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Harry Seidler and the Legacy of Modern Architecture in Australia

An Interview with Penelope Seidler

Susan Macdonald

Abstract

Harry Seidler is recognized as one of Australia's most important twentieth-century architects. Many of Seidler's buildings are now becoming recognized as heritage places. His Rose Seidler house of 1950 was bequeathed to the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales (NSW), and is now a house museum. Seidler was vocal about the 'heritage industry', and it is interesting to reflect on these views now that his own buildings are considered worthy of recognition and conservation. The following interview with Harry Seidler's partner, Penelope Seidler, reflects on the architect's views on how we manage our heritage and on the interface between contemporary architecture and its conservation.

Introduction

Since arriving in Australia in 1948 to design and construct a house for his parents, Harry Seidler has made a remarkable contribution to Australian architecture. He is Australia's most renowned twentieth-century architect, and has been acknowledged internationally by a number of awards and accolades over a 50-year career, including Australia's highest honour, the Companion of the Order of Australia, and the RIBA Royal Gold Medal in 1996. Seidler's buildings range from the modest but ground-breaking residential buildings of his early career to major public buildings, embassies, commercial office buildings and industrial structures in Australia, Asia and in his native Vienna.

Born in Vienna in 1923, Harry Seidler fled to England just prior to the Second World War. Initially interned as an enemy alien, Seidler was then



Figure 1 A portrait of Penelope and Harry Seidler, 2005. (Petrina Hicks)

sent to Canada, where he was later released and studied architecture. Seidler went on to study at Harvard University with Walter Gropius, and at Black Mountain College with Joseph Albers. He worked as chief assistant in Marcel Breuer's architectural practice in New York between 1946 and 1948. En route to Australia, he spent three months in Brazil working with architect Oscar Niemeyer.

From the outset, Seidler's work challenged the status quo. His remarkable career has left Australia with a legacy of wonderful buildings, such as Australia Square, his seminal Rose Seidler House and the Horizon building, all in Sydney. Although these are all generally admired, they have not yet been widely recognized as heritage places. The innovative nature of Seidler's work often brought him into conflict with local government and planning bodies when he was required to follow often-conservative town planning rules and regulations. Seidler was a visionary contemporary architect, of high ideals and integrity, whose philosophy is based on the principles of 'social use, technology and aesthetics'.

Seidler's views on the 'heritage industry', as he called it, were perhaps misunderstood. As this interview with Harry Seidler's widow and partner of 48 years Penelope Seidler reveals, Seidler had a respect and appreciation for the philosophy and practice of conservation as a discipline, but railed against what he saw as the superficial application of the principles of conservation. The interview reveals that Seidler felt that the protection mechanisms for heritage did not always support conservation aims, and

that he thought in some instances the compromises made undermined the very intent of conserving the building in the first place. He also abhorred pastiche and was a firm advocate of the notion that each epoch should contribute to the built environment in a contemporary manner. Harry Seidler was also committed to the celebration of architecture and the role it plays in shaping our world. The publication in 2003 of his book, *The Grand Tour: Travelling the World with an Architect's Eye*, a collection of Seidler's beautiful photographs of architectural splendours from all over the world, demonstrates his love of architecture and his interest in its achievements from ancient to modern times.¹

The Rose Seidler House, his first commission in Australia (1950), was bequeathed by Penelope and Harry Seidler to the NSW Historic Houses Trust in 1988. It was the first post-war building to be recognized as a heritage item and be opened to the public as a house museum and resource centre for modern architecture in Australia. This building, which was hugely important at the time of its construction and continues to be, has now been visited by thousands of Australians and stands as a symbol for post-war Australian optimism and growing cultural awareness. The Rose Seidler House exposed new ideals of Modernism transported from Europe via the United States, presenting architecture as a tool of social reform and providing for new ways of living. The house paved the way for many modest architect-designed homes in the 1950s and 1960s that broke from the prevalent inter-war Californian bungalow model and explored the theories of Modernism at an affordable domestic scale.



