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'Remembering designer George
Freedman' by Sam Marshall
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Remembering designer George Freedman



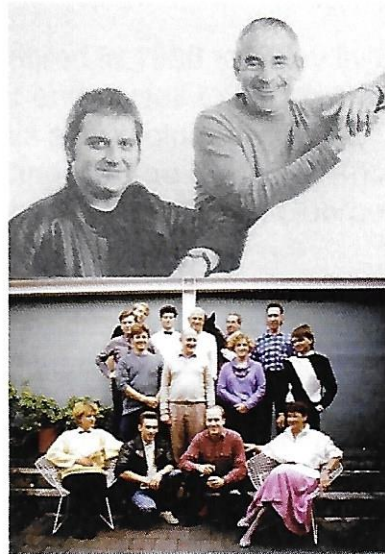
Designer George Freedman is remembered as a man who nurtured and paved the careers of many of Australia's best designers.

With a love of life and everything it offered, George had an exceptional eye for colour, material and detail, and brought art, design and architecture together to create some of Sydney's most remarkable interiors.

George passed away on 21 July 2016, aged 80 years. Delivering the eulogy at a service filled with George's friends and colleagues, architect Sam Marshall whose career began in George's Sydney studio, reflects on the man who profoundly changed his life and career forever.

“George was widely known as an exceptional colourist, be it bright fluorescent or just fifteen shades of white.”

— Sam Marshall



George Freedman, 1936–2016

No-one in George’s design studio understood how he could use the same water, same coffee, same milk and same pot as we did, yet produce a sensational coffee; light years ahead of our attempts. It was this ability to manipulate material, space, colour, texture, form and lighting that set him apart. He was a magician of atmosphere.

Born, raised and educated in New York, George joined Knoll International in New York in 1968 with responsibility for interiors for their globally based corporate clients. His projects included the US Pavilion for the 1970 Osaka World Fair designing the VIP dignitaries’ hospitality areas.

In 1969, Knoll International sent George to Sydney to design the executive accommodation for the Bank of New South Wales (now Westpac). In later years those drawings were considered by his staff as the ‘design bible’. He brought not only International Modernism, as had Walter and Marion Griffin and Harry Seidler, he brought the exotic. On arrival, he fell in love with prominent interior designer, Neville Marsh, and decided to stay. They established Marsh Freedman Associates in 1973.

George and Neville worked together well, each knowing their strengths to contribute. I recall them coming back from a weekend at their farm at Milton with all the furnishings done for the State Bank. Another weekend back with all the cutlery, and so on.

In the studio, George set the direction. You worked with George not for him. Individual spaces were different because the different personalities of the designers were included. In his words, “They would interpret what I was thinking and make it a reality”. Like myself, young architects were attracted to MFA as it was where it was happening at the time. In this dynamic workplace, George opened our eyes to what was possible and inspired us all in our future careers.

Following a very successful partnership, Neville retired in 1986 to enjoy living in Rome. At that time George invited Robert Chester and myself to become his partners. Ralph Rembell joined MFA direct from his architecture degree at UNSW to later form Freedman Rembell in 2002. It was fitting George designed Knoll's 75th Anniversary fitout in the De De Ce Sydney showroom in 2014. George never really retired.

George developed an inimitable approach to interior design, highly recognised for his relentless attention to detail, inventive use of materials and especially colour. He manipulated space rather than merely applying surface decoration. He had the ability and courage to reinvent himself with each project. He effortlessly applied his design skills to residential interiors, corporate headquarters and restaurants, theatre set design, boat interiors, crockery and carpet design – always maintaining the highest in quality.

Sydney's best chefs at the time including Tony Bilson, Damien Piglet and Anne Taylor, employed George to create harmonious atmospheres to wrap around their masterful food. These were, amongst others, the interiors for Berowra Waters Inn, Chez Oz, Kinselas, Claude's, Taylors, Bilsons, the Treasury Restaurant and Ampersand.

Mutual respect between George and some of Sydney's best architects: Glenn Murcutt, Michael Davies, Wendy Lewin, Peter Stronach, Ken Woolley, Lionel Glendenning, Andrew Andersons, Ross Bonthorne, Keith Cottier, and more recently Neil Durbach, produced seamless extensions of each others' work.

