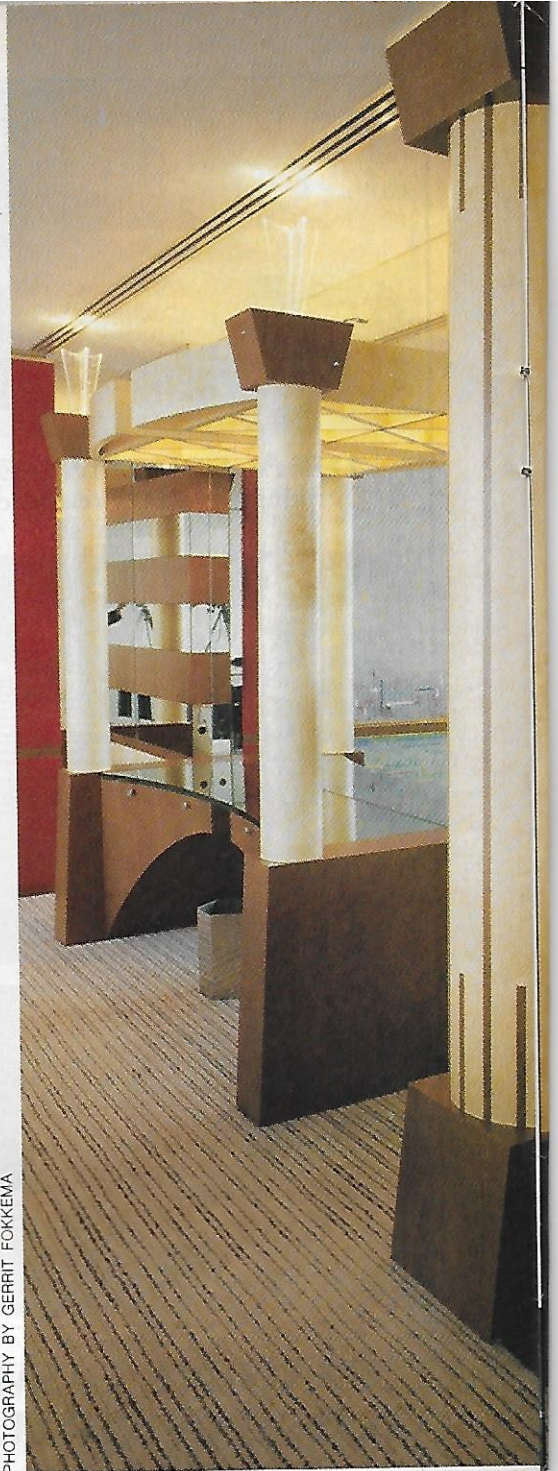


Part of the \$6 million furnishings: above, the board room . . .