Figure 2 The Rose Seidler House (1948), located on the edge of the bush in northern Sydney was commissioned by Harry Seidler's mother. (Marcell Seidler)



Figures 3 and 4 Australia Square (1967) is a landmark building in the Sydney skyline, which also created a successful urban plaza defined by the circular tower and the lower piloti building. It is arguably Australia's most important post-war high-rise building, redefining corporate architecture. (Max Dupain)



In 2003, the New South Wales Royal Institute of Architects, aided by a grant from the NSW Heritage Office, undertook a survey of Seidler's work with a view to assessing its significance and identifying a selection of places to be listed under the State Heritage Register. This work was undertaken in co-operation with Harry Seidler and his office and provides an important legacy. However, since that time only a few of the nominations have progressed, revealing the nervousness of owners about the listing of their buildings generally, and perhaps a lack of recognition that buildings from the second half of the twentieth century are now also part of the Australian historic legacy and worthy of protection. Listing buildings provides certainty to the community and owners about what is recognized as being of value. But it is the perception that listing denudes the owners of the potential to develop their properties as they wish that has caused some to shy away from having them heritage listed. More work to address both these issues is needed. The interview in this regard reveals current attitudes to the conservation of more recent heritage in Australia.

Harry Seidler died in 2006, aged 82. Harry Seidler and Associates, the practice he established over 40 years ago in Sydney, continues. A pictorial record of Harry Seidler's work is available on www.seidler.net.au.

The following interview was held with Penelope Seidler in January 2007 at Harry and Penelope Seidler's home in Killara, Sydney, designed in 1967. Penelope Seidler is an architect also, and has been involved in the arts in Australia for many years.

The interview seeks to explore Harry Seidler's views on the practice of heritage conservation generally as recalled by Penelope Seidler, and how it may be applied to his buildings as they are increasingly recognized and protected under the relevant legislation. It also seeks to clarify some misunderstandings about the way Seidler viewed the legacy of the past.

Interview with Penelope Seidler

SM: Penelope, Harry did not always speak favourably about the heritage protection system in Australia, yet he was a great champion of architecture, the legacy of historic buildings and the lessons that society can learn from the architecture of other eras. Can you tell me what he saw as the problem with the heritage system?

PS: Harry called it the 'heritage industry'. What he found difficult about it was its superficiality or its piecemeal approach. He abhorred the idea of retaining the façade of a building; he thought that was very shallow or mere tokenism. His view, and I agree, was that a building is more than a façade – if it's worth keeping, then more of the building than the façade is worth conserving.²

