

HARRY SEIDLER 1923 - 2006

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HARRY SEIDLER WAS BORN IN Vienna in 1923. He left there in 1938 when his family moved to England to escape the Nazi occupation of Austria but was interned in 1940 and eventually shipped to Canada where he was permitted to study architecture and structural engineering at the University of Manitoba. He graduated with first class honours in 1944 and the following year won a scholarship allowing him to attend the Harvard Graduate School of Design where he studied under architect Walter Gropius, formerly Director of the famed Bauhaus in Germany between 1919 and 1928.

Seidler then studied at the experimental and short lived Black Mountain College summer school in 1946 under another former Bauhaus teacher, Josef Albers. Here his academic and technical skills were enhanced by a strong aesthetic influence. Between September 1946 and March 1948 Seidler worked as Marcel Breuer's chief assistant. Breuer, who had been educated at the Bauhaus and then became master of its carpentry shop, had been Gropius' professional partner. Seidler left America to travel to Australia, spending some time in Rio de Janeiro to work with the prominent architect Oscar Niemeyer. He finally arrived in Sydney during July of 1948, having travelled all that distance at the instigation of his parents. They had migrated here from England in 1946 and had asked if he could design a house for them. The Rose Seidler house (named after his mother) was the very first that he built in Australia. He began to design and document the house in November 1948, and it was completed in 1950. It was not, however, his first project – this may have been the remodelling of a basement flat in Potts Point into his own studio and residence. His flair for publicity brought about its publication in a prestigious compendium of up-to-date Australian art, architecture and design, published in 1949¹.

The Rose Seidler House was the first of a group of three adjacent dwellings designed for members of his family, based on work he had done in Marcel Breuer's office during 1946. It created an absolute sensation, arousing great interest and comment within both the architectural profession and the general populace.



For Seidler it opened the door to a flood of commissions for houses over the next five decades that were situated across metropolitan Sydney and its outskirts, in Canberra and as far away as Darwin. The house also won him his first Sulman Medal, no mean achievement for a young and recently arrived migrant architect designing outside of the mainstream and early recognition of his contribution to local architecture.

The firm of Harry Seidler & Associates was formed around 1954. Since that time numbers of people, several destined to become prominent architects in their own right, have

worked in the practice. Another association that was destined to last for many years was formed after Seidler approached G J Dusseldorp of the recently formed Lend Lease Corporation at the end of the 1950s with plans of what was to be come the block of flats called Ithaca Gardens in Elizabeth Bay. The relationship between Harry Seidler & Associates and Lend Lease proved fruitful right up to the beginning of the 1990s.

Over the years Seidler's office designed a wealth of different building types including individual houses, apartment blocks, office buildings, and industrial structures that remained true to Harry Seidler's deeply held Modernist convictions about what architecture should be. This rigorous and uncompromising approach, though not always understood or appreciated by the general public, resulted in an impressive record of masterful and often innovative works, the quality of which was frequently recognised by awards for excellence.

Sydney is fortunate to have a large and impressive collection of his buildings, as the following examples may show. Blues Point Tower (completed in 1961) was the first tall building to be registered under the Strata Titles Act and the only building to emerge from the massive development scheme consisting of carefully placed apartment blocks and other buildings surrounded by large areas of open space, which was prepared by Seidler and others during 1957 as a counter to North Sydney Council's proposed rezoning of McMahon's Point for industrial purposes. Harry Seidler & Associates went on to design many apartment blocks during the late 1950s and 1960s that sometimes included innovative double storey apartments like those in blocks such as Ithaca Gardens and Arlington at Edgecliff (1966). The direct expression of concrete frame, panels of brick infill and carefully composed fenestration that characterises these buildings recalls the work of artists such as Joseph Albers and Piet Mondrian.

Some thirty years later Harry Seidler & Associates was still designing stylish apartment blocks such as Horizon in Darlinghurst, Cove in The Rocks and the North Apartments in Goulburn Street. Comparing these to the earlier buildings amply attests to the evolution of Seidler's work as well as its consistency over the years.

