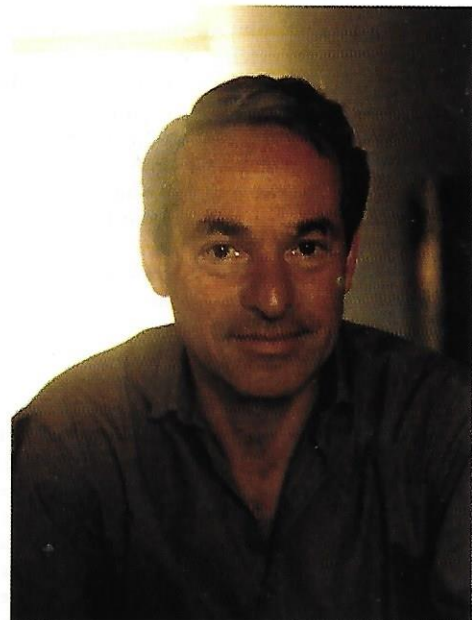




***THE INTERIOR VOICE***

**On Fantasy, Functionalism and**



Andrew Southam

**George Freedman rarely designs domestic interiors, but when he does, the results are never less than intriguing. Megan Cronly spoke to him about his work.**

**I**t was the third week of Sydney's incessant rain. The grey had taken over the sky and sea. Droplets scrawled their way across windscreens and shoppers. People kept moaning about the weather and the tenor of conversation was about as exciting as a wet sock. Moss in our shoes, mould in our hearts — the damp had seeped into the very soul.

"I get so bored with everyone talking about the rain," said the housekeeper talking about the rain. He ushered me into the kitchen. "I love it. You wake up and it's raining. So what? Worse if it was atomic fallout". We pondered prospective 'tête à têtes' with whingeing victims of the apocalypse, as I dived towards a square foot of sunlight on the parquet floor.

The rain had even seeped into the house, trickling down an expanse of 'nipple pink' wall. Roving around the space, the splashes of mulberry, aqua, turquoise, yellow, made the weather irrelevant. The apartment was stunning. No wonder the house-keeper had a touch of optimism.

Waiting for the man.

The door opened with a pink sweep of Galoises and debonair smiles. Returning to the site of past work, George Freedman exuded a charm and lightness that further dispelled the drizzle of the outside world.

George Freedman and Neville Marsh form the core of the interior designing firm Marsh Freedman Associates. They are better known for their commercial work — office space for construction companies, the design for the State bank in Sydney, board rooms, lobbies — all imprinted with their distinctive style. Domestic interiors account for perhaps one contract a year.

"The commercial work pretty well occupies us. It's not really a preference.

Tandy Rowley

**nd Fun**

They're all good. Domestic work is so wonderful — you're completely involved in determining personal needs, everyday needs. In commercial work you do it in terms of use of the building, making abstract images. In domestic work the images are not that abstract — you really have to find out what makes the client happy in their space so that they LOVE being there."

Negotiations with interior designer and client raise all kinds of problems. How to identify needs, to determine a 'lifestyle', to strike a balance between artistic authoritarianism and actual desires. George Freedman described it as "a slow process".

"We don't go out to dinner, find out about their marriage, that kind of thing. Understanding needs comes from the process of the design relationship. We structure our design thinking for someone else — it's a partnership. It's up to the client to feed the designer with their needs, and up to the designer to satisfy them. It's also up to the client to understand what the designer is doing. I can't do traditional interiors.

Don't know how. But I can do contemporary spaces that are references to traditional interiors."

"Designing in a specific line, as I do, means that you don't do something different each time. The whole designing process, from a bank, to a construction company to a house or apartment is all one continuous process. To solve one problem after another. You use, of course, your previous experiences. Sometimes you come upon the space. The space . . . determines . . . everything."

We were sitting in the lounge of what had been a late Victorian townhouse. Around World War I it had been converted to three apartments. As George discovered, via a designer in the house next door, many of the walls were not load bearing. They could be stripped out, opening up spatial possibilities. George went further and knocked into the roof space which increased the size by two thirds.

The clients wanted the apartment to function for two people, but Freedman suggested it was really a one person space. A conflict between space and need.

"Open plans look perfect. They are wonderful to be in. But they can cause problems. Guests become an impossibility, there is no privacy. And if there is any kind of problem between the two occupants, there is no boudoir, no sulking room!"

**T**he designs of Marsh Freedman glow with experimentation and functionalism. But there is quirky individuality too. A sense of fantasy and fun. The bright yellow stairs are a good example.