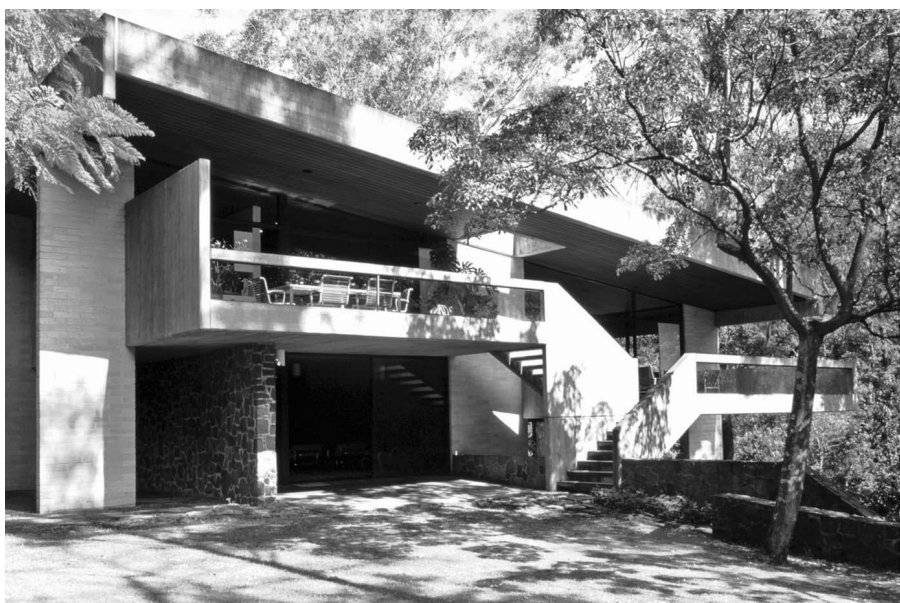


Figure 5 The Seidler's home in Killarra, Sydney (1967) uses an elegant palette of materials such as concrete, bronze, stone and glass. The materials and the relationship with the landscape – the manner in which the house embraces its terrain – creates a serene and powerful sense of place. (Harry Seidler & Associates)

Harry thought that the planning legislation in Australia was unsympathetic to heritage; there were inconsistent goals between planning and conservation. The system allows for the over-development of sites. For example, allowing development potential of say 15 times the size of the heritage building means that it will be subsumed in the development. He found the system frustrating and felt that too many compromises were made when buildings were conserved, and that too many changes were made, contradicting the aim of protection. If the building was important then perhaps there should be less change allowed so that its historic integrity could be preserved.

Conversely, he also thought that there were buildings that were designated as heritage items that were not worthy of conservation. Too many little bits were kept when the whole was not retained. In many instances, he was required to keep buildings on sites that he did not recognize as being important, but then to make the site work – the historic building was so compromised that he found it difficult to understand how this could be a good heritage outcome. He believed in the totality of architecture. An example of this was the Cove apartments in Sydney on the edge of the historic Rocks area. There was a small church hall on the site that was required to be retained, but to achieve the necessary car parking, the structural acrobatics that were required to keep the heritage building Harry



Figures 6 and 7 The Cove apartment building (2003) is located on the edge of Sydney's historic Rocks area. This high-rise building is characteristically Seidler. The lower levels share a streetscape with low-rise late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century warehouse buildings, and have responded by utilizing brick and concrete detailed and proportioned to relate to the scale and articulation of the existing buildings. Seidler felt the retention of one of the historic buildings on the site compromised the existing and the new buildings. (Eric Seirens)

thought ridiculous. He also thought the building had been severely compromised, which countered the intent of keeping it. If the building was truly significant, then the compromise that was allowed was a *tour de force* of vacuous principle.

Harry also believed that it was desirable to protect areas rather than individual buildings, so that the context of the heritage buildings could be

properly looked after and the outcomes would be cohesive. It is hard, for example, to appreciate or understand a single Victorian building when it has lost its context.

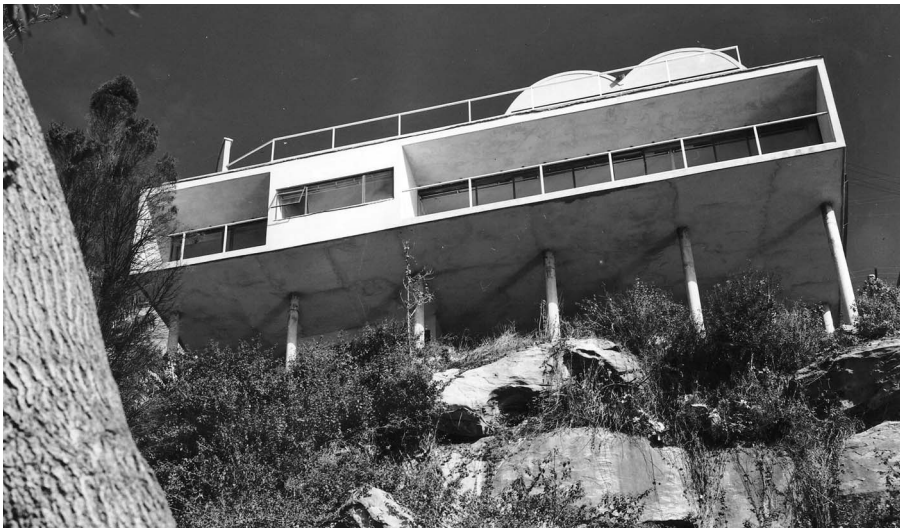
Harry also really disliked what he called fake heritage – superficial pastiche that lacked design integrity and resulting in buildings that were not truly representative of their era.