PHOTOGRAPHY BY GERRIT FORKEMA

. . . sideboard in the dining room, both on

AROUND THE WORLD IN 80 ROOMS

By DAVINA JACKSON

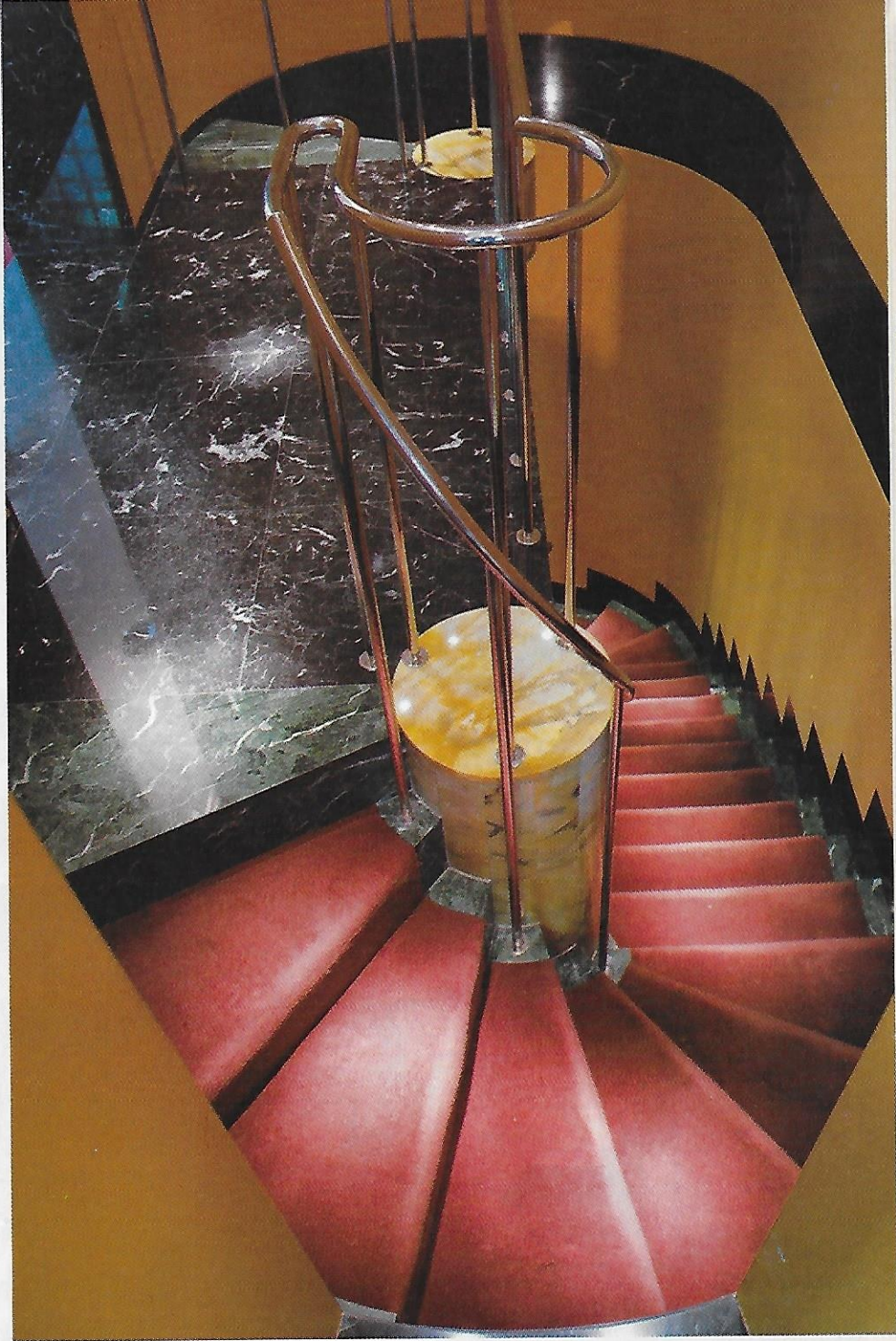
IT WAS EASILY the most bitter conservation battle Sydney has seen in decades.irate architects and members of the august National Trust went out on the streets, for the first time waving banners and wearing cardboard models of one of the city's early "skyscrapers" like paper hats at a Christmas party. Notables as varied as Brett Whiteley, Margaret Fulton, Leo Schofield and Harry M. Miller signed public protest advertisements.

What were they on about? The State Bank's plan — now executed — to pull down its 11-storey Art Deco-style headquarters in Martin Place, the old Rural Bank built in 1936. It wanted to

GOOD WEEKEND



the 36th level



The spiral staircase which links the 35th and 36th levels

put up a 36-storey monument that would cement its image as “aggressive” commercial banker with a high-profile home at the top of the city’s financial precinct. It’s no accident, executives say, that the result is taller than the headquarters of its rival Westpac nearby.

For its plan, the bank was accused of “Goebbels tactics.” Opponents plastered their cars with bumper stickers reading “The State Bank demolishes more for you, personally” — a play on the words of its advertising slogan.

By the time the new centre opened in September last year, the brouhaha was more than three years dead. And, curiously, some of the critics came back

with compliments. Many architects still are angry about the demolition and the NSW president of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects, Lawrence Neild, says the new design has not changed their opinion. But some of his members privately commend certain aspects of the building — particularly the red granite surface finish and the decision, under pressure from them, to set back the tower to minimise overshadowing of Martin Place.

The Sydney Morning Herald’s architecture critic, Professor John Haskell, wrote a column praising the centre after opposing demolition when the furore was at its height. And *Herald*

columnist Leo Schofield named it one of Sydney’s best buildings — exuberantly praising its “urbanity,” “sophistication” and “good manners.”