"The choice of yellow was a sunshine-energy expression. A description of movement. The railings are almost like DMR barriers or police barriers . . . Are police barriers yellow?" he laughed.

Although he insists he has no design philosophy, Freedman speaks eloquently about his design ideas.

"The whole point of interior design, interior architecture, is a sculptural form. It is a 3-D expression. Think of people like Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth — those mass sculptures. The penetration — the interstices

— is as important as the form. The colour is part of that manipulation of space. You can take any colour and make something happen with it. The colour choice becomes as much a part of the form as anything else."

"I have an idea when I'm starting out of what I want to happen. Then I play with colour chips, a collage. It really is a three dimensional painting. The colour in this place could almost be chaotic. There is always the risk that it's about to tip over the edge."

With eleven strong colours plus white used over the high-visibility of the open plan, the risk is great. But Freedman's adventurous and painterly use of colour works — beautifully. His dynamic designs and sense of fantasy with space and colour make sense when he elaborates a fairly unconventional history.

George Freedman's working life began in a New York architect's office. Straight out of university, he began "trudging along doing toilet details for an airport facility".

"Starting at the bottom," I suggested.

"Starting at the bottom indeed," he laughed.

But Freedman didn't stay there very long. A recitation of his past reads like the mythical charmed life. Chance encounters, wise guidance (including advice *not* to start a restaurant in the Canary Islands!). Moments of "absolute luck and happenchance" as he puts it. In his 20's Freedman twisted around the globe, living in Amsterdam, painting for two years in Spain, working as an interior designer in London, eventually ending back in New York, living a fantasy with Knoll International.

"Knoll was one of my dreams. The most intelligent, exquisite, inventive, beautiful, commercial interiors ever done. Florence Knoll did absolutely sensational work."

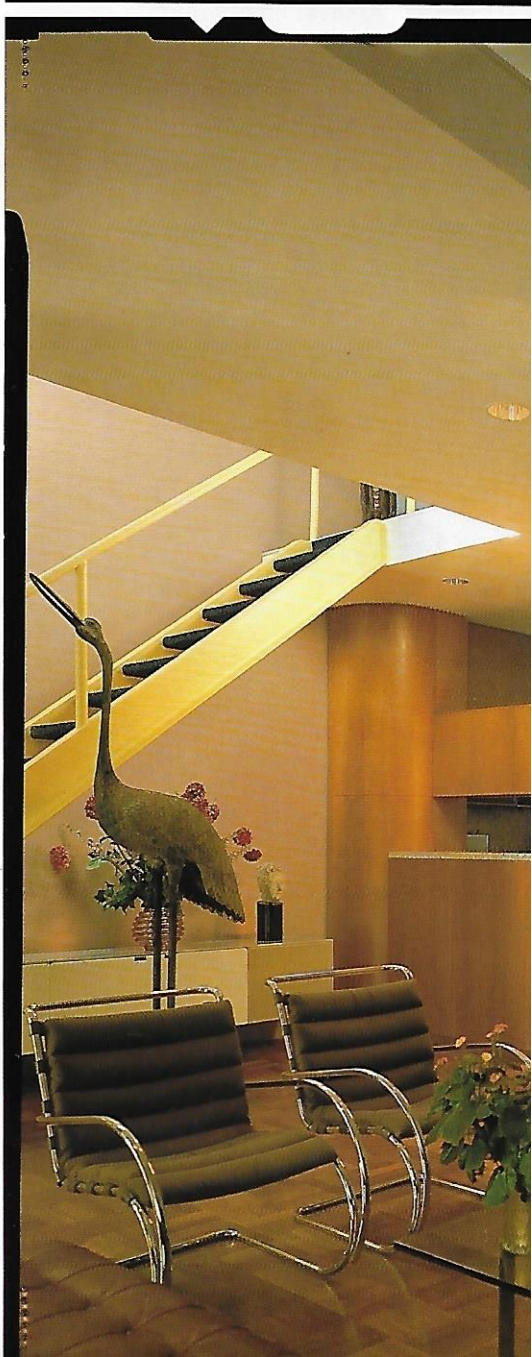
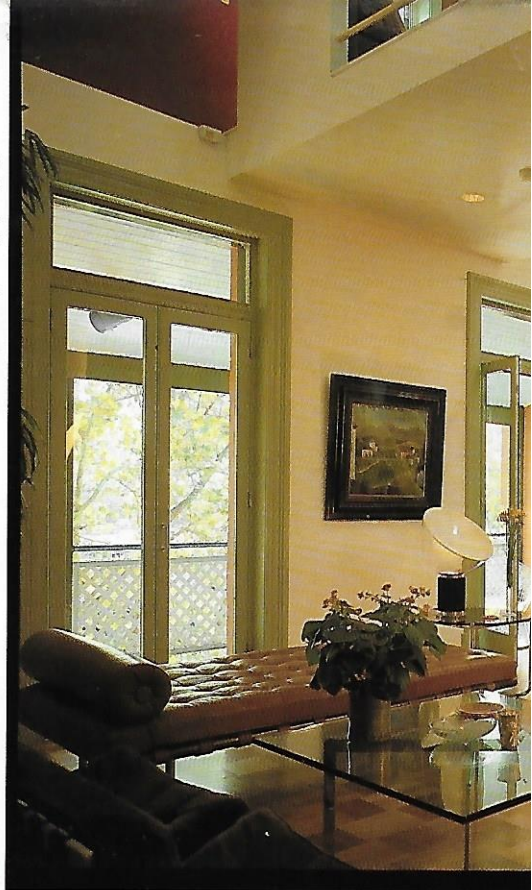
From there, Freedman came to Sydney fifteen years ago, bringing the same qualities to interior design in Australia.

