

“To Each Time Its Art, to Art Its Freedom”

# Modernist architect Harry Seidler dies in Australia

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Australian architect Harry Seidler died March 9, aged 82, nearly a year after suffering a massive stroke, from which he never fully recovered. Seidler was an uncompromising, passionate and skilled architect who designed over 180 buildings in a career spanning more than half a century.

While the majority of his works were built in Australia, where his practice was based, Seidler was very much an international architect. His career constituted a living link with the Modern Movement in architecture, which was borne out of the revolutionary ferment of the first decades of the twentieth century. He was inspired by profoundly humanist ideals.

Born on June 25, 1923 into a well-off Jewish family in Vienna, Seidler, along with his one brother and parents, was forced to flee to Britain following the Anschluss of March 1938. The 15-year-old youth was separated from his parents and then cruelly interned by the British government as an enemy alien when the war broke out, despite having fled the Nazi regime. Eventually he was deported to Canada and interned in Quebec.

Throughout his life Seidler often referred to the words inscribed over the entry to the Secession building in Vienna. “*Der Zeit ihre Kunst, der Kunst ihre Freiheit*” (To Each Time Its Art, to Art Its Freedom). The Vienna that Seidler and his family had fled had been the scene of amazing cultural and intellectual developments. In the first decade of the twentieth century, the city was home to Kokoschka, Klimt, Egon Schiele (painters), Mahler, Arnold Schönberg, Berg, Anton von Webern (composers), Arthur Schnitzler, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Robert Musil (writers), Sigmund Freud, Alfred Adler (psychoanalysts), Adolf Loos, Otto Wagner (architects), Karl Kraus (journalist-essayist), the Austro-Marxists, as well as Russian revolutionary exiles such as Leon Trotsky and Adolph Joffe.

After release from detention in Canada in October 1941, Seidler’s developing interest in architecture gained him a place at the University of Manitoba. He graduated in 1944 and in 1945 won a scholarship to the master class at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. There, Seidler was taught by Walter Gropius, founder of the Bauhaus School in Dessau, Germany and its director from 1922 until 1928.

Gropius had been radicalized by his experiences during the First World War, and responded to the artistic freedom and experimentation ushered in following the October 1917 Russian Revolution. He had trained as an architect and worked in the office of Peter Behrens, with Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Charles Edouard Jeanneret, who later became known as Le Corbusier. Gropius became chairman of a left-wing association of architects, artists and intellectuals—the *Arbeitsrat für Kunst* (Workers Council for Art). He believed in the need for a new society and aimed to overcome the separation between the arts and crafts, and to create a total environment fit for human beings to live in.

Reflecting on Gropius’ outlook at Harvard, Seidler remarked, “The deep-rooted revolutionary zeal became part of us. There was something in

wanting to make a better world after the war, more than being a revolutionary. Gropius was just the man to intensify that almost religious feeling in young people. He made us feel, and he actually said it, that we were destined to change the physical world.”[1]

Among Seidler’s contemporaries at Harvard were I M Pei, Ulrich Franzen, Henry Cobb, Edward Larrabee Barnes and Paul Rudolph. After graduating, the young man spent time studying with another Bauhaus figure, Josef Albers, whose unique research into the perception of colour had won him a teaching position at the Black Mountain College in North Carolina. Albers was recommended by Philip Johnson, director, at the time, of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. While still at Harvard, Seidler had worked briefly for Alvar Aalto and then, in 1946, moved to New York to work for Marcel Breuer, also from the Bauhaus.

By this time Seidler’s parents had resettled in Australia, where his uncle had established a clothing manufacturing business. When Seidler’s mother offered the young architect the chance to design her new home, he could not refuse, even though he would be curtailing his opportunities to learn more from the masters. On his way to Australia, he visited Brazil, working briefly with Oscar Niemeyer, whose free form curvilinear work was a protest against the predominating linearity of the period.