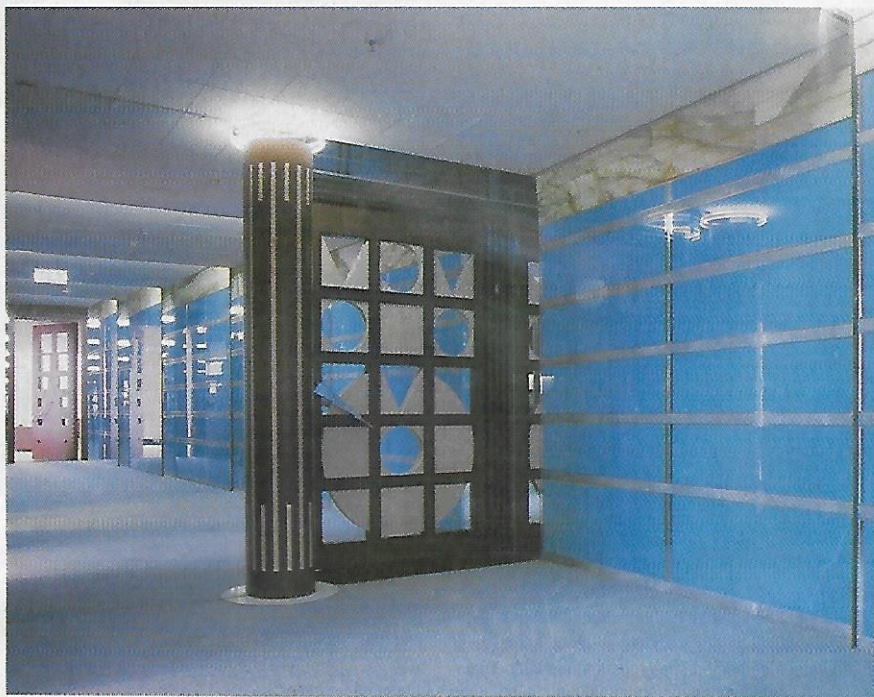
Comments of this kind are like Vivaldi to the ears of State Bank executives who are quick to compare their building’s current (independent) valuation of \$229 million with the cost price (including land value) of \$162 million. The senior partner of the architectural firm which designed the centre, Graham Thorp of Peddle Thorp and Walker, remarks: “We always knew we were right.”

THE STATE bank’s managing director, Nick Whitlam, could listen to Vivaldi ▷



From the Waterford Shop, Sydney.

WATERFORD CRYSTAL. NEVER OUT OF PLACE.



Hallway leading to the dining room: opulence with style

from the matt black music system concealed behind white lacquered wall panels in his office. He could sit in his black leather armchair, set near his window on the 35th floor, rest his feet on the matching footstool and cast his eyes over the Harbour toward Manly.

According to the bank's secretary, John O'Neill, the MD has not yet used either his armchair or stereo system for rest and contemplation. Yet these and other luxurious appointments in his corner suite near the top of the State Bank Centre almost generated a mini-controversy of their own while the executive floors were being fitted out. Rumours got around of black marble toilets and questions were asked in parliament. Says O'Neill: "Politicians were querying whether it was true that Nick Whitlam has a black bathroom. The answer is yes, but it hasn't cost more than a white one."

His comment may be correct technically but is misleading. The furnishing of the two top floors of the centre, for senior executives and board members, was the most expensive project of its kind ever carried out in Sydney. The bank went for the best. The price tag was \$6 million. (Furnishing the remaining nine floors occupied by the bank cost about \$15 million.)

If an Australian company wants the best in interior design and is prepared to pay for it, that firm may well hire George Freedman — an urbane, mild-tempered New Yorker who has created colour schemes for Kinselas Brasserie and the building which houses the Macquarie Galleries, as well as the Powerhouse Museum; designed executive offices for Westpac and Leighton Holdings and decorated

private homes for dozens of eastern suburbs people who don't like getting their names in the papers. He is a talking dictionary of design, persuasive with clients and virtually the only interior stylist for whom Australian architects happily will alter their building plans.

John O'Neill says that the bank put its complete trust in him when it hired his practice, Marsh Freedman Associates, to fit out the top floor rooms (finished mid-year).

Freedman's scheme for the executive floors is a sumptuous review — he uses terms such as "adventure" and "game" — of 20th century interior design. More than 80 spaces — offices, foyers, conference rooms, dining areas, circular antechambers, hallways, bathrooms and two remarkable marble staircases — have been created within the 2,250 square metres of the two levels.

With the trend to post-modernism in architecture and design — which reached its peak of popularity here when this scheme was planned — specialists have had a field day creating designs packed with "direct references" and "visual puns" on classic buildings and interiors of the past. Freedman's references in this project are impeccable and the craftsmanship in executing them almost faultless. But visitors might wonder whether there are too many references, from too many different sources, to allow overall harmony.

