

# THE BULLETIN

WITH  
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**We're not perfect, but sometimes we forget that we have plenty to be proud of in this country. Let's stop knocking ourselves for a minute. We're creative, we're tolerant and we're humane. We're better fed, better educated, better organised, and better entertained than at any time in our history.**

**The Bulletin asked 25 thoughtful Australians to explain...**

**Why Australia  
is the best  
place in the  
world to live**





# In search of an Australian style

*Architect HARRY SEIDLER reflects on the dream at the end of a journey*

**A**fter a complicated odyssey from my native Vienna, where I lived until the age of 15, I had a period of schooling in England and was interned and transported to Canada during World War II. Following a final architectural education at Harvard, I settled down to work with architect Marcel Breuer in New York from 1946 to 1948.

My parents had lived in London during the war and decided to move to Australia, where they had business connections. Reports came to me that, in spite of the somewhat "primitive" conditions, they liked the country, which they felt had a great future. Why didn't I join them? Nothing was further from my mind. New York was exciting and the architectural scene full of the new wave of emerging modernism in which I took part, at the fountainhead, as Breuer's chief assistant.

The avalanche of letters kept coming from Down Under with an increasing crescendo of praise for the adopted country's potential but I remained immune to temptation.

My mother, an astute woman who knew of my burning ambitions in architecture, finally knew how to break my obstinacy. An almost formal, business-like letter came saying: "We want you to come here on a visit, at our expense, and accept the commission to build us a house." That was different. Imagine: a chance to do my own thing. I made conditions: the ticket



**Some things don't change: the harbour from Point Piper, 1950**

had to go by way of Brazil because I wanted to see its new architecture and work for a while with Oscar Niemeyer, its most celebrated architect.

And so it was. After some months in Rio I arrived in Sydney in the winter of 1948. The ramshackle sheds of what was then the international airport at Mascot and the sea of red tile roofs of Maroubra and Bondi did not impress me.

The next day I was taken on a sight-seeing tour. Arriving at the top of the hill before descending to Double Bay, I saw Sydney Harbour for the first time. "Stop the car," I called out. What a sight! The sky was a brilliant clear blue and the whole width of the harbour was laid out below me. I was stunned by this superb setting.

To my amazement the

**Brick and tile dunes cover the sandhills of Bondi, 1950**







**The Rose Seidler House, Wahroonga, 1949**

cloudless sky persisted for three weeks. Soon I found a place to live — and rebuilt it — on the water's edge next to Lady Martin's Beach in Point Piper at the enormous rent of 30 shillings (\$3) a week including lock-up garage. I lived and worked there for the next 12 years.

There was no modern architecture to speak of in Australia then and the house I built for my mother caused quite a stir. It brought an almost immediate string of clients who wanted something just like that. At first they were European immigrants to whom this new architecture was somewhat familiar, but what amazed me was the average Australians who came and wanted uncompromisingly modern houses. This had no counterpart in New York, where only the initiated wealthy were willing to take the plunge into the unknown world of modernism.

"What nice unpretentious people," I thought. They trust me, a mere 25-year-old, with their life's savings.

And so a thriving practice was built.

The obstacles of having to argue with local councils to gain approval and the difficulties of finding willing builders seemed irrelevant against the excitement of building in this, to me, unique magnificent natural setting of the Australian bush. The brilliant blue of the sky and the gnarled sculptural forms of eucalyptus trunks and branches were a superb setting for the clear-cut white geometry of my early houses.

Soon their images appeared throughout the world.

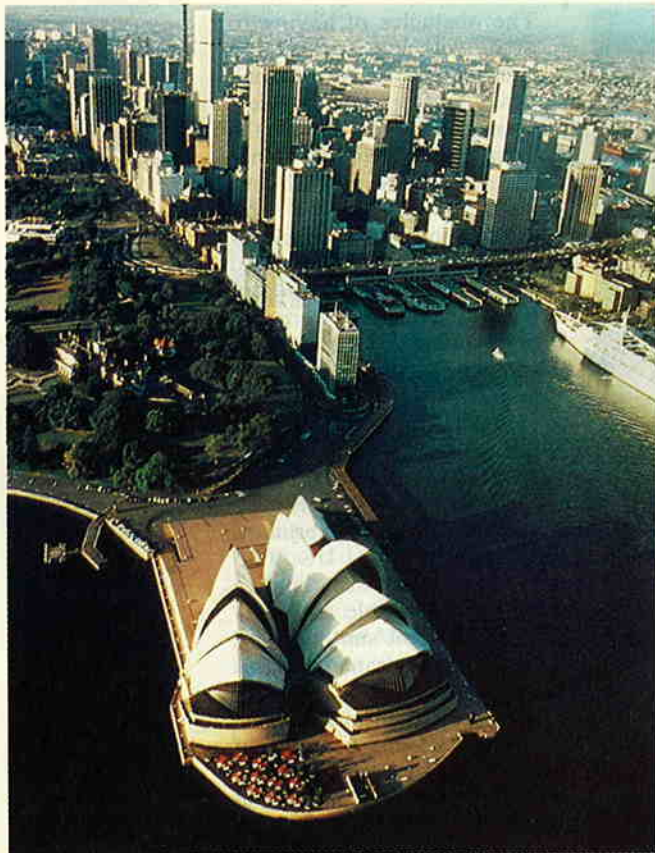
Australia was most progressive in architecture was the impression they gave in publications in Germany, France, England and the US. The climate in those countries made such open architecture impossible and none of them had the brilliant sun and hard shadow contrast which dramatised this architecture so much.

