



# the maestro's legacy

The work of George Freedman, above, has had a lasting effect on Sydney, and on the careers of a group of dedicated followers.

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Sam Marshall



Stephen Varady



Iain Halliday

Photography Vicki Leopold, Jennifer Soo and Quentin Jones

## His name may not be in lights, but his interiors are. Jeni Porter assesses the work of designer George Freedman and talks to the creative talent carrying his message forward.

**Think architecture and Sydney, think minimalism.** Think simple, light-filled structural spaces, plain white walls, large glass areas that are so suited to our sun-bleached lifestyle. It's a style that's evolved over decades, influenced by both our climate and harbour-oriented landscape and by key architects whose work epitomises the modernist approach.

Harry Seidler and Glenn Murcutt have had a huge impact. Seidler, who emigrated here in 1948, was an early minimalist. Murcutt created a uniquely Australian style of modernism with simple shed-like homes that are perfectly in tune with their environment.

But there are other, lesser-known people who were key figures as local design came of age. Architecturally trained interior designer George Freedman – a New Yorker who came to Sydney for one project in 1969, fell in love and stayed – is one such person.

His is hardly a household name but Freedman is credited with galvanising the commercial interior design field, elevating it from straightforward decoration to an architecturally based discipline. According to architecture writer Davina Jackson, Freedman is a "maestro". "George created a whole new wave of sophistication and glamour and modernity," she says.

The Sydney of 1969 was a vastly different place from today's chic metropolis. It was a provincial city with interiors done largely on the cheap and based on regurgitated designs. Enter Freedman, devotee and employee of American designer Florence Knoll, a leading proponent of commercial interior design based around the International style's purity of materials and finishes and industrial aesthetic.

To that design philosophy Freedman brought an encyclopedic knowledge of classic details from other periods and an artist's touch with colour. He teamed up

with Neville Marsh, in life and in business, and their Marsh Freedman Associates revolutionised interior design. (Marsh left Sydney in 1986 and died eight years later.) Freedman is credited with creating the most significant corporate interior of 20th-century Australia – the now largely junked State Bank executive offices on the top floors of the bank's head office in Martin Place, city.

But perhaps his greatest legacy was in training a group of architects whose work is influencing a new generation of style-setters.

**Iain Halliday had dreamed of being an architect** since he was 10 years old, traipsing around exhibition houses and haunting furniture showrooms. There was nowhere "more desirable to work" than Marsh Freedman when Halliday graduated from Sydney College of the Arts with an interior design degree in 1983.

"They practised a very sophisticated aesthetic – there was none to compare," Halliday says that Freedman "personified a certain brand of New Yorker – worldly and well-dressed". Halliday was the only other person in the firm early on. When he wasn't on the drawing board he was delivering textiles, learning subtleties about materials that have never left him.

Halliday, who later studied architecture, says you can see the influence of his first job in his much-admired, much-imitated work. "Definitely you see it in the diverse use of materials – rich marbles, rich veneers, textiles ... I think what I probably benefited from the most was the tremendous knowledge of detail as filtered through the eyes of Florence Knoll."

His approach is not as rigorous as Freedman's "but the grounding is there". "You can't simply not know where the light switch is going to be, how many pipes there should

be on a sofa cushion or which way the veneer should run." Just as Freedman influenced the young Halliday so, too, has Halliday had a huge impact on scores of young designers. Doing time at Burley Katon Halliday, the firm he runs with David Katon, is considered the equivalent of a postgraduate degree in architecture.

**Sam Marshall has won numerous awards** and acclaim for his simple, cleverly planned and environmentally sensitive projects ranging from a prize-winning warehouse renovation to a prototype for a futuristic caravan.

Of his four years with Freedman, Marshall says: "That's where I really learnt everything about architecture. University equips you with a lot of stuff but George showed me how to be inspired about design."

Marshall knew nothing about the man when Freedman interviewed him in 1984. "I remember showing my portfolio to George and almost being arrogant about it. I said to him, 'And what do you do?' He opens up this portfolio and I nearly fainted; I thought I will never get this job. It was just the most amazing portfolio of work."

But Marshall got a job overseeing the State Bank fit-out. "It was a fantastic learning experience on how you build things, what you can and what you can't build."

Three years ago he won NSW's top residential architecture award for a \$60,000 conversion of a derelict 1903 industrial coach house in Darlinghurst into a home and office. That renovation is far removed from the splendour of the \$8 million-plus State Bank project and other glamorous work undertaken with Freedman but Marshall says they're linked through design attitude. "You read the building, you see what it is, and the prompts are in the building."