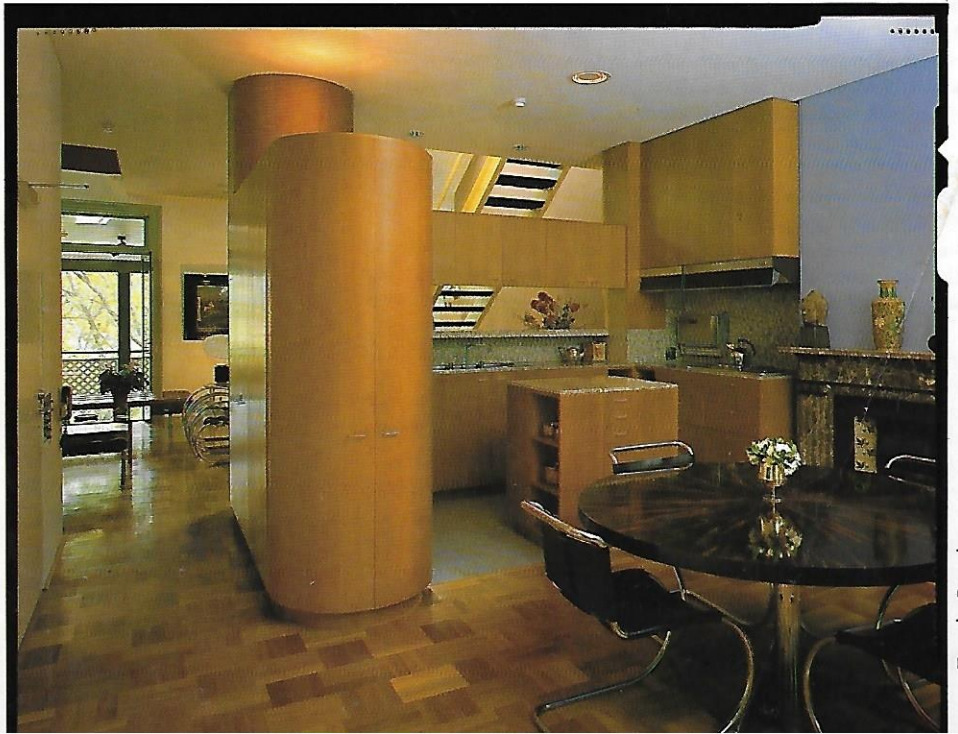
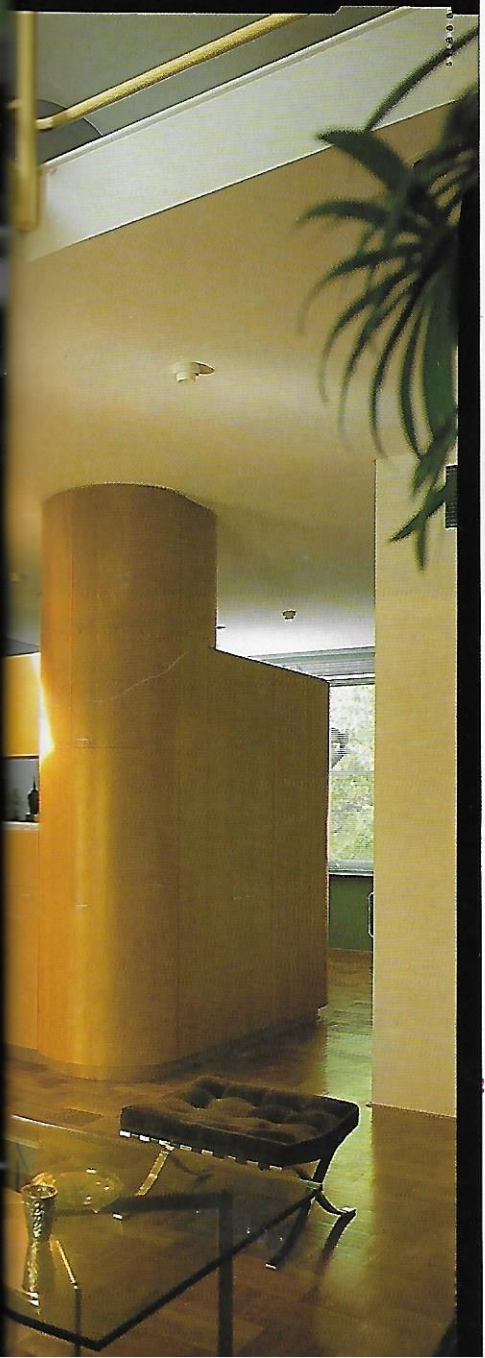
"Sydney has changed so much in the time I've been here. I don't really think the words and ideals and basic terms I use have changed. They have . . . developed . . . in terms of expertise and fantasy. But the people who come to us have changed.

