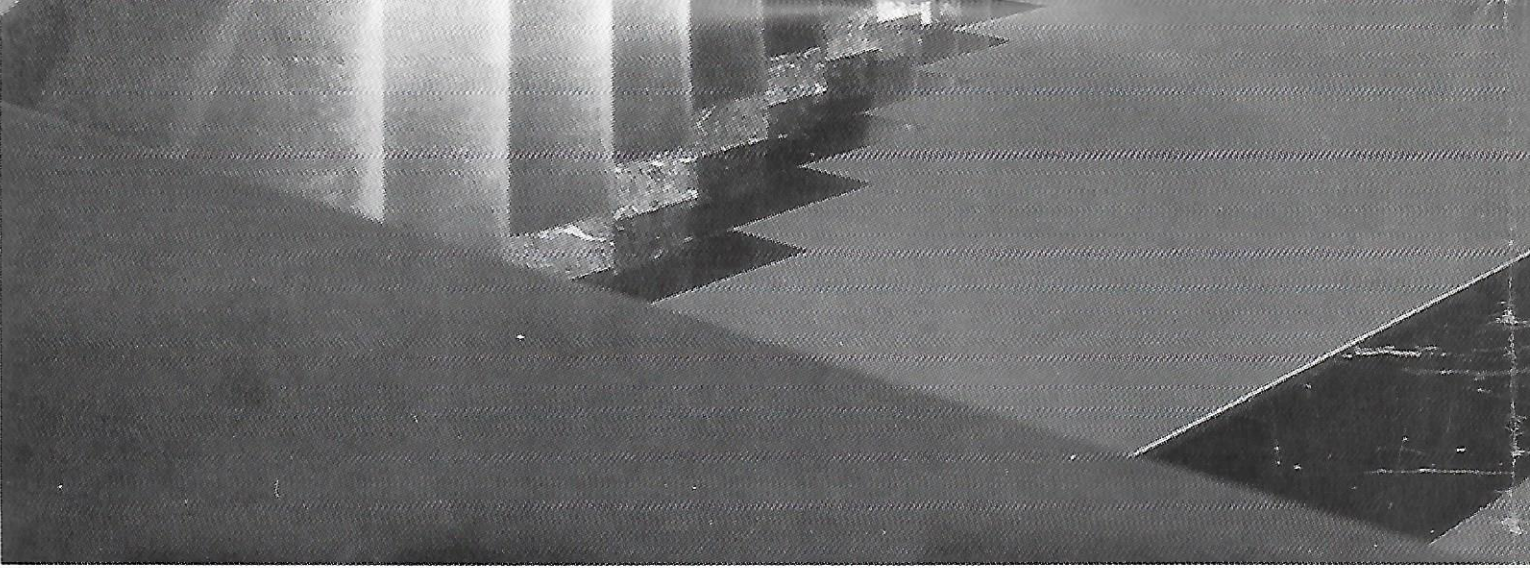
More specifically, those employees who are the support staff of top management and work on levels 35/36 are themselves framed in the frame — they are part of the spectacle. However, they don't fit. The rigour of the aesthetic and the nature of corporate culture marginalises and diminishes people. They serve it, are its functionaries and exist outside its regime of styles (as the depopulated architectural and interior design photography continually shows). Unless uniformed, beyond the convention of the sombre suit or dress, people cannot be accommodated as part of the aesthetic environment. They are made invisible by their exclusion from the photograph and by the control (self and directed) of their social perception of the designed space, for in this haven of economic deregulation, behaviour is heavily regulated by formal and informal devices. For instance, very little can be brought into the space to humanise it, its personality is the expression of the corporate ideal, corporate culture is an ultra conformity. It is the power in the land. While the styles of the place are not clinical, they lack warmth, they repress, they are not open to be marked by the employees' personas. Such space is policed by the dominance of the corporate will.