Marshall says one of Freedman's great strengths was in allowing his young employees to express themselves →



Freedman's current work, left, still adheres to his central design tenet: get the functionality right, and the beauty will follow.

Photography Sharrin Rees

**'Everything was detailed to the last millimetre; it was incredibly exacting. With some things we could have fudged it but the spirit was that it had to be just right.'**

as they collaborated. "It was not a case of, 'we do things this way.'" When he set up Architect Marshall in 1988, Marshall says one of the big shocks was working to much tighter budgets. But Freedman had taught him to think everything through and using the same set of principles come up with innovative things. "I see George on this planet as creating new and beautiful things," he said.

**Stephen Varady likens his 18 months working for Freedman to a finishing school.** "It was a unique sort of atmosphere – we all had our tasks, we all related back to George but we were kind of left to our own devices all the time to work things up." Varady's most exciting task was the State Bank's octagonal boardroom that was, literally, built around a marble tabletop 2.7 metres in diameter.

Freedman gave him a rough outline. Then Varady was let loose. "Stepping out of uni I would never have contemplated finding a piece of granite in South Australia that was the biggest piece of stone ever quarried in this country and creating a circular tabletop." The table is long gone but Varady still has the meticulous hand drawings.

Varady, who set up his own practice in 1987, says detail and detailed thinking is the Freedman legacy. "I don't think anyone would mistake our work for George but if you look closely you will see George in the details."

Glass bathrooms are a Varady signature. He did his first in a terrace in Paddington because he needed to get light through the floor to the rooms below. "My knowledge about how to put things together helped tremendously in designing and detailing something which I had not seen done before."

There have been seven more glass bathrooms since then, including two in a terrace alteration and addition in Paddington that is shortlisted for this year's NSW Royal Australian Institute of Architects awards. "George taught us

that things could be better, that you could be passionate about what you did, that you could get inspired by your workplace and do these fantastic, amazing things."

**When Freedman offered Bill MacMahon a job** the high-distinction student asked his lecturer Glenn Murcutt, then teaching at the University of NSW, for advice.

"I said, 'George does interiors, is that what I should be doing?' Glenn said it would be a good start," says MacMahon, who joined the large team working on the State Bank.

MacMahon was blown away by the attention to detail. "Everything was detailed to the millimetre; it was incredibly exacting. With some things we could have fudged it but the spirit was that it had to be just right."

MacMahon and Freedman parted company after 18 months. With another Marsh Freedman alumnus, Stephen Roberts, MacMahon then made his mark with their grungy fit-out of the Third Man restaurant in Kings Cross in 1987. This was seen as a watershed in restaurant design. MacMahon says the decor was "almost anti-George; everything there was kind of sludgy".

The pair teamed up with set designer Michael Scott-Mitchell and for about five years their D4 Design was the It firm. They were responsible for one of Sydney's most glamorous and, in the fickle world of dining, most enduring restaurant interiors – Rockpool in the Rocks.

Rockpool, MacMahon says, is more solemn than something Freedman would have done but "in the timber we used and some of the fabrics we used we would probably not have done if it wasn't for working for George". He recently revamped Rockpool, keeping its essence but trying to "mature it a bit".

Under the D4 monicker Roberts has made his name in

New York while MacMahon runs a low-key practice in Potts Point and lectures at UNSW.

MacMahon's exit may have been fraught but he is grateful that he worked with Freedman. "Every time you were talking to him about what you were doing you would really feel the thing had progressed and was better than it had been."

**Close to 40 years after he first discovered** that interior design was "the thing I found the most interesting in the world" Freedman still can't imagine doing anything else.

His modest office in a heritage building in Oxford Street is a far cry from the glory days of the 1980s when wealthy Sydneysiders sought to Marsh Freedmanise their homes and offices. But with his business partner, Ralph Rembel, another of Murcutt's high-distinction students, Freedman is still designing beautiful homes for discerning clients. FreedmanRembel, which also does corporate work, has an \$11 million project on the go.

Freedman, in turn, is thrilled that his proteges do "such terrific stuff". He didn't set out to be a mentor. He simply wanted a job done in a certain way. The only way to do that was "to get people to do what I wanted" and that meant hiring young talent that hadn't been "distorted".

Freedman rolls his eyes when asked to define his design philosophy. "I always find it very difficult – the designs are always about interaction of spaces, and the progress through spaces, and what relationship one space has to the other, both in terms of its function first and then its form."

He says function and satisfying the occupant's needs are absolutely primary – beauty follows: "If it works it falls into place and it is beautiful." The other ingredient, says the 67-year-old Freedman, is loving what you do. "You have to enjoy it otherwise it won't be beautiful." (s)