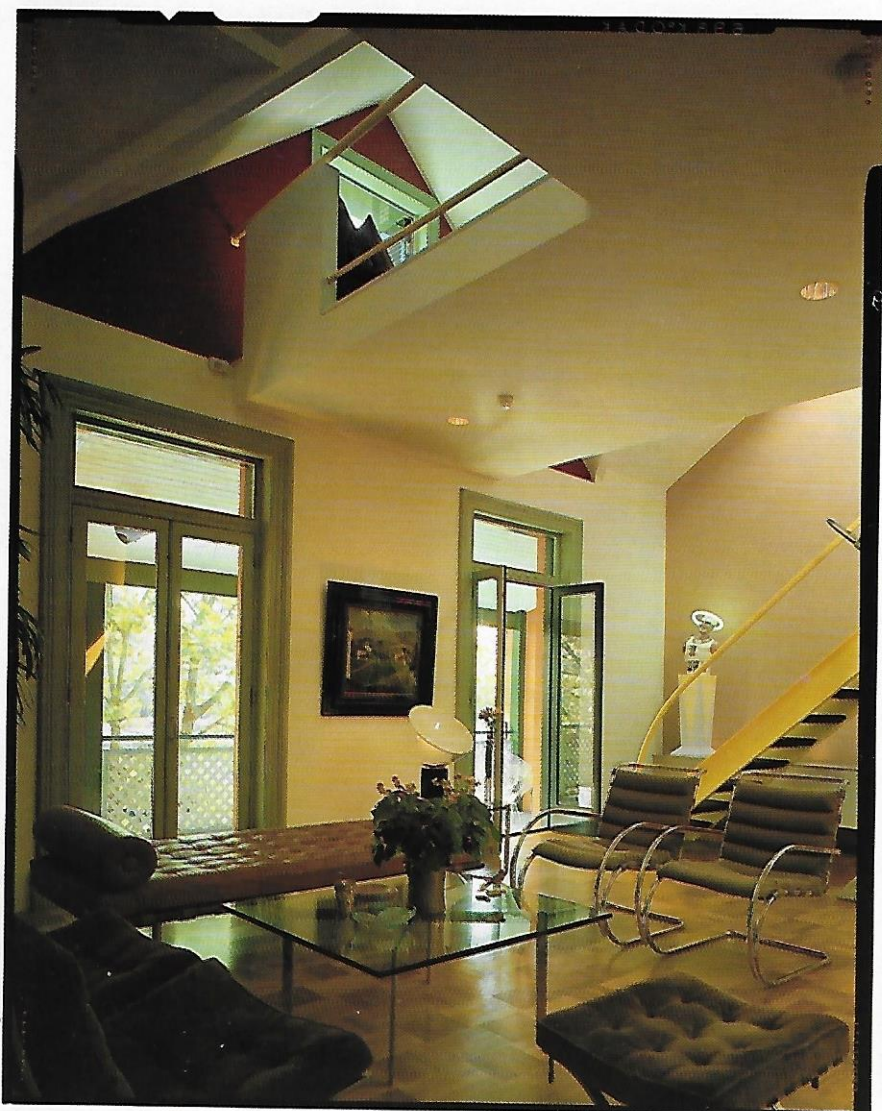
"Little by little Australian interior design is starting to become comparable to the work done in New York or London. We ARE a provincial society here, in our exquisite little outback city! It isn't New York. We don't have — yet — the real sophistication to completely mirror New York. Not that New York is an ideal. What is happening is that the craftsmanship and skill being employed is becoming very very sophisticated.