Arriving in Sydney in 1948, Seidler built his first house, Rose Seidler House. It caused an immediate sensation, attracting a constant stream of interested viewers. The flat roofed cubiform structure was a design the young man had been developing in the US, under the influence of Breuer. In 1951, the Royal Institute of Architects in New South Wales awarded Seidler the Sulman medal (see <http://www.seidler.net.au/projects/001.html>).

The Rose Seidler house launched Seidler’s career, and by 1954 he had designed 28 houses. Much later, Seidler reflected, “In America my field was so much tougher. The fact that in Australia people took me at face value, that they trusted me, endeared me to the country. There are not many countries in which a 25-year-old architect who is new to the place is given a chance as I was.”[2]

According to Henry Feiner, who worked in Seidler’s office, while the Rose Seidler house astounded its Australian audience it was very much a Breuer-inspired work. A far greater innovation was his 1950 design for the Rose House, built near the Rose Seidler House in the Sydney bushland suburb of Turramurra. This house pre-dated Mies van der Rohe’s Farnsworth House by a year. The only precedent was a sketch by Mies for a house in Wyoming that was never built.

The Rose House consisted of an elongated floating rectangular box with fully glazed walls front and back suspended on four columns with triangulated steel ties supporting the large cantilevered ends. Feiner claimed that had the Rose house been built anywhere in the world other than Australia, it would have won Seidler the recognition it deserved as

ground-breaking architecture (see <http://www.seidler.net.au/projects/002.html>).

In 1958, Seidler became an Australian citizen and married Penelope Evatt, a member of the Evatt family of Australian Labor Party (ALP) parliamentarians and left leaning lawyers. Despite his family connection with the Evatts, he never joined the ALP. In 1967 he stood unsuccessfully as a Senate candidate for Gordon Barton's "Australian Reform" movement, which later became the Australia Party, forerunner of the Democrats.

Beginning in the late 1950s, the boom in commercial development saw Seidler become architect for the Lend Lease property development company; an association that would provide him with much of his major work over the next three decades.

His most well known office tower from this period is Australia Square in Sydney, completed in 1967. It consists of a 50 storey tower and an adjacent 15 storey block. The buildings cover 25 percent of the site. The street level plazas are given over to dining and seating areas. The circular form of the tower was designed to minimise its visual impact on its surrounds. The structure for the tower was designed in collaboration with the Italian structural engineer Pier Luigi Nervi and was the result of Seidler's extensive research in the US and Europe. The main concrete column-free floor plates, spanning from the exterior columns to the concrete lift core, were made of curved ribbed reinforced concrete beams exposed at the plaza level as a beautiful sculpted ceiling form. The external columns taper up the tower as the loads diminish, thus exaggerating its height (see <http://www.seidler.net.au/projects/014.html>).

In many of his projects, Seidler worked with artists whose works became an intrinsic component of his designs. Australia Square had tapestries by Le Corbusier, John Olsen, Vasarely and Joan Miro. At the corner of George Street and Bond Street is a sculpture 'Crossed Blades' by Alexander Calder. Seidler maintained that the interior of his buildings, down to the furniture and accessories, were all critical to the realisation of his design. He fought a number of battles, including at the Australian embassy in Paris, to maintain the integrity of his interiors (see <http://www.seidler.net.au/projects/018.html>).

In 1966, Seidler became outraged by the New South Wales government's treatment of Joern Utzon, architect of the Sydney Opera House. On the basis of a campaign that combined xenophobia against the Danish Utzon with Philistinism towards spending money on the arts, Utzon was driven from Australia. The extraordinary architect never returned to see his Opera House, which was completed poorly by others and opened in 1973.