To complete the design logic of the Freedman State Bank interior, a fashion

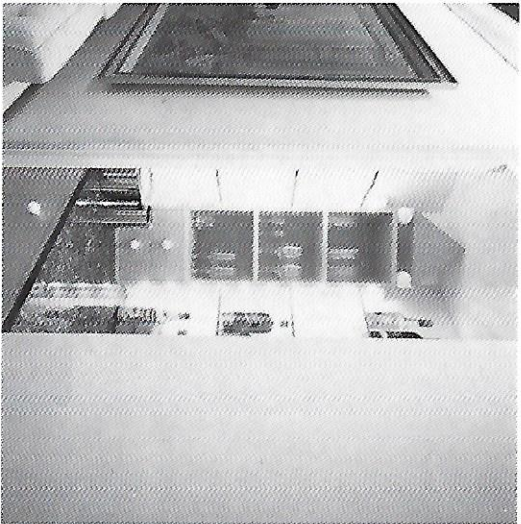


Chairman's office.





Managing Director's office.



Post-modern cocktail cabinet in deputy managing director's office.



Staff toilets

skills. Visitors find they have to place themselves in the hands of those assigned to guide them through the space, mainly because the constant changes of style, use of mirrors and paucity of directional cues make one's physical passage through the space very difficult without prior knowledge of the floor-plans. In addition, visitors are rendered passive in the space in which they are placed because almost every room requires specialist knowledge to be able to be brought into use; getting the lights right, the door closed, finding the telephone, the projector projecting, a drink and so on, cannot be done unless one has been shown what is where and then how it works. Moreover, each room's function is not confined to its designated use — as room to 'meet in', 'work in', 'eat in', 'wait in', and to 'conduct one's toilet in' — it becomes a location to manufacture and hold the gaze of the visitor. This look is framed by corporate view and desires, and seeks a reflective view by the viewer — a reflection upon one's own taste in relation to the spectacle of taste presented.

The passage of the gaze is not just about viewing a synchronic spectacle. While that which is looked upon exists in the present, it does not set out to be read as having come from the same moment. The eclectic compound of styles is a means to represent the idea of tradition, and one in which the bank is placed. As a new bank, part of the design brief was to give the impression that the bank has been and will be around for a long time. Design then, in its use and style, becomes a means to construct a visible, if fractured and un(der) articulated, historical narrative. The pleasure of the invited gaze is not then based upon a play of the style of a conservative 'Post-Modernism'. Rather, it is based upon a managerial rationalist co-option of what appears to be an irrational expression of 'expressive individualism'. 'Art' becomes subsumed to a capitalist logic, 'creativity' to management's deployment.

ate will.

To complete the design logic of the Freedman State Bank interiors, a fashion design exercise should have also been undertaken, for here one expects to meet people who look like they have just walked off the set of 'Dallas'. One doesn't, yet this silly speculation is not beyond currently applied fantasy. New regimes of dressing for the job are on their way!

What we have indicated here is that underneath the facade of a 'Post-Modern' play with style is the rationale of a modernist functionalism that characterises a history of the employment of high culture in the development of capitalism. The architect or designer, like the objects and space he or she designs, is never neutral in this progress. Choices are always made or imposed. The point I make here is that some architects and designers know it, and that others don't. It follows that the attribution of authorship, while going to the architect/designer, is often misleading for what comes to be, is prefigured by the managerial concept rather than the design concept. Style then is simply a deflection from the form of that which already exists prior to design. ●

*Tony Fry is a lecturer in the Department of Fine Arts at Sydney University. He is currently preparing a resource book on aspects of Australia's design history which will be published early next year.*

**NOTES:**

1. See Huw Benyon, *Working for Ford*, Penguin, UK 1973.
2. Peter Roach, 'Heaven's Gate', *Interior Design* (Australia), Issue 4, 1986, pp. 80-100. See also Davina Jackson, 'Around the World in 80 Rooms', *Good Weekend Magazine*, 3 January 1987, pp. 30-35.
3. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, R.K.P., UK 1984 — The concept of 'cultural capital' is formulated by Bourdieu and presented in this text.