It wasn't all residential. Several landmark projects in the City of Sydney challenged the traditional way that development had taken place and provided unprecedented amenity for pedestrians. The first, Australia Square, went on to win both the Sulman Medal and the Institute of

Architect's Civic Design Award for 1967. A little to the south, the massive MLC Centre, completed in 1978, won the Sulman Medal for 1983 while the Grosvenor Place project, completed in 1988, was awarded the Sulman Medal for 1991. Here a very large tower (the largest in Australia at that time) covered merely a quarter of the site and demonstrated innovative approaches to energy conservation. Seidler's own complex of office and residential spaces at Milson's Point (built in several stages between 1973 and 1994) was also celebrated by the architectural profession. His offices received the Sulman Medal for 1981 while the office extension and penthouse won the Institute's Interiors Award for 1991. Perhaps the most exciting of all his inner city buildings was the one designed for Capita in Castlereagh Street, just to the south of Hunter Street (completed in 1989). Here audacious manipulation of voids and building volumes provided natural light to office spaces at all levels and gardens perched high above the street.

Lest one thinks Seidler only worked on residential and commercial commissions, three quite diverse projects illustrate the scope and depth of his architecture – the Memorial to the Martyrs of Jewish Persecutions in Europe at Rookwood Cemetery (1970), the extraordinary structural accomplishment of the Government Stores Building in Alexandria (1972) and a purpose designed Navy Workshop on Garden Island, built circa 1987.

Seidler's first commission outside Sydney was the Bowden House, situated in one of Canberra's suburbs. It was designed in 1950 but not completed until 1955. Other residential buildings in Canberra included housing developments for the Australian National University at Campbell and Garran, built around 1968 (the dwellings at Garran have since been demolished) and a group of townhouses in Yarralumla (completed in 1984). Apart from all of these, one of the most distinguished and structurally advanced buildings to have been erected in

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PICTURES : [1] Grosvenor Place [2] "Ercildoune" at Elizabeth Bay is another of Seidler's apartment buildings from the 1960s. [3] Harry Seidler remodelled a basement room on the lower garden level of a block of flats overlooking Sydney Harbour, to provide himself with an orderly apartment combining living and working areas. (*Art and design*. 1949) [4] Blue's Point Tower. [5] The buildings occupied by Harry Seidler & Associates at Milson's Point. FRONT PAGE : The Royal Australian Institute of Architects used this image of Harry Seidler to promote its journal *Architecture Australia* during 1993. REAR : The massive bulk of Grosvenor Place looms over older and shorter neighbours.



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the city during the 1970s was the complex known as the Edmund Barton Offices in Barton, built to centralise the various Commonwealth "trade agencies".

Further afield, Seidler's work had a marked influence on Melbourne's domestic architecture during the 1950s². His office eventually received commissions in the southern city, which included the Ringwood Cultural Centre 1980, the Frankston Civic Centre (1983) the Waverley Civic Centre, (circa 1984) and a cousin of Grosvenor Place, Shell House (1988), which won the Royal Australian Institute of Architecture's Commercial Award for 1991. Work in Queensland included Brisbane's Riverside Centre and the Hilton Hotel, both completed in the second half of the 1980s. On the other side of the continent Perth's QV 1 Building won the Institute of Architect's Commercial Award for 1992. "One is tempted to write "Harry triumphs yet again!" said juror [and architect] Anne Cunningham. "But it is hard to ignore Seidler's understanding not only of building as art, but also of building as science. His ability to create interesting plans and volumes both within and without his buildings, and his skilful incorporation of state-of-the-art technology together with flexibility for future change, is generally unmatched in the profession. His response to climatic conditions, in particular the sun shading devices, is a hallmark of his work"³.

To cap it all off, Seidler won the Institute's Gold Medal in 1976 and then was recognised by it once more with a Special Jury Award for International Practice in 2000 – his commissions were certainly not limited to Australia. Projects in other parts of the world included the Australian Embassy in Paris (1972), the building for the Hong Kong Club (1980-84) and most recently the massive housing estate known as the Wohnpark Neue Donau in Vienna, which houses more than 2,500 people. Seidler's contributions to architecture have also been recognised in other countries. He was made an Honorary Fellow of the American Institute of Architects, while the Royal Institute of British Architects awarded him its highest honour, the Royal Gold Medal, in 1996. He was elected a member of the Academie D'Architecture de France in 1982, awarded the Gold Medal of the City of Vienna in 1989 and then Austria's highest honour, the Cross of Honour for Arts and Sciences First Class, in 1995.



The death of Harry Seidler marks the end of an era in architecture here and abroad. More than any other architect, he introduced European Modernism to this country and for the last fifty years his office has been at the forefront of innovation and the advancement of architectural design in Australia. His influence as a master of architectural design and as a critic of the local architectural scene will be missed.

Footnotes: ¹ *Art and Design 1*, p.26

² *Phillip Goad, Melbourne Architecture*, p.155

³ *Architecture Australia*, November/December 1992, p.44

Photos: 1, 2, 4, 5, and REAR R.Lumby circa 2003/4

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