Seidler spoke at many of the protests demanding Utzon's reinstatement. "The apostles of mediocrity are about to take over. If they are allowed to step into Joern Utzon's shoes, they will make the greatest mess of all time out of the building." In response, Utzon wrote in a letter to Penelope Seidler, "A good man fights for his ideas. But a great man is a man who fights for other people and ideals." [3]

Utzon's message to the memorial service held for Seidler on April 6, 2006 read, "Harry is the best example of how a newcomer, a migrant, attacks the problem of getting something built. He taught others to achieve this including myself. He was a marvelously gifted architect searching in his youth for education with the great masters and translating all of his knowledge into his own language, showing a new way of living in the modern times. It was architecture of enormous importance to me when I came to Australia, so vital and with so many wonderful examples that he epitomised the Australian future. He aspired for a better life for his fellow man. We were brothers in aspiration and I am deeply grateful to him."

In 1967, in response to growing opposition to the Vietnam war, Seidler remarked, "There is a time when one is so utterly appalled by the role the government plays in foreign policy, and in Vietnam in particular, that one decides to do what one can to present a saner approach to people.... What

we are doing is barbarous." [4] On issues of government planning policy and the regulation of building work, Seidler always stood on the side of artistic freedom.

Seidler was a long time critique of postmodernism in architecture. He reviled applied decoration and historicism and said of postmodern designs in 1981, "They are the tantrums of a rich, spoilt child, delighting in being contrary and shocking us with corny stylistic idioms, not to say ludicrous bad taste." [5] Seidler took up the cudgels against architect Michael Graves' 1987 postmodern proposed addition to the Whitney Museum in New York. While that endeavour was successful Seidler faced other difficulties.

Because he had designed a number of major skyscrapers, Seidler became the butt of criticism for those who opposed this form of development. And there were many bad examples to criticize. At the beginning of the 1990s, he was commissioned to design three office towers in the Darling Park precinct for Lend Lease. After Seidler had successfully completed the tower design, Lend Lease managing director, Stuart Hornery, rejected his plans for the plaza and forecourt and engaged other designers. Seidler responded by resigning from the project—thus ending his long relationship with Lend Lease—refusing to allow his cohesive overall design to be compromised.

While this break has been put down to a clash of personalities, it represented a more profound shift in the commercialization of the design process. The artistic freedom once allowed Seidler by Lend Lease was now being viewed by the property developer as too risky—a potential threat to the realization of higher rents. As a result of this break, Seidler was obliged to retrench two thirds of his staff.

In May 1990, Seidler was invited back to Vienna to receive the Viennese Government's Gold Medal for ex-citizens of note. Afterwards, he was appointed by the Viennese government to design the Wohnpark Neue Donau public housing complex. Completed in 1998, the complex comprised 850 apartments constructed over a freeway on the banks of the Danube River (see <http://www.seidler.net.au/projects/013.html>).

Seidler was pleased to finally have the opportunity to design a mass housing community. He had long been an advocate of broad scale urban planning in Australia to create better environments for ordinary people. As in most countries, successive Australian governments have privatised public housing and the majority of residential buildings are built by developers for profit. The western suburbs of Sydney are notorious examples of low quality housing, badly planned in terms of access to basic social facilities like child care centres, schools, public transport and recreation facilities.

Throughout his career Seidler railed against the government's lack of foresight and the bad outcomes caused by private development. I recall attending a lecture delivered by Seidler in 1983, which made a deep impression. In it, he encouraged the next generation of architects to strive to design better living conditions for ordinary working people. Unfortunately, and through no fault of his own, Seidler's dwellings are inhabited, and his offices owned, by those individuals who make up the most privileged layers of society. Despite his best intentions—and the intentions of those who shared the ideals of the Modern Movement—a better world was not created for the majority of the world's population. Such a goal, while noble, could never be achieved by good design alone.

Much of Harry Seidler's architecture is very beautiful and all of it extremely well executed. One can only imagine how his work might have developed if his commissions were determined by the human need for delightful living and working environments, rather than the developers' need to make money.

Seidler is survived by his wife Penelope, son Tim and daughter Polly.



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