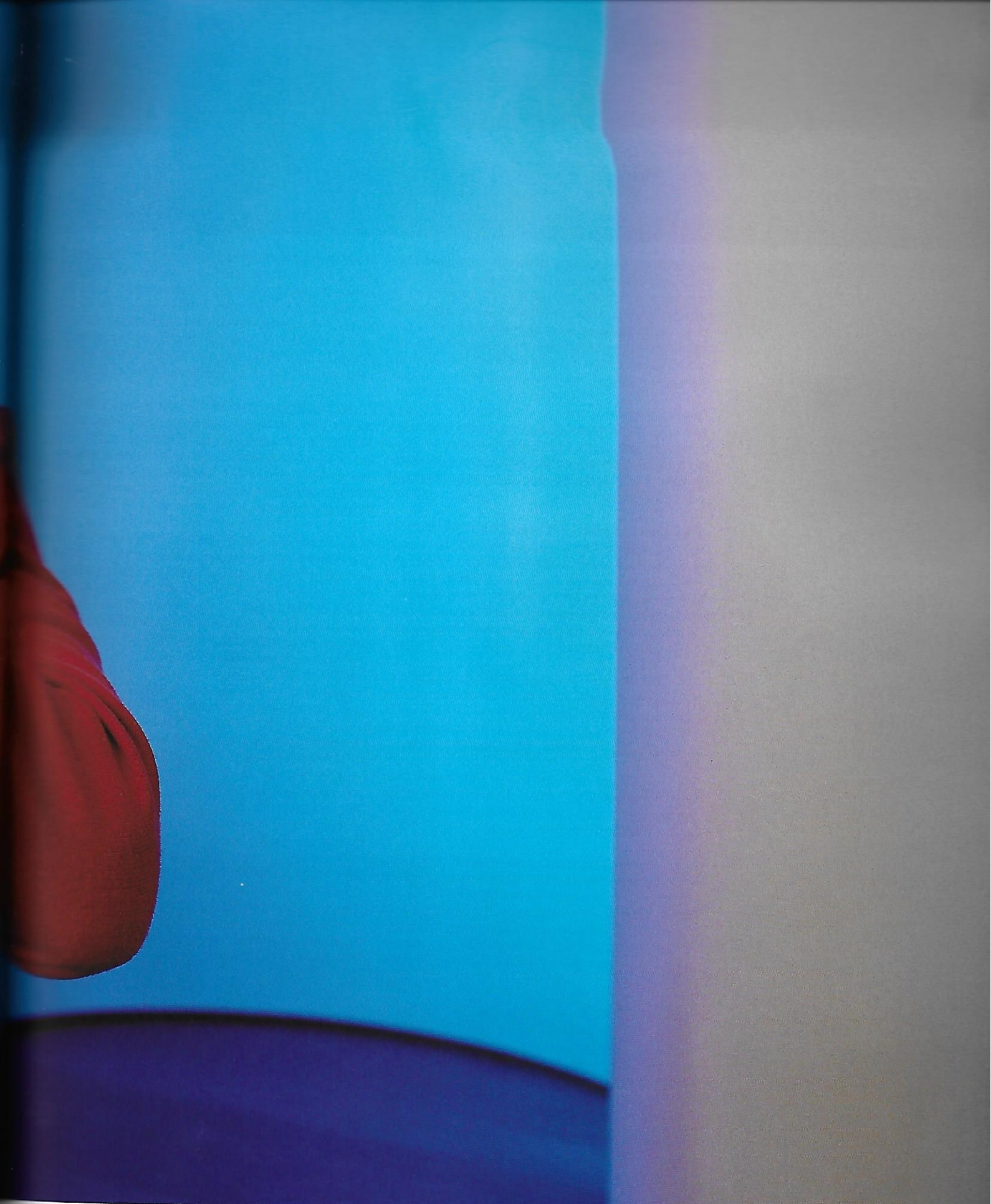**Artemide** DESIGN LUMINARIES
GEORGE FREEDMAN

FOR MORE THAN 40 YEARS, THE ARTEMIDE GROUP HAS AIMED TO PROPOSE LIGHT AS A COMPANION TO PEOPLE, AND AS A SOURCE OF PHYSICAL PLEASURE AND MENTAL COMFORT. HOW APPROPRIATE, THEREFORE, THAT IN THE FIRST OF A SERIES RECOGNISING THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE 'LEADING LIGHTS' OF AUSTRALIAN DESIGN, ARTEMIDE PRESENTS GEORGE FREEDMAN, OF FREEDMAN REMBEL, AN INTERIOR DESIGNER RECOGNISED AS A MASTER OF DETAIL, MATERIALS AND COLOUR WHO STRIVES TO CREATE BEAUTIFUL ENVIRONMENTS WHERE "PEOPLE FEEL ABSOLUTELY COMFORTABLE – AND WHEN PEOPLE ARE COMFORTABLE THEY ARE BEAUTIFUL"

George Freedman and Ralph Rembel sit in the front room of George's East Sydney terrace – in the blue room. The blue is imposing: a deep sky, a seaside blue, not unlike the colour his parents' bedroom was painted when George was growing up in the family home in Brooklyn, New York. It's a blue that could well strike a particular chord because his parents' bedroom was the only room in the house that ever stayed the same colour.

