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