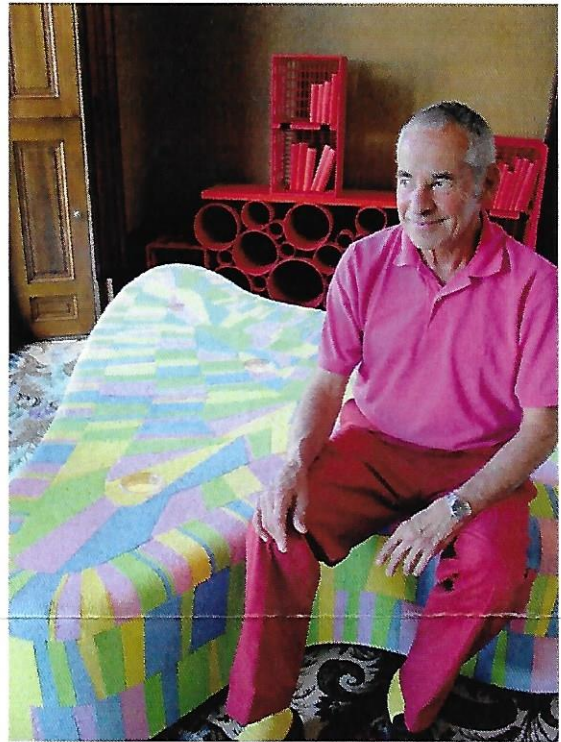
One of his important achievements was the executive levels and rooftop garden of the State Bank in Martin Place. Under the helm of progressive managing director, Nick Whitlam, the brief was to have interiors as good as any in the world, if not better, to show that the bank was serious about what they did and that "they had always been there". Space, materials and detailing were innovative and exacting – often flamboyant, often referential, always functional. Many site specific art works were integrated into the design. Art, design and architecture were one.

George was widely known as an exceptional colourist, be it bright fluorescent or just fifteen shades of white. The exterior he created for Macquarie Galleries showed the possibilities of colour on a heritage façade, while the theatre set for the Sydney Dance Company performances of Kraanerg in 1988 involved painting white forms with pure projected colour to create the mood.

His sharp and encyclopedic memory of colour, materials, furniture and interiors (both contemporary and traditional) equipped George to know when to be flamboyant or restrained, strong or subtle, when to put a Mies sofa next to a Bugatti cabinet – or when to combine these together in a new way. An exhibition at Elizabeth Bay House had amoeba-shaped ottomans covered in fluorescent pink, blue and green domestic kitchen sponges!

“What a man, what a person, what a designer. I used to call him the private university of design. He mentored so many of the great designers. He was a great friend who was always the man of Detail and he will always be remembered as one of Australia’s true design pioneers.”

— Kevin Jarrett, Founder Space Furniture



We all know George’s love of life.

We all know his keen sense of humour. Neville and George shared a desk sitting opposite each other. I recall Neville walking away from this desk, and from George’s raucous laughter while talking to his mates in New York on the phone, saying with his eyes looking up, “You don’t know what it’s like sharing an office with a laughing hyena.”

George’s commitment to quality, the highest quality, permeated his work and life. He showed us all how good things could be.

With his two black Scottie dogs at his side, he mixed a mean Negroni to mellow the end of the day – more laughter.

Sam Marshall

Sam Marshall heads up Sydney-based practice Architect Marshall, best known for the recently completed Museum of Contemporary Art Australia.

Photo credits: Page 1 – Born in New York, designer George Freedman will be remembered for the considerable influence he has had on Australia’s interior design culture over the past 40 years. This is one of the few photos taken of George doing what he loved best. Photo by Peter J. O’Brien. Page 2 – Top: Ralph Rembel and George Freedman. Photo courtesy Freedman Rembel. Bottom: The Marsh Freedman team in 1988. Sam Marshall is on the left, second from the back. George is holding one of his much loved Scottie dogs. Photo courtesy MFA. Page 4 – George on his colourful kitchen sponge ottoman at the Changing Spaces exhibition, organised by the Historic Houses Trust and held at Elizabeth Bay House in 2006. Photo by Jody Pachniuk.