

AUSTRALIA CULTUREBLOG

Harry Seidler: Australia's king of concrete and curves

The man who brought modernism to Australia is still revered by architects – and the subject of two new books and an exhibition



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The Ian Thorpe Aquatic Centre, designed by Harry Seidler. Photograph: Dirk Meinecke

Jeremy Edmiston was an architecture student when he gave Harry Seidler a lift one night. On the journey, Edmiston asked Seidler where he thought architecture might evolve. “Architecture isn’t about style,” Seidler told him. It’s about contemporary means and methods and how we can articulate that with clarity.”

Austrian-born Seidler was the consummate modernist. A disciple of the Bauhaus founder Walter Gropius, he introduced Bauhaus methodology to Australian architecture

when he arrived in 1948. His first work – the Rose Seidler House – was a cause celebre and won him the 1951 Sulman award. He became a household name with Australia Square Tower, the tallest lightweight concrete building in the world when it opened in 1967.

His message stayed with Edmiston, now the co-founder of the multi-award winning New York firm SYSTEMarchitects (renowned for Burst, a prefabricated plywood holiday house).

“Harry was an enormous presence in my life and mind,” Edmiston says. “There’s a geometric clarity to Harry’s work that I think is important in our work. If Harry were in my generation he would be doing the work we are doing at SYSTEMarchitects.”

Once, he remembers, Seidler returned from China with an armful of drab, grey dustcoats for the staff. “He told us the smocks symbolised dedication, hard work and quality.”

Angela Rowson studied Seidler during her degree at the University of Technology, Sydney. As part of her course she spent a week building a balsawood model of his Blues Point Tower, which she has donated to the permanent collection of the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney. “It’s definitely under-appreciated – the patterning in the façade, the fenestration and the clever planning. I get a lot out of what I learned about Seidler, especially when it comes to planning for high-rise residential.”

Stefan Heim of architects Durbach Block worked with Seidler in for a year in 2004. “It was fantastic; we were rebuilding the Ted Meller House in Castlecrag that he had originally designed in 1950,” Heim says. “Harry would always ask, 'What is the best material for something? What’s the most functional product?' Now I ask myself the same questions whenever I design something.”



The Horizon Tower in Sydney. Photograph: copyright Eric Sierins

Seven years after his death, it seems that Seidler is again the flavour of the month. This year Helen O'Neill's biography on Seidler, A Singular Vision, was released while next April will see the launch of a book by Vladimir Belogolovsky focusing on the architect's projects with contributions by Kenneth Frampton, the late Oscar Niemeyer, with whom Seidler worked in 1948, and Norman Foster.

Belogolovsky is also curating a travelling exhibition on Seidler – Architecture, Art and Collaborative Design – tracing the architect's role in bringing Bauhaus principles to Australia through 15 featured projects; five houses and five towers in Sydney, and five major commissions beyond Sydney. It arrives at the Museum of Sydney on 1 November.

Belogolovsky is a self-confessed Seidlerphile. “He brought a sense of style and sophistication, beauty, and refinement to Australia. He can teach Australian architects how to address local sun and climate, how to explore the wonderful qualities of concrete – of which he was a true poet in collaboration with Pier Luigi Nervi – and how to benefit the public by providing open spaces such as plazas within privately owned corporate urban projects.”

The latter point is perhaps best exemplified by Australia Square Tower (1967), a building that took Sydney into the 20th century with a piazza that changed the way the city's office workers approached alfresco lunchtime dining. It took decades for the rest of Sydney's architects to catch on.

Belogolovsky says the main element that up-and-coming architects can take from Seidler is the way he was able to find a particular artistic solution in each project.

“Harry treated a small house or a huge building as a total work of art without compromise,” he says. “Seidler was consistently inspired by works of art; a concept which seems to be fading away nowadays, as buildings become more efficient and calculated.



The Harry and Penelope Seidler House, Killara. Photograph: Max Dupain/copyright Penelope

Seidler

"We should not forget that architecture is not only a social and environmental tool, but perhaps more importantly, it has an emotional dimension and we do need to create beautiful spaces to enrich our everyday environment.

"Harry liked to say, 'To each time its art, to art its freedom.' This expression comes from 19th century Vienna and it holds true today."

Indeed, not only were Seidler's buildings works of art in their own right – think of the dynamic balconied façade of Horizon, the sinuous curves of the Ian Thorpe Aquatic Centre, or the way Blues Point Tower suggested Josef Albers' City – but he used world-class sculpture and paintings to punctuate his architecture.

Australia Square alone featured a sculpture by Carlberg in Lend Lease's executive suite reception area, along with tapestries by Miró, Calder, Le Corbusier, and Olsen. There were also huge public tapestries by Le Corbusier and Vasarely in the main tower lobby – which were replaced in 2002 with a Sol LeWitt mural. And outside near the corner of Bond Street he selected Calder's menacing Crossed Blades, arguably the most significant sculpture in the country.

The architect Hiromi Shiraishi worked with Seidler's firm from 1994 until 2012. "The first time I ever visited him I was a student, and he showed me his office," she says.

"First I saw the Frank Stella in the foyer, then the curving staircase – which was like a sculpture in itself – and in his office he had these floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. On them were more than a dozen tiny-scale models of sculptures he had used. Harry explained to me how important it is to put a big artwork in front of a building."



Australia Square Tower, with Alexander Calder's Twin Blades in the foreground. Photograph: Max Dupain/copyright Penelope Seidler

"Now, because of Harry, when I design something, I think about the place where the

artwork will go right from the beginning – it's part of the design” she says. “At the moment I am designing the revamp for the Aboriginal Cultural Centre in Cairns. I have left several walls blank, because later on we will collaborate with local Indigenous artists to create a big artwork for the space.”

It was while working with Seidler in the late 80s that the architect Russell Jones began to share his boss’s appreciation and mastery of concrete.

Jones, who now runs a practice in London, has completed a magnificent concrete family residence in Waalre, outside Eindhoven. It is impossible not to see the influence of Seidler, not only in the choice of material, but in the way Jones has used it in a sculptural manner. The textural quality of the bark of the pine and fir trees that surround the site has been reflected in the rough finish of the white reinforced concrete vertical surfaces. The cantilevered bedrooms and gallery spaces, and blade walls, are similarly Seidleresque.

Jones says the most important lesson Seidler taught him was not about modernism or concrete per se, but something much more important. “Harry taught me about passion.”

- This article was amended on 12 December 2013 to correct the spelling of consummate and architect, and to remove an incorrect link to Russell Jones.