George leans back on well-used tan leather Mies' Barcelona chairs. He speaks slowly, carefully, and laughs a lot. Ralph contributes quietly when necessary. And George's two black Scottish terriers, the current incarnations of what have become characteristic accessories after many years, nudge around and play staring games.

If anybody can be said to have invented interior design in Australia, it would have to be George Freedman. Arriving in Sydney from New York in 1969, George brought the sensibilities and disciplines of the latest international style to what was still, in design terms, a provincial outpost. He plucked interior design out of the realm of decoration and aligned it with its natural partner, architecture. In George's hands, interior design in Australia went pro.

Soon afterwards, when he teamed up with his then partner in life and business, Neville Marsh, Neville had great expectations for the firm. He wanted Marsh Freedman Associates to be the best interior design group in Australia – and in its heyday in the eighties, this goal was achieved with appropriate panache.

Operating through the nineties as George Freedman Associates, George formed a new partnership five years ago with long-time associate Ralph Rembel and the company now operates as Freedman Rembel.

Recognised as a master of detail, materials and colour, and known for his rigorous design discipline, George Freedman has not only led by example for over 30 years, he has also been a highly influential tutor, mentor and motivator for the architects and students who have moved through his practice. He was elected a Fellow of the Design Institute of Australia in 1984 and is a founding member of the Australian Academy of Design.

The direction his life has taken, however, has been propelled as much by his innate talents and propensities as by his choice of lovers, and by sheer accident as much as the opportunities that came his way.

"It was always part of my nature to be involved in art. As a little kid in summer camp I would volunteer to paint [stage] sets rather than play basketball. Being involved in the production of something that was handsome or beautiful was a natural choice.

"Design and colour were always part of my upbringing," he says. "My father was a colourist for a paint company and every three years the house would be completely repainted and recoloured. Everything was always rich and strong: the stair hall would be screaming Chinese red, the sitting room dark brown, another room aubergine, another a pearl colour. It was always intense colours. The first time I was allowed to get involved I selected wallpaper for one wall of my bedroom with Spanish galleons floating on it and the other wall was mock leather, which at 13 or so I thought was the absolute cat's miaow." With this richly painted backdrop to his early life it's hardly surprising that George likes intense colours and is quite at ease in highly coloured spaces.

When he was accepted into the Carnegie Institute Drama School, however, he says, "My family decided that set design was not the appropriate thing for a nice Jewish boy to do, so they talked me into doing architecture." A summer job at New York architects Kahn & Jacobs turned into a full-time position when he "got quite distracted" in his final semester. (The distraction? "Oh, a young man. Actually he wasn't young. I was young.")

"I wasn't quite sure how I was going to fit into architecture without a degree. It hadn't really occurred to me to do interiors." But at Kahn & Jacobs, "The guy who was doing the interiors of the American Airlines Passenger Terminal at Idlewild Airport (now John F. Kennedy) had a heart attack." There was a big presentation coming up, George took over and "that's how it started".

After a few years spent painting in Spain and Holland and another stint at Kahn & Jacobs, George arrived in London, and with his small portfolio of paintings landed an interior design job with Tandy Halford and Mills. "I learned a great deal from them: basically, how to plan and detail interior spaces. Once I started doing interiors I was very comfortable. It just seemed the natural thing for me to do and I knew I was starting to master what I was doing."

In his early thirties he was back in New York, and there were only three firms he wanted to work for – Skidmore Owings & Merrill, I.M. Pei and Knoll International. "They were the best firms and also they did the work I admired – very strict international style, modernist, mostly commercial work. On the same day I got offered a job from both I.M. Pei to do a project in Houston, Texas, and from Knoll to do the Bank of New South Wales in Sydney.

"I thought Sydney sounded a lot more exotic than Houston, the romance of Sydney took my fancy. The Bank of New South Wales was a big project. Peddle Thorpe & Walker were the architects; they talked the bank into using Knoll's planning unit in New York because they thought it should have an interior of that calibre. It was a gigantic project for me at the time and it was pivotal, in that it really changed my life. I met Neville Marsh at [a] dinner party. I fell in love."

George moved to Sydney to complete the bank project and started working with Neville and his company, Neville Marsh Interiors, on numerous bank projects. Many foreign merchant banks were opening up in the wake of deregulation. "There was a boom of banking that had this Knoll look throughout Australia. It was a lucky time and the clients were good."