Harry often found the heritage advice available at the local government level problematic and frustrating, and sometimes felt that the advisers lacked the knowledge and experience to make competent decisions, relying more on rules and bureaucracy, which he also found immensely frustrating.³ He had an experience with one of his houses where the council was being very rigid in their approach to the additions designed for the house, and was doing it by the book; that is, adhering rigidly to the rules rather than common sense. They did not care that it was the original architect making the changes and that he was doing it in a way that was sympathetic to the design of the building and met the needs of the new owners.

He, however, did appreciate the professionalism and expertise of the Heritage Office when he came into contact with them. The Heritage Council played an important role in saving the Igloo House in Mosman, Sydney after its demolition had been approved by the local council. He was very pleased when the Heritage Council stepped in and put an emergency heritage order on it. He considered it to be an important house (completed in 1953) with a pioneering structure, and was exceedingly upset about how the Mosman Council (local council), which had approved the demolition, had approached it. The process was really distressing. It had been judged on its current condition and it had been unsympathetically altered over time. It was described during the Council meeting as the worst building the speaker had seen in 30 years of building. Harry spoke at the meeting and explained about the house, and he had taken photos along. We both felt they were so dismissive. The Heritage Council putting the order on the house and then listing it was really terrific. Then a new owner acquired the house who loved it and understood its architectural significance and is restoring it to its original design.⁴

He certainly recognized and supported the idea of keeping and conserving historic buildings. It is true that he did not recognize social significance in the way that heritage practice often does. His focus was on the architectural significance and the aesthetics, the celebration of their beauty and the lessons that buildings from the past convey. This is demonstrated in his book, *The Grand Tour*, which comprises 950 photos from 40 countries of historical and contemporary architecture.⁵

SM: Did Harry have an expectation that his own work would be one day protected for future generations?



Figures 8 and 9 The Igloo House, Mosman (1952) was threatened with demolition in 1999 and saved through the making of an Interim Heritage Order. The house was then sold, and the new owner has worked with Harry Seidler to conserve the house. (Max Dupain)

PS: I don't think he thought about it in those terms. Architecture to Harry was serious business, and he built for eternity. He did not expect it, but I think he hoped that they may be recognized and therefore protected. He thought that good architecture should be recognized, looked after and nurtured. He hoped that his buildings would be recognized culturally. He used to say 'you can't pressure-cook culture'. He disliked it when his buildings were distorted and capriciously changed.

SM: Harry bequeathed his first house in Australia – the Rose Seidler house designed for his parents in 1948 – to the NSW Historic Houses Trust. Can you tell us a bit about how that came about? What were Harry's expectations for the building? Did he agree with the way the Historic Houses Trust approached the conservation of the house?

PS: After the Seidlers left the house, it had various people living in it, my sister and her young family at one stage lived there in a very different way to the Seidlers. Eventually, the burden of keeping the house with tenants became difficult and Harry wanted it to be well looked after, so it all came together. The Historic Houses Trust were interested in looking after it, and so it just evolved.

When the house was bequeathed, Harry included various clauses about the management of the setting of the house, which is very important to it, to make sure that what he saw as the important characteristics of the architecture were preserved.

