

VALE 1936-2016 George Freedman

The New York-born, Sydney-based designer had a talent for making everyday spaces look out of this world.

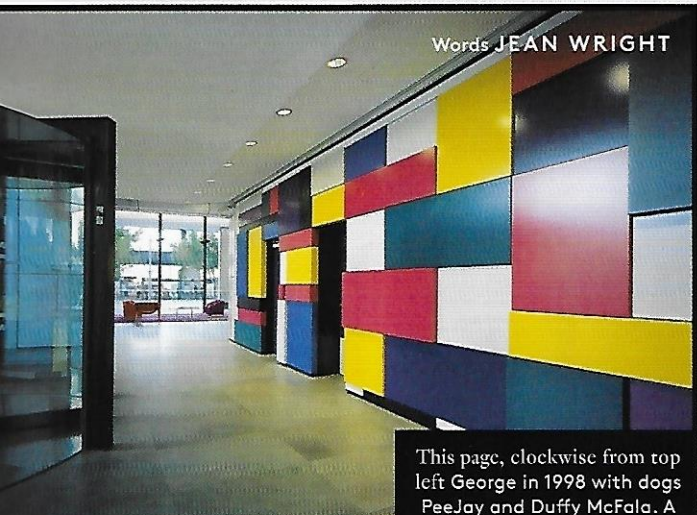
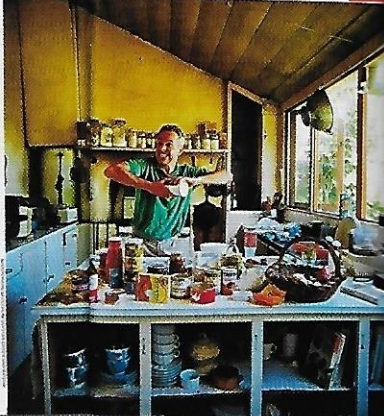


ALFRESCO

Challenging the status quo, George Freedman works his magic to create a look that is both timeless and modern.

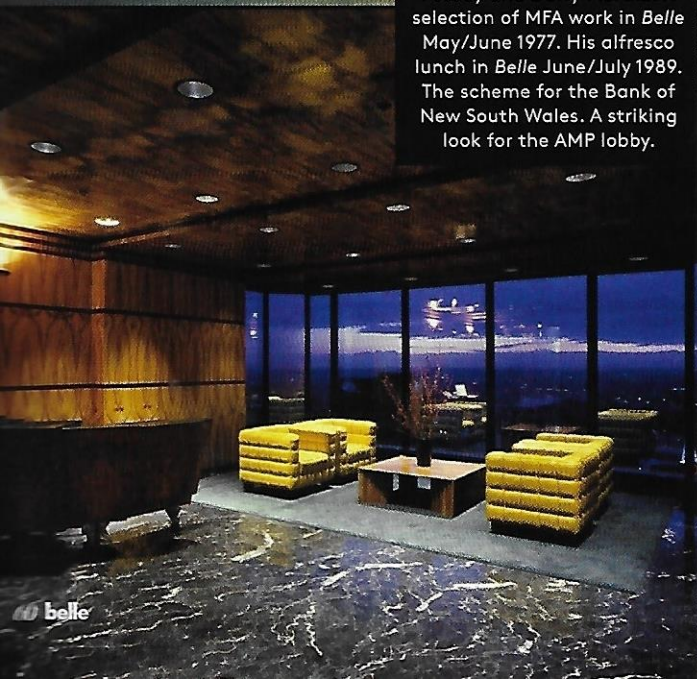
The Tin Man

George Freedman's design philosophy is to create spaces that are both functional and beautiful. He believes in the power of color and texture to transform a room.



Words JEAN WRIGHT

This page, clockwise from top left George in 1998 with dogs PeeJay and Duffy McFala. A selection of MFA work in *Belle* May/June 1977. His alfresco lunch in *Belle* June/July 1989. The scheme for the Bank of New South Wales. A striking look for the AMP lobby.



A quintessential New Yorker with international style cred, George Freedman changed the design landscape in Australia forever. “Spatial invention” – as opposed to applied surface decoration – is the way high-end furniture retailer De De Ce, Knoll’s representative in Australia, describes his special skill.

At his funeral service after his death at 80 in July, George’s indelible mark on our design history inspired a rollof praise from colleagues and clients for his groundbreaking residential, corporate and cultural commissions.

Working globally in the employ of furniture maker Knoll International, George already had an impressive CV when, in 1969, he was sent to Sydney to design the executive levels of the Bank of New South Wales (now Westpac). This exciting project saw him introduce a level of sophistication not seen before in this country. George’s future in Australia was decided when he met much-admired interior designer Neville Marsh. He decided to move to Sydney permanently and, in 1973, Marsh Freedman Associates (MFA) was formed when they forged a partnership in both business and life (Neville retired in 1986 and moved to Rome).

MFA rapidly became known as *the* place to work and attracted a new generation of budding designers such as Iain Halliday, who by the age of 15 was determined to work there, joining the firm in 1983.

As a mentor George influenced many young talents. Architects Sam Marshall joined MFA in 1984, as did Ralph Rembel, recruited on his graduation at the recommendation of his tutor, Glenn Murcutt. Ralph worked with George for 26 years culminating in the partnership, Freedman Rembel, in 2002. “MFA was a place where the creative process was disciplined, intelligent, sophisticated, optimistic and wickedly laced with humour,” says Ralph. “George almost never stopped laughing and always looked at things in a positive light. He would arrange what seemed like a cacophony of materials, textures and colours then organise them with symmetry and balance to create spaces that were like a natural landscape.”

