

IN MEMORIAM



Tribute:

GEORGE FREEDMAN

DISCIPLES OF THE LATE SUPERSTAR OF AUSTRALIAN DESIGN HAIL HIM AS A 'MAGICIAN'. BY CHRIS PEARSON.

Interior designer George Freedman, who died on 21 July at the age of 80, was a modern-day alchemist. "He was a master of whipping up a dessert out of nothing or mixing a cocktail — it could be a metaphor for his work," says architect Sam Marshall, who worked for Freedman in the 1980s. "This ability to manipulate material, space, colour, texture, form and lighting set him apart. He was a magician of atmosphere."

Born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1936, Freedman studied architecture at Syracuse University. In the early 1960s, he worked as an interior designer in New York before moving to London in 1965. Three years later, he returned to the US and joined Knoll's international planning unit. It dispatched him to Sydney in 1969 to outfit the Bank of NSW (later Westpac), where Freedman met his future partner in life and work, Neville Marsh, and established Marsh Freedman Associates.

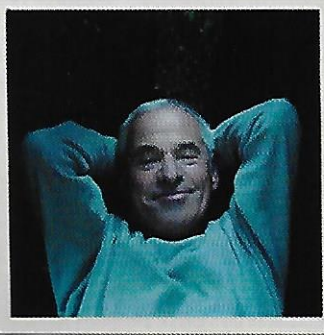
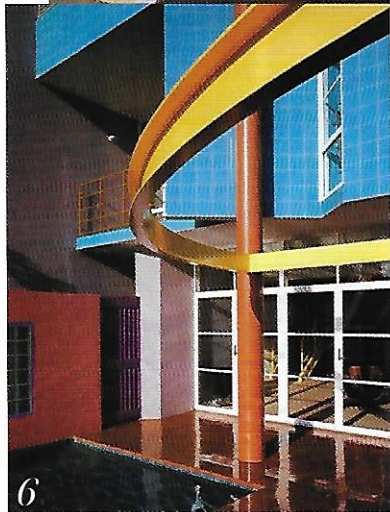
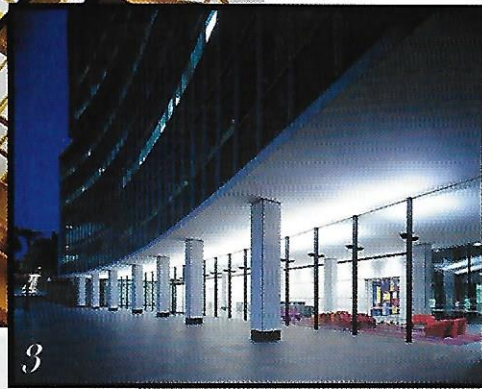
Through the 1970s and '80s, until Marsh retired to Rome in 1986, the dazzling duo became celebrity designers with A-list clients. After Marsh's departure, Freedman went solo, focusing on both domestic and commercial projects, but he later teamed with Ralph Rembel, the two forming Freedman Rembel in 2002. For the likes of Barry Humphries, James Fairfax and Clyde Packer, Freedman brought splashes of colour to their living rooms, as well as Modernist leanings — expect to see a Knoll sofa in scarlet red or a Bauhaus chair in sunshine yellow. He was arguably best known for his commercial work, including Sydney's QVB building, Bilson's restaurant and, most significantly, in 1985, the State Bank of NSW's executive floors in Martin Place.

These unbanker-like bunkers boasted flamboyant ceilings — one in gold leaf and another in silver — Nero Marquina and camphor laurel inlaid with ebony. The two floors also flaunted Freedman's flair for colour, with yellow walls, jade tiles and abstract rugs. And he cheekily conducted a design tour, drawing inspiration from the Viennese movement, Bauhaus, Art Deco and the Memphis of the moment.

Perhaps his greatest legacy, Freedman mentored leading industry names such as interior designer Iain Halliday. "What he and Neville did was streets ahead of anyone else," says Halliday. "They got plum job after plum job. My heart was set on working for George." In 1983, he got his wish — but it wasn't a glamorous start, shifting the Ferrari from the transit lane and walking the dogs.

"In a Tudor-style house, he would place Bertoia furniture and modern art," Halliday says. "In their own apartment, he and Marsh combined Knoll furniture with eight-foot bronze cranes and a Carlo Bugatti cabinet — no one then knew what that was. He gave me an appreciation of Knoll furniture, textiles, colour... so many things. When you were 21 and growing up in Sydney, it was all so glamorous. It was a moment, hard to explain, but it was amazing."

Freedman is survived by his partner, Peter O'Brien, and their two Scottish terriers, Pee Jay and Duffy McFala. *IL*



FROM TOP: George Freedman's many corporate and residential projects include: 1 & 6: John Nankervis's Paddington home (1983), from Vogue Living, Oct 1987. 2 & 3: The AMP building in Sydney (2001). 4: Centennial Park home, from Vogue Living, Dec/Jan 1994-5. 5: James Fairfax's Woollahra home (1995). 7: Bilson's restaurant, Circular Quay (1988).