

George Freedman

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Perhaps best known for his work in the State Bank building in Martin Place and Nicholas Whitlam's infamous 'black loo', George Freedman has brought to interior design in Australia a style and a sense of theatre that no other interior designer has yet managed to achieve. Freedman is as talented and knowledgeable as he is charming and unassuming. He is persuasive, enthusiastic and polite. And he giggles.

Freedman's studio is unexpectedly spartan. A converted warehouse with bare boards and steel supporting columns, it is divided into reception, studio, library and meeting room by a series of cabinets, bookcases and a sailcloth stretched between columns. The books and magazines are catalogued and arranged in order and a neat and tidy working area is decorated with various mementoes and artefacts.

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A bronze heron from a Chinese garden - you can tell whether they were in the water or on land by whether they have feet or not according to Freedman - stands inside the doorway, and a wonderful chromium bug about the size of a small dog sits on top of the metal cabinets. Made entirely from American car parts, the bug, which looks a bit like a carnivorous cicada, monitors proceedings with its red reflector eyes. The sailcloth divides the meeting room from reception and doubles as a projection screen. In the meeting room, as comfortable and unobtrusive as the rest of the furniture, two elderly black Scotch Terriers sleep away the working day.

Freedman trained as an architect at Syracuse University but failed to submit his final thesis. Instead, after a two year stint at Khan & Jacobs Architects in New York, he and a friend left for Europe to paint and to write. Living on the then idyllic island of Ibiza, paint and write is what they did. The rent was the equivalent of about \$3 a month in those days according to Freedman and six thousand dollars went a long way. He exhibited his paintings twice in Europe; in Amsterdam and Brussels, but eventually, he said, "I ran out of money and I needed a job."

Not just any old job, however. He worked in London for 3 years before going back to New York, where he determined to work for

Skidmore, Knoll or I M Pei and after many interviews with each he became an assistant designer with Knoll International and thus to work with Florence Knoll, for whom his admiration is boundless. "She influenced me enormously. She influenced me very, very much. She is my Goddess. I confess..... I'm proud to confess."

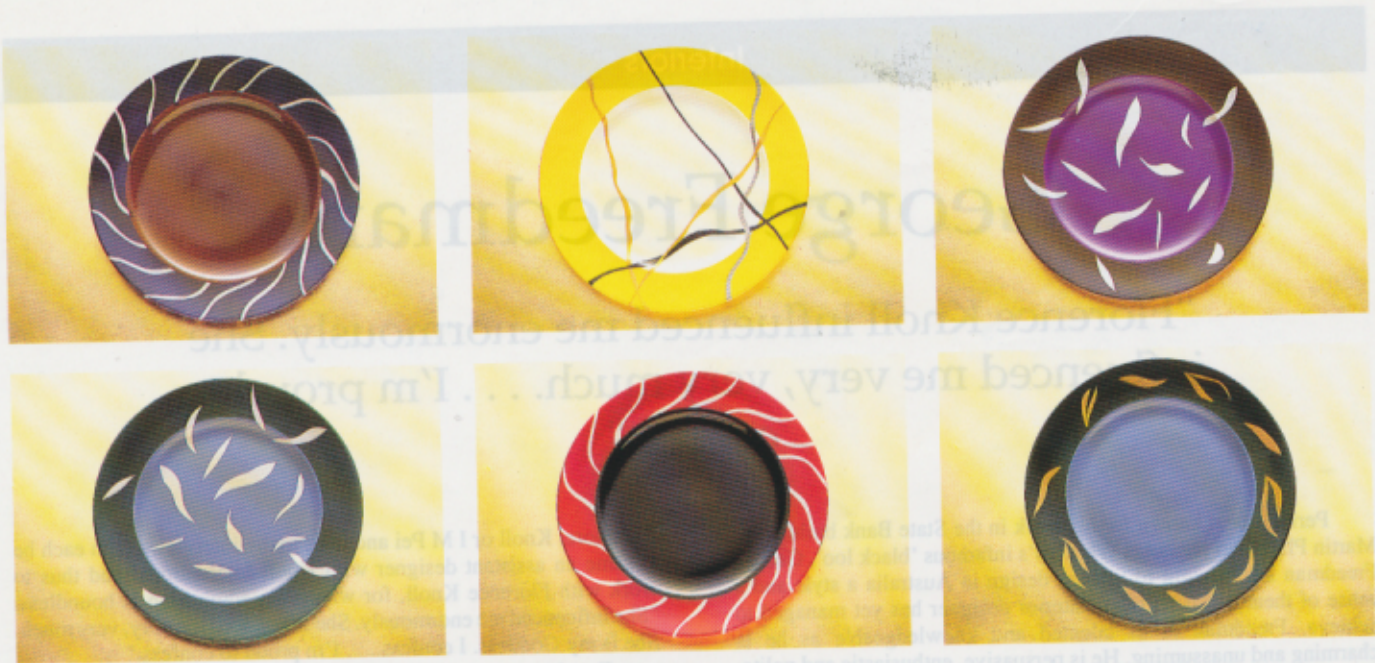
Freedman came to Australia in 1969 when the Bank of New South Wales commissioned Knoll International to do their interiors. He decided to stay and now, more than twenty years later the Freedman trademark is evident in many Sydney buildings both public and private.

