



Harry Seidler: a towering architect

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Editorial

Harry Seidler: a towering architect

The man is gone but his ghost will haunt generations to come. Strolling through downtown Sydney, no one can escape the presence of Harry Seidler. If there is any urban public space worth the name it belongs to Australia Square, a unique phenomenon in the entire country.

Regardless of their scale, Seidler's buildings mostly are tangible but personal; they are the work of an immigrant architect who was cut between the idea of 'settlement,' dear to this country, and dreams of a restless nomad. The notion of 'lightness' is indeed a very contemporary phenomenon in many ways. In his *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, Italo Calvino speaks of the usefulness of 'lightness' when one hits the weight of walls blocking the smooth passage of life. Seidler experienced this in his youth, and like many Jews, he had to move. Yes, there is something of an existential dimension in his architecture that is imbued with that which the German thinker, Arthur Schopenhauer, claimed to be the task of an architect: to hold in balance the dynamic play of gravitational forces. While this intuitive understanding of architecture remained central to the nineteenth century debate on the tectonic, it could not escape the mind of an Austrian architect, even one who had been taught by Walter Gropius and had worked in Marcel Breuer's office for a short period of time. The regional subconscious does not evaporate easily. Australians know this very well.

Like many architects, Seidler highlighted the essentiality of landscape for architecture. It is to his credit that he approached architecture, at any scale, by juxtaposing the notion of landscape with the tectonic. Those who dislike him for personal reasons, or because of their own misconception of Modernism, should turn their critical eye away from the sky and look at a topographical section running through the east/west area of Sydney. The cut, connecting one of Seidler's most recent buildings, the Cove, with that of Australia Square, demonstrate how good he was in moulding the horizon of topography with towering buildings. Speaking in architectural terms, this is perhaps his greatest legacy. He was also good in thinking of a hybrid image of tall buildings, incorporating tectonic experimentation, which Mies van der Rohe carried out during his American period, with the notion of corporality implied in Le Corbusier's later architecture.

Once Reyner Banham wrote that Seidler is the only architect of his generation who shifted the design away from domestic scale to high-density residential buildings. Given the opportunity, as he tried to do on several occasions, Seidler would have planted as many tall buildings around Sydney as he wished. After all, it is not a bad idea to mark the landscape with soaring and beautiful towers. They mark the landscape and provide orientation to the city. "Light" as his approach to architecture might have been, Seidler's towers confirm the importance of the earth-work for the tectonic. Also of significance is his use of the enclosure of the building not as a thin surface, but a structural entity in its own right, the articulation of which was expected to protect the interior space from Sydney's

bright sun. This much is clear from the MLC, where the rising columns taper towards the last floors and disappear in the enclosure.

Geometry was another aspects of his architecture. Instead of playing with forms, Seidler would take geometry as a raw material to be embellished into a tectonic form. The idea of repetition also marks most of his design. Seidler was at his best when his imagination kept tightly to the idea of repetition. I like the Grosvenor Centre, for example, better than the playfulness of the Cove. It seems that in most of his work, however, Seidler was skilled in articulating a constructed space with that aesthetic quality which would touch one's heart, as Le Corbusier expected architects to do. This much is clear from the entry stairs of the Opera House from where looking back to the city at night, one can't miss Seidler's round tower soaring up solemnly.

Harry Seidler, Glen Murcutt, and Utzon were the three names I knew of Australia when I decided to take a full time teaching position at the University of Sydney in July 2000. I first met Seidler during a semester when he accepted to teach a studio, the 4th and 5th years combined. Though reluctant, the students who attended his studio were very happy with the outcome of their final project. He was a man of confidence and in charge of the space surrounding him. No wonder that during the same semester I only had a brief opportunity to converse with him. Good Australians perhaps disliked this aspect of his character the most; he was nobody's 'mate.' Life is too short to make everybody happy! Perhaps some can do it. Good on them! At the end of that semester he wrote a short piece in one of the morning newspapers, criticising the way architecture has been taught at schools. He was right to some extent, but most academics could not take that. Their response was "what's the problem?" My feeling is that, as a good architect, he did not trust those academics who pursue a bookish or bureaucratic attitude toward architecture.

On Friday March 17/06, Marcus Trimble, a young architect from BVN, invited many colleagues to gather at the Australia Square for "a drink in honour of the life of Harry Seidler." It was nice to see both the old and young generations of architects gather to pay their respects to a man in whose absence we can cherish the spaces and volumes he put together so elegantly.

The man is gone but his ghost . . .

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