Haig Beck, editor of the formerly British-based magazine *International Architect* and a respected critic, "won't have a word said against Freedman's work." Beck is featuring the State Bank fit-out in a new book on Australian design. "George has created continuity by using the same kinds of luxurious

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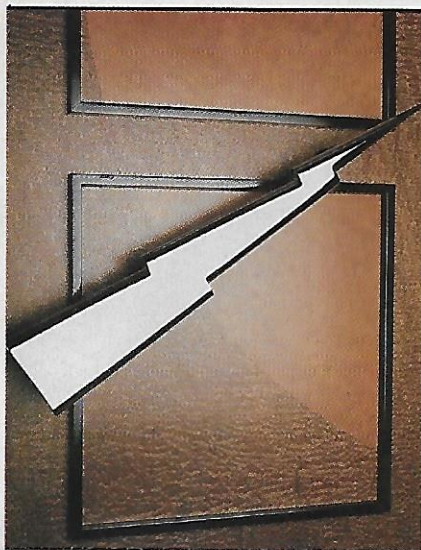
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Lightning bolt door handle

materials, in different ways, in the hallways. But, once you step through a door, he gives you the freedom to play different games. It's like being inside a city, inside one building."

On both floors, Freedman set an initial mood of fantastic opulence with lift lobbies walled with black glass and floored with Italian "nero marquina" marble. Each lobby has heavy glass doors at both ends and barrel-vaulted ceilings. The ceiling on the 35th floor is finished with gold leaf; the ceiling next floor up is surfaced with silver. Both are inspired by the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles.

The splendour continues into the adjacent main reception area on the 35th floor. Its walls are clad with exotic timber veneers — Australian-grown camphor laurel with patterned inlays of imported macassar ebony. The marble floor of the lift lobby is repeated. Floor-to-ceiling windows provide a panoramic view westward to the Blue Mountains.

Here, Freedman prepares visitors — although they may not know it — for a series of very strong colour surprises later. The shock in this room is relatively mild — four bright yellow leather chairs of a classical early 20th century design by Viennese architect Josef Hoffmann. But further on in the building you are confronted by doses of more potent shades — bright yellow walls and sienna orange carpet offsetting a black marble staircase, one corridor with glass walls painted a startling sky blue; brilliant jade green tiles on all walls of the women's bathroom and vivid abstract rugs in several offices (created especially by artist Alun Leach Jones).

Although his references go back as far as the 18th century (with his Versailles inspiration for the lift lobbies and a tribute to John Soane's design for the Bank of England in his scheme for this bank's boardroom), Freedman particularly has been thorough to catalogue

the major design movements of the 20th century. To summarise chronologically, although his scheme doesn't: there is Viennese design circa 1900 to 1920 with furniture by leading architects of the period such as Otto Wagner, Adolf Loos and Josef Hoffmann. Art Deco is represented by many furnishing treatments that were popular during the 1930s, especially the use of exotic timber veneers in complex inlay patterns. Freedman notes the Bauhaus movement by including furniture pieces designed by a leading exponent, Mies van der Rohe, and using them in rooms decorated in styles of which Mies would approve. Freedman takes a favourite architectural treatment of the 1950s — glass block walls — and has installed them as curving barriers between executive offices and hallways (where light was needed but sound transmission not wanted). He recreates a 1960s look in the office of deputy MD Don Adams with furniture of the period by Florence Knoll and special pieces by Mies whose work was back in favour at that time. And finally, with Nick Whitlam's office, he moves to the 1980s — using bright, blousy velvet furniture designed three years ago by Otto Zapf for Knoll Furniture of New York.

Although the interiors of the old Rural Bank deliberately emphasised Australian themes and materials, there was never any question that the new building would follow suit. George Freedman, like Nick Whitlam and his board, has an outlook that is purposely international. He includes Australian elements in his schemes only if he thinks they stack up against the best from the rest of the world. In his view, our furniture doesn't (although the bank has many locally-made pieces he designed himself) while Australian art does.

Advised first by the late Rudy Komon and now by Macquarie Galleries director Eileen Chanin, the bank has developed an extensive collection of contemporary Australian art — and many of its works are displayed prominently through the building. On the executive floors, a pastoral scene by Salvatore Zofrea covers an eight-metre-long wall in the largest dining room; tapestries by Colin Lanceley hang in the main boardroom and paintings by other local artists such as Michael Johnson and Fred Williams decorate most of the private offices.

The bank even commissioned some art tableware for its dining room — a selection of Limoges pieces made to a pattern created originally by Monet. But Freedman thought Monet's colours did not suit the decor, so he had Limoges reproduce the pieces in shades of royal blue, rust, ochre and black. "I can't stop fussing with things," he notes. Then he claims, surely tongue-in-cheek, that the rust colour on the china "matches the sand of Ayers Rock." □



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