His work is about 50/50 commercial and domestic and his architectural training is evident in the way in which he perceives and uses space. Bilson's Restaurant in the Overseas Passenger Terminal, Circular Quay in Sydney has spectacular views of the Harbour Bridge, the Opera House and the city. To dramatise entry to the restaurant Freedman has designed spaces to first enclose diners from the outside city and then to gradually unfold the views from the interior of the restaurant. He says, "the entry rotunda is an introverted space where patrons can wash off their experiences of the day and leave the mundane world behind. Curved stainless steel wall panelling controls and reveals the views as diners move into the dining areas."

"We used a luxury liner imagery of luxury because of the history of the building and its location, and that standard of luxury and service had to involve everything. Every part of the restaurant was to be designed with the same care. The washrooms, the plates, the finishes, everything." The stainless steel, the carpet design, the lighting and the curves and undulations all reflect and accentuate the rippling of city lights on water. It's glossy and sophisticated, and as with most of his work Freedman has a down to earth anecdote to tell. "Just before the opening night someone ran into one of the stainless steel wall panels with a ladder and dented it," he said. "It was to be replaced, so on the night everyone was asked to sign that particular panel, and it looked so wonderful we decided to keep it. Its celebrity graffiti."

But it is not just in Bilson's that Freedman exhibits this attention to fine detail. All his work seems to be the result of careful thought and a determination not to just "make do". So a granite slab in Adelaide which is perfect for a Sydney boardroom table can be transported and transformed, and an artist can be persuaded to paint a triptych in six rather than three panels and camphor laurel veneer panels inlaid with macassar ebony can work as a sumptuous wall surface.

The style, or stylishness created as a result of finishing each project to the nth degree can at times produce the feeling of a film set where each piece of furniture has its marked place and actors perform their predetermined roles, but Freedman says, "they are not really meant to be set pieces. But I suppose the kind of work I do does tend to be axial and it does tend to be symmetrical." The strong Freedman trademark that is sometimes perceived in his work he describes as a consistency which derives from change and development, though he stresses it is a development which has no specific order.



Bilson's Restaurant Plates: Designed by George Freedman

"There is a kind of consistent evolution of design problems," he says. "Each time you do a project you come across a series of problems, and you set up some ideas to solve and explore, and sometimes the problems are not completely resolved. Or, there comes a point in the development of the overall design when you have to stop and commit yourself even though there are still things going on in your mind. So when the next project comes along we tend to continue developing those thoughts. There is a continuity."

A kitchen designed by Freedman illustrates his developing ideas of volatile space. "The image of the planes separating was very much part of what I was thinking about at the time. The clients wanted an open arrangement with the kitchen running into the sitting room and the dining room. We treated the kitchen as a piece of furniture rather than a room - as slots against the wall. The kitchen cabinet concept is broken up with each door set slightly differently. Each has a changed position and different thickness. It makes it a space you pass through. It is not a fixed enclosure."

"And you can do this in other ways," he says. "Using mirrors to separate heavy massed things from lighter things can create a kind of floating weightlessness. Things appear to hover. The mass and the lightness set up a kind of vibration and there appears not to be a fixed space between them." The same restlessness can be achieved with colour. "We sometimes use two colours together that will set up a vibration so the space is never quite in repose. There's always something transient about it. They are spaces to move through not to stay in."

As well as interior design Freedman has twice designed sets for the Sydney Dance Company. For their production of Kraanerg he produced a fixed set of planes and angles that achieved the necessary mood and location changes entirely from lighting. He says, "there were 58 lighting changes, and when I worked out the colour sequence I would use say, three colours but the lighting designer, John Drummond-Montgomery would use ten or eleven colours to achieve the same effect. He did magic things." Freedman says he loved designing for the theatre. "It was so immediate and it happened so quickly. I would love to do more of it if the opportunity arises."

The State Bank executive offices fitout completed in 1986 has been written about and photographed by almost every design

magazine in the country, and no doubt a number of overseas magazines too. Suffice to say here, that six years and almost nothing has been changed and the designs are as fresh, adventurous and luxurious as they were in 1986. The project allowed a lot of opportunity to experiment according to Freedman, and he is pleased and flattered by the extent of critical appraisal the project received.