Harry hoped that it would be kept and shown as it was designed, and that the bushland setting would not be compromised. He also wanted it to be open to the public. It had received a huge amount of attention when it was first built and people were always coming to see it. At the time the Historic Houses Trust (HHT) took it over, it again received a lot of attention and a large number of people still visit it. It is interesting that a number of houses of that era also received a lot of public attention at the time, but not much has been heard about them since. This house has continued to attract an enormous amount of interest.

Harry found the process of its conservation a very interesting one, he was quite amazed by it, about the level of care and meticulous attention to detail that was involved. He was bemused by it, I would say. They [HHT] wanted to conserve it using original materials, some of which were very difficult to come by and were by then expensive or required careful crafting. He could not believe how much work went into it, but he was also very pleased. The story about the repair to the ramp illustrates how he wanted to approach the repairs to the building. Harry thought that they should repair it using new technology and engineering approaches which involved using steel, but HHT wanted to do a very careful repair using the original construction method and materials. Harry was amazed at the degree of difficulty they were prepared to undertake.

SM: Did Harry distinguish between the practice of architecture and the practice of conservation; did he recognize it as a discipline?

PS: Yes, very much so. He saw the practice of contemporary architecture and conservation as very different. He grew to respect and recognize the discipline of conservation. He was quite interested in this. One of our close

friends in Vienna is a conservation architect who works on a variety of historic buildings. He and Harry had long conversations about the philosophy of conserving buildings.

He had a lot of respect for proper conservation specialists, but was himself very much a contemporary architect.

SM: What do you think were Harry's expectations about the way in which his buildings should be protected? Did he have views about how change to his buildings should be approached?

PS: I don't think he had any expectations, but he hoped that people would like them and look after them. He was really happy when new owners contacted him about his buildings and was always pleased to advise people and talk to them about them. Harry saw his buildings as his children, and was always interested in what became of them and happy to help them grow old gracefully.

Harry assumed buildings would change over time, due to the new needs of owners, changing circumstances, and believed that they should grow or change in a contemporary way. He always returned to the original design intent of the building, but was never nostalgic in the way he then approached change. Harry utilized the latest technology, construction techniques, and the way he was solving architectural problems now. Harry was always really happy when he was involved in his buildings, and it did upset him when he saw that they had been mistreated.

SM: Did he see the idea or the fabric as being more important? Is it more important to retain the building, albeit changed, or is it important to retain the original design intent?

PS: A bit of both. The idea or philosophy behind the building was obviously of great importance but the fabric, its materiality and the way it was built was also very important and often the two were so closely interrelated you cannot separate them. As I said though, when he went about working on them again, he might use new materials, perhaps improving them with a greater budget. Harry's early buildings were built in the post-war period of austerity when materials were rationed or in short supply. Nowadays people want more luxurious accommodation and materials.

SM: A common criticism of buildings of the post-war period is that they were not built to last, that they were replaceable and therefore the materials were disposable or unimportant and therefore that it is OK, when you come to conserve them, not to worry about the fabric. Do you think this is how Harry saw it?

PS: No, I think his philosophy changed. As a young architect, his earlier buildings paid more attention to the aesthetics and not so much to the

maintenance and durability of the buildings, but quite early on, perhaps ten years into his career in Australia, this changed and he became concerned with the permanence of the buildings, their materiality and the way they were built and crafted to stand the test of time. They were less experimental, if you like, in terms of their materiality. By the time he came to build this house [built for Penelope and Harry in 1967] he was building for eternity. We have been here for 40 years and virtually nothing has changed, and it is almost maintenance-free as far as any building can be. It is beautifully built and needs very little care. The materials have a sense of the infinite – it is here for all time and the house has been built to last. Some of the details – the aluminium doors have really substantial sections that are no longer available. The concrete is perfect, the off-form finish would be difficult to achieve today.

SM: Was Harry involved in the conservation of many of his own buildings?