A recession followed; times weren't so good. "We were back making bedspreads!" says George. Then in the early eighties, along with other corporate and residential projects, "we were asked by Nick Whitlam to do levels 35 and 36 of the State Bank, Martin Place. It was a fabulous opportunity. It changed the whole texture of the group – from four or five people we grew to 17 and it was a terrific learning process." Working with a repetitive series of managing director's offices built on an identical plan, he says, "we decided to tell the history of design in the 20th century. Each [office] had a different selection of furniture, a different colour scheme: in one office it would be chairs by Corbusier, in another chairs by Marcel Breuer, in another furniture by Florence Knoll. It was a gargantuan adventure.

"Although the Bank of New South Wales, done in the late sixties, was an extravagant installation, the State Bank pushed it further. Nick Whitlam's request was, make it look as if we've

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always been there. It was probably a turning point in interior design in Sydney, even in Australia, in terms of what a really first class business interior should do -- we were building an image. The State Bank put the firm on the map, so to speak, and established the true direction of the firm." After that, he says, Bilsons then Ampersand (two of five restaurant interiors he has designed for Tony Bilson) and the Fairfax residence would be the major benchmarks of his career.

"For me, interior design is the most exciting thing I could think of doing. We are quite lucky in the kinds of clients we get, who give us considerable encouragement and leeway. When we started out it was a new game in Australia. Also, I had never run an office before, so it was a new process. I have been told that Marsh Freedman Associates/George Freedman Associates in a sense invented interior design in Australia. That's not really true – there were people like Marion Hall Best before us who did work with that kind of intent, but without the same discipline." Now, he says, a number of architectural firms operate interior design practices with that same discipline and intent.

"There was a period in the early eighties, when it became fashionable to be 'done' by Marsh Freedman, as if it was a face lift or a new car. People come now because of the work. Ralph has been very much part of this change. There's a very strict modernist background, a continuous discipline that we share, [but] with his architectural background we now have control over our complete work environment. Because of him, and because of the development of the practice, it has become very thorough and precise."

"We have a kind of a language that is part of what we are. It's our toolbox," says Ralph. " And then we have our clients, who have their wish-lists and requirements. These two things are meshed together. We don't dictate our language onto people, but we tend to stay within the agenda of that language."

"Finding the direction is fairly easy," says George. "Putting it on paper is where we start testing it, finessing it. Then the scribble has to become a reality and that is exciting when it all falls into place. When it isn't right, you know it. When it is, it sits there, and you're comfortable with it – then it's beautiful."

"Very early in my [career] we did a house," he says, "and [the woman's] brief was to make it so that when her friends came they'd look beautiful. The sitting room was large and luxurious and after the first dinner party she rang up and said, 'Thank you. My friends looked beautiful. And boy," she said about one or two of them, "did they need help!' "

"Part of what we do is that people should feel comfortable in a space. It's not necessarily a prime thing, but it should reinforce their lives. It should be uplifting. You want people to feel absolutely comfortable – and when people are comfortable they are beautiful.

"I strive to do beautiful work, that is satisfying and appropriate to me, the client and the brief. It's as limited as that," says George. For amplification, he points to Ampersand as a project that ably defines the firm's current approach. He says it has a feeling of comfort, luxury and fantasy and does make people look beautiful, but declines to go further. "It's not for us to describe. Artists should do what they do and shut up." idM

THESE PAGES THE MANY FACES OF THE ANIMATED AND TALENTED GEORGE FREEDMAN AND (BELOW) THE DESIGNER WITH PARTNER IN FREEDMAN REMBEL, RALPH REMBEL.

GEORGE FREEDMAN TIMELINE

Year	Event
1936	Born and grew up in Brooklyn, New York, USA
1953-58	Studied architecture at Syracuse University, New York
1958-60	Worked with New York architects Kahn & Jac
1960-61	Moved to Ibiza, Spain, to paint
1961-62	Returned to New York, Kahn & Jacobs part-ti Painting.
1962-65	Lived in Holland – painting shows in Amsterd and Brussels
1965-68	Moved to London. Joined British graphic and interiors firm Tandy Halford & Mills. Bovril Headquarters, London. Beechams Head Office, London.
1968-70	Knoll International, New York. Various projects including the Bank of New South Wales, Sydney.
1969	Moved to Sydney
1971-77	Partnership with Neville Marsh at Neville Marsh Interiors. Various American bank offices throughout Australia: Morgan Guarantee, Bank of Chicago, Bank of America, Partnership Pacific Residential and commercial work.
1977-86	Neville Marsh Interiors became Marsh Freed Associates. Price Waterhouse offices, Sydney Leighton Holdings offices, St Leonards; Powerhouse Museum, Sydney; various restaurants, corporate and residential project
1983-86	Executive offices, State Bank of New South Wales, Sydney.
1984	Architecture graduate Ralph Rembel joined the company.
1986	Neville Marsh retired.
1987-2001	Company renamed George Freedman Assoc Corporate and residential work. Stage sets fo Sydney Dance Company productions: Kraane Soft Bruising and Mythologia Bilsons Restaurant, The Treasury, Intercontin Hotel, Sydney; Ampersand Restaurant, Fairfa residence
1996	Ralph Rembel became a partner.
2001	Company renamed Freedman Rembel.