"Thinking in terms of Australian design — hmmm — I don't see the point in that kind of thinking. I don't think we live any differently to people in Paris, or Rome, or Florence, or San Francisco, or London, or New York. Going to offices, houses, spaces in these cities, there is an enormous familiarity in terms of how the world works. In terms of how you sit, you eat, how you get in and out of bed, turn on the television set . . . A kind of internationalism of all our parts perhaps? Are you wearing everything that is 100% Australian?"

As it happened, I wasn't. Italian boots, tights from London, skirt from Paddington Markets, Sydney . . . "And you have a Japanese tape recorder and we're drinking Indian tea out of cups found in Perth."









Oriental motifs, inlaid in pewter. George's eyes wander to a light-sculpture near the stairs.

"And that was made by a Melbourne ceramicist. It's called 'St. Chesty'. I was struck by it. Such a cheeky expression. Taking a T-shirt/singlet that now have all those different labels. But instead of saying 'Coca Cola', the 'labels' are all French saints. On a day like today he looks like a French or Italian saint in a church with the light coming down on him."

He rounds up the objects in the room with stories and obvious affection. "That Chinese bird dates from early 19th or late 18th century. It comes from a whole series of garden sculptures. A dealer brought it into the office over his shoulder. (The bird is easily 6' high.) It's a wonderful over-sized thing!"

The space that acts as lounge, kitchen and dining areas is 'divided' by a huge 'half-round' form, a steamlined cabinet that functions as storage space, servery, partial corridor . . . sculpture even.

"I designed it, then Allen, Jack and Cottier did the working drawings. The idea is that the functions inside are invisible. There is a surprise! Sometimes you sit here and it appears as if that whole piece of furniture — because the kitchen basically is a piece of furniture — is about to roll across the floor. It has no connection to anything. It reminds me of a medieval fortress — a war machine.

"Every piece inside the apartment — the chairs, tables — have been designed between 1926/7 and 1930. All the chairs are Miës van der Rohe. What I have designed — the bedside table, the kitchen unit, the chaise lounge upstairs — are references to Miës. The modern offshoot is the Charles Eames chair. The whole aesthetic I was trained in — of Saarinen, Eames, Isamu Noguchi, Knoll — is sensational work. I've been dragging around this aesthetic for most of my designing life."

Given the importance of colour — an overwhelming presence in the apartment — the upstairs bathroom comes as a strange surprise. It is completely white.

"There was no reason. The other bathroom, downstairs, is grey. There wasn't a rule in my heart, that everything should be white. But when I came upon the form! — as soon as the form of that curved shower 'thing' existed — well, immediately it had to be a small unit tile. And when we came upon that little chiclet mosaic, it had such a nice sparkle to it, automatically it made sense that the bathroom be white. It's like being inside a big packet of chewing gum. Oh yes, there is a dimmer so the lights go down to a pinky-orange."

Bathing in the 6' bath with a skylight to the night sky is quite a fantasy. As George says, "Everything is twinkling and sparkling".

George Freedman is an enthusiast and incredibly positive. Given a moment to talk about 'pet hates' in design, he turned the conversation back to the style he loves.

"Oh — I hate shoddy, bogus, badly-made work. The quality of things is important, to be perfect of its kind. Beautifully made and beautifully finished — a joy to see and touch. Each thing should have a delicious quality through it. You know," he laughed, "life is art, life is fun!"

We left the exquisite apartment, out into the rain again. "As long as you have a wonderful space to be in, the rain doesn't matter, does it?"

This internationalism reflects in George's choice of objects. In commercial designs, Marsh Freedman choose everything, down to the hand towels. In domestic work, the extent of their involvement is another aspect of negotiation. In the apartment here, the designer's choice encompassed everything — sheets, soap and stocking the kitchen. "Part of the quest," says George.

The apartment contains a number of carefully placed and chosen pieces. And for each piece, George has entertaining stories of provenance and discovery.

"The cabinet near the dining table was designed by Carlo Bugatti in 1895. The father of the Italian car — that Bugatti. They were a remarkable family! That cabinet was found in London by John Hawkins (a Sydney dealer) in a bootmaker's shop. It was in terrible disrepair. Leo Schofield bought it from him and we bought it for our clients. Each time it changed hands it changed price. I think John bought it for £10."

The cabinet itself has references of more than Italian flavour. Chinese symbols,