The work became larger in scope and the excitement of developing new ways of building, adjusted to an expanding economy and technology, was in itself an incentive to intensify the search for newness. Compared with where I had come from in the US (and in contrast to the situation 40 years later), I found Australian workmen willing and, by my standards then, moderate in their demands. A co-operative mateship developed with the teams on site. They were marvellous people. It struck me that the equalising social structure did not allow for any sense of boss-relationship. All were equal and any attempt to claim higher status invoked laughter. How heal-

**Eucalypts soften the white geometry of early modern (60s) houses**







**The world's most distinctive Opera House and business district**

thy, I thought. No fascist hothead standing on a soapbox would get to first base with these people.

There came a time in the 60s when the demand for average-priced, modern houses was satisfied by project home builders who offered the public an alternative to the traditional triple-fronted brick bungalow. When I compared notes with my American colleagues, no such thing was available in the US. Australia was becoming the trendsetter, not only in design but also in making a progressive product available to the average family.

Nothing could demonstrate the open-minded enterprise of the 60s better than the Sydney Opera House. Nowhere in the world would such a daring project have been contemplated, let alone built. The fact that its unique form has become the symbol of Australia in the eyes of the world stands in stark contrast to the reactionary stance of a single politician who ousted architect Joern Utzon and thereby denied us the promise of a world of wonderment on its inside. Who remembers that politician, Davis Hughes? We will never know how superbly Utzon's vision would have been reflected in the interior had he stayed to complete his work.

However, we have much to be proud of in Australian architecture historically. Even ignoring the present shallow fashion of facadism, which demeans the true value of old buildings, there can be no doubt that our early settlers produced buildings

of intelligence and sensitivity. To me the beautifully restored buildings in Sydney's Macquarie Street — symbolised by the old Mint Building, with its sun-shading veranda and restrained aesthetics — reflect the best of European tradition translated to



**The Mint Building, Macquarie Street, a colonial masterpiece**

the climate of a new world. But beyond that, the large residential areas — such as Paddington, with its incomparable terrace houses — are one of our greatest national treasures. An intensely logical building, created with minimal means, is here elevated to monumental importance when seen as a town planning totality.



**The typical Sydney terrace house: practical and charming**

To take this superb historic example and translate its essence into the vision and technology of today has been my ambition, even if it has been given the opportunity too rarely to become reality. This is the challenge of our time in housing terms: to create a cohesive domestic style applied to sufficiently dense housing to produce a result full of visual delights and simultaneously answering the pressing social problems of providing community facilities planned from inception.

After housing, city centre development offers the greatest challenge and opportunities. There need be nothing wrong with high-density urban centres. People simply want to be close to each other in their activities. It is only bad planning and poorly-designed buildings that make us wish they would stop.





**A comprehensively planned total community with a variety of joined houses. Queensland, 1980**

People always have built dense cities. They were made not only tolerable but also delightful by the juxtaposition of public open spaces within the density. Australia Square is one such example that recalls the piazzas of medieval cities such as Sienna in the way Sydney people respond to what is provided and congregate in its open but contained space. The key is that the 50-storey tower occupies only about one-third of its site.



**Australia Square: the 50 storey tower with its popular open public plaza (on private land)**



But what of an Australian architectural style? In my view it will consist not of a "different" way of superficial decoration but rather of a method of expressing what makes building here different from building in Europe or the US: our climate and our informal way of life.

Even using present technology, which constitutes a kind of universal building vocabulary in the civilised world, I look to the uniqueness of our climate to design distinctively Australian responses. Not the sheer glass walls imported from New York but glass buildings shaded on their exteriors, not only to help save energy but also to leave us free to look out without the glare that otherwise can be stopped only by claustrophobic venetian blinds.



**Glass-walled skyscraper protected by external sunshades: Grosvenor Place, 1988**

The fact that we occasionally have downpours can generate a response in design solutions for the covering of building entrances. The results can translate our needs into unmistakably Australian images.



**Riverside Centre, Brisbane, 1986 — a glass rendition of the traditional veranda**

Australia has presented me with all these challenges and stimuli. No-one in Vienna or anywhere in Europe has such opportunities. The decision to end my odyssey here has been the best choice of my life. ■