PS: A few, probably not enough. As I said previously, he was always really happy to talk to owners who approached him about these buildings, and we have a few clients in the office who are working on some of the houses. He would spend hours talking to owners. We went to visit some of his buildings as they came up for sale, and some have been really badly altered. Sometimes this upset Harry. Often now you see his name cited when buildings are for sale 'it's a Harry Seidler building' but it actually bears little resemblance to the building he designed.

The Office retains some association with some of the bigger buildings. Whether we have an ongoing involvement depends who is in charge. Nowadays, big buildings are managed by real estate managers rather than building managers, who at least had an understanding about building construction and how they work. Now it is more about the commercial arrangements of leases and so on. This is not necessarily in the best interests of the building.

Sometime new owners approach the Office, sometimes not; I am not sure why more don't. Perhaps they are nervous of the name, or perhaps they just do not want to feel constrained, which there is no reason to be. The moral rights legislation has helped a bit, people have to at least write a letter and let you know what they are doing.⁶ It has not made a big difference though. The fact that people need to stop and think about how they are changing the building in relation to the original design intention probably helps a bit.

Harry felt that people have lost touch with building – the practice and the craft of construction. Previously more people were involved with their buildings, much less so now.

SM: Which were Harry's favourites of his buildings?

PS: He used to say 'the next one'. I think the Office [Milson's Point 1973] and this house. He was very satisfied his Vienna work [Wohnpark Neue Donau]. He was very fond of Blues Point Tower [1962], which is a most important building. I do not understand why people appear to dislike it.

SM: *The people who live there love it?*

PS: Yes, but the critics say that it is because they cannot see it. Perhaps it is that people are not ready to understand it aesthetically. He was proud of the Joadja House [which won the NSW RAIA Blackett Award in 2001].

The buildings with the great sites were the ones he said were the most outstanding. The site and the building's response to it create a totality. The Joadja House and the Thredbo ski lodge (1962) are buildings with wonderful sites which showed off the architecture. He was very proud of the Vienna Wohnpark Neue Donau [1993] and Hochhaus Neue Donau [2001]. It gave him enormous satisfaction to build in the city that had rejected him in 1938.

Harry always said that he thought buildings needed to stand the test of a generation to determine if they were truly good architecture. Was it durable to last as intended and do the aesthetics endure beyond the present? Many of the buildings that have received architecture awards reflect current fashions. A good building will endure – the architecture will continue to delight or interest people and its integrity will still endure.



Figure 10 Seidler was particularly proud of his Wohnpark Neue Donau (1993) project in his native Vienna. (Eric Seirens)

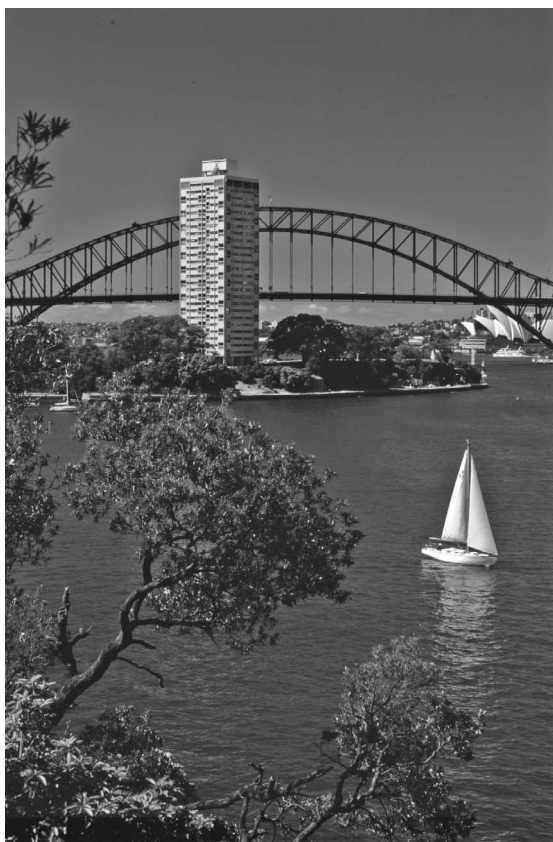


Figure 11 and 12 Blues Point Tower, Sydney (1962) is a controversial building on the north side of Sydney Harbour. The building is the only one actually built from a large proposal by Seidler and a group of architects and planners for a major redevelopment of this harbour-side peninsula, which is now considered an important conservation area. The building, in its parkland setting, provides for public access around the water's edge. (Max Dupain)