At present Freedman with associate Ralph Rember is working on a small building at Centennial Park which he says is his first whole house. And for the future? It depends what comes along.

KATH VERNON



Bilson's Restaurant: Entry rotunda designed as a transition space between the everyday world and the theatre of the restaurant.



State Bank of NSW: Chairman's Office



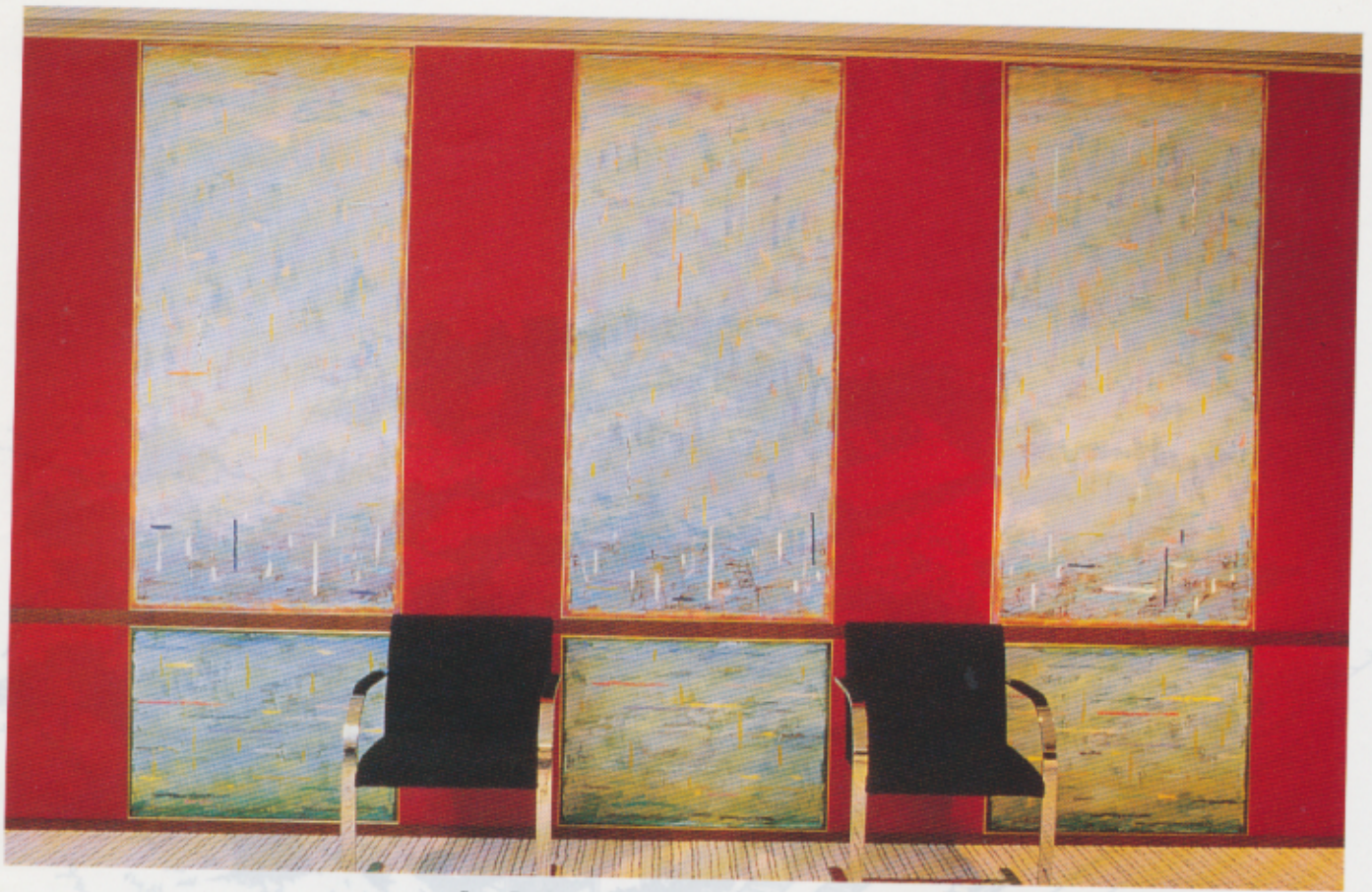
Melbourne apartment - the clients, both in their 70's wanted it to be theatrical, glossy and luscious

State Bank of NSW: Chairman's Office





Kitchen Potts Point, Sydney



State Bank of NSW: The triptych in one of the dining rooms was painted in six panels. The chair rail designed to protect the paintings.



Powerhouse Museum