“George was a breath of fresh air on the design scene in those days,” agrees Babette Hayes, who was featuring MFA’s work in *Belle* magazine by the mid-70s. “He had a wonderful understanding of space, elegance and the unpredictable use of colour, then he would bring exquisite antiques and graceful Knoll modern design to the mix. He was very sophisticated in his

appreciation of design history and its application to space, and had a sense of fun and the offbeat," she explains.

George liked people and particularly enjoyed the intimate relationship with clients in designing homes, developing many long-term friendships in the process. An architect by training, he was no mere decorator but collaborated well with Australia's top architects, including Glenn Murcutt, Peter Stronach, Andrew Andersons, Keith Cottier and Lionel Glendenning – they spoke the same language. In conjunction with Peter Stronach, MFA converted a row of grand Victorian terraces in Potts Point into strata units. George and Neville's own apartment occupied the two top levels in one. "There was a wonderful juxtaposition of shapes within the space," says Babette, "It had zing, with 'Barcelona' chairs, artworks and a 17th-century inlaid tallboy in the mix alongside a strong yet subtle palette, the sloping attic ceiling and lovely light."

Babette knew him well and they were friends beyond the magazine world. "George was gracious, elegant, non-conformist, quick-witted and very funny but never cutting or undermining. I think that is why he was so well-liked. A good conversationalist, he was knowledgeable about a wide range of subjects, especially the arts: opera, ballet, music, architecture and fine arts. He always made you feel at ease and expressed an interest in what you were doing."

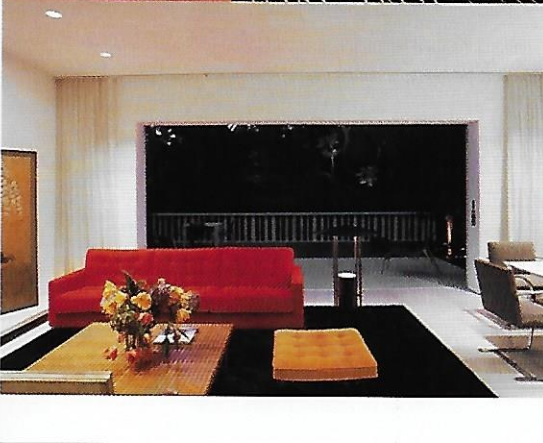
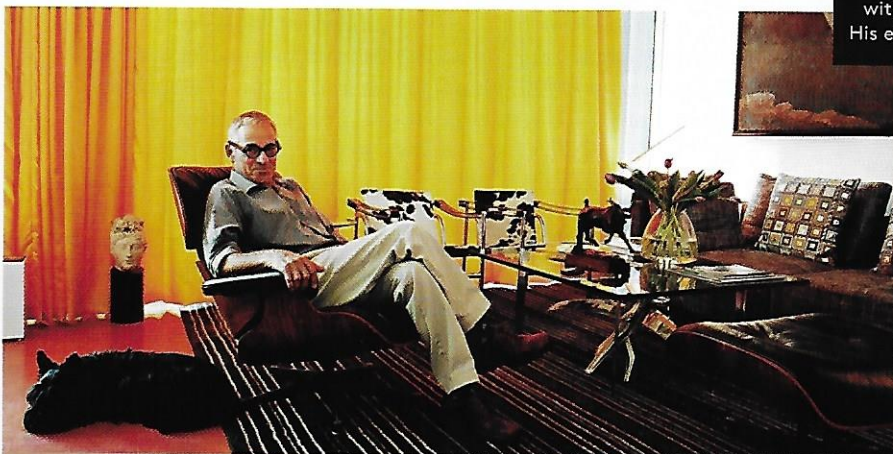
George loved good food and was known as a great cook. He was also famed for the killer negroni cocktail he mixed. Not surprisingly, he was chosen to design for leading hotels and restaurants of the day such as Kinselas, Bilson's and Ampersand. He loved the theatre world and his masterful use of colour was demonstrated in *Kraanerg* for the Sydney Dance Company, where he used coloured lighting to transform a stage production without moving the sets.

He had timeless taste in his attire with a signature look of preppy east coast, New York casual chic. He was usually in chinos, a chambray shirt with rolled-up sleeves or a cashmere sweater, and brown moccasins. As identifiable as his professional and personal style was his choice of pets, a succession of Scottish terriers. Duffy McFala and PeeJay, his last pets, were always by his side until they died in 2010. Three years later, George was diagnosed with lung cancer but he kept designing until the end.

Late in life George met and married a young psychologist, Peter O'Brien, who recalls him touting his Manhattan birthplace as "the centre of the world". Peter's eulogy ended with a classic quote by George: "A Friday night martini is a great reward, but a Saturday lunch negroni will really get you grinning."



This page, clockwise from top George's Potts Point apartment in Belle May/June 1980. Bilson's interiors. Scenes for *Kraanerg* by Sydney Dance Company in 1988. George designed the interiors for adman John Nankervis's home in the 80s with Peter Stronach, MFA office in Woollahra. Interiors for James Fairfax residence. George with one of his beloved terriers. His elegant design for Ampersand.



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