Figure 13 Spectacularly sited, the Joadja House (1996) is one of Seidler's most celebrated houses. (Eric Seirens)

SM: Penelope Seidler, which do you think are the most important of Harry's buildings, ones that you would like to see protected for prosperity?

PS: I love this house – because we live here, but also because it is beautiful. I really love the Igloo House in Mosman and the three at Wahroonga.⁷ I think it is important to protect some of the smaller houses. The best ones should be protected, but that does not mean they cannot evolve over time for their future inhabitants.

Concluding remarks

The interview clarifies a number of issues in relation to Harry Seidler's views about his work over time, its contribution to the legacy of architecture to society and about the conservation of his work. It is easy as a conservation practitioner to make assumptions and judgements about heritage places with little regard for their contemporary social and cultural contexts.

Conserving places from the recent past provides an opportunity to capture from the creators first hand the historical content of their work, unblemished by current values. It is important that this is achieved, and perhaps a priority for organizations like Docomomo International, ICOMOS and others is to set in place methodologies for achieving this. The World Heritage Guidelines for nominations to the World Heritage List require nominators to argue for the authenticity of their nominees. Where there is the opportunity to document the ideas and thoughts of the sites' creators themselves, as is sometimes the case for twentieth-century heritage,

then perhaps this should be made a requirement in order to ensure this primary historical information is recorded while it is still possible.

Acknowledgements

Susan Macdonald would like to thank Penelope Seidler for participating in the interview, which it is hoped will provide important context for those involved in conserving Harry Seidler's work in the future.

Biography

Susan Macdonald BSc(Arch), B Arch, MA(Conservation Studies), RIBA, PIA

Susan trained as an architect in Australia where she currently works as the Director, Policy and Heritage Management of the NSW Heritage Office. She worked as an architect in London and in the architectural conservation team at English Heritage in the 1990s. She has a keen interest in the conservation of twentieth-century buildings and was the project director for the nomination of Sydney Opera House to the World Heritage List.

Notes

- 1 Seidler, H., *The Grand Tour: Travelling the World with an Architect's Eye*, Taschen, Germany (2003).
- 2 Seidler frequently cited an example in lectures of a 1980s project, which retained a two-storey Victorian façade with a modern office building arising immediately behind on a historic town square, as being the worst of the approach to heritage, an insult to the practice of conservation and resulting in a poor building outcome.
- 3 In NSW, heritage items are subject to local government planning permission and most councils seek the advice of their own heritage advisers in making their decisions. Advisers are often architects, but may be planners and occasionally landscape specialists or archaeologists.
- 4 The Igloo House in Mosman on Sydney Harbour was designed in 1952 and completed in 1953. The house was recently saved from demolition by an emergency heritage order, and since has been listed on the NSW State Heritage Register. It was then sold, and the current owner also purchased the adjacent property and Seidler designed a new house linked to the existing house and prepared plans to restore it before his death.
- 5 Australia's Copyright Amendment (Moral Rights) Act was amended in 2000 to include provisions that require that architects' works (which are recognized as artistic works) are correctly credited, attributed, and must not have their work treated in a derogatory way. Architects must therefore be notified when changes are proposed to their buildings.
- 6 Seidler, *op. cit.*
- 7 Seidler designed three houses within the land acquired by his parents, including the Rose Seidler House, the Marcus Seidler House designed in 1950 and the Rose House in 1952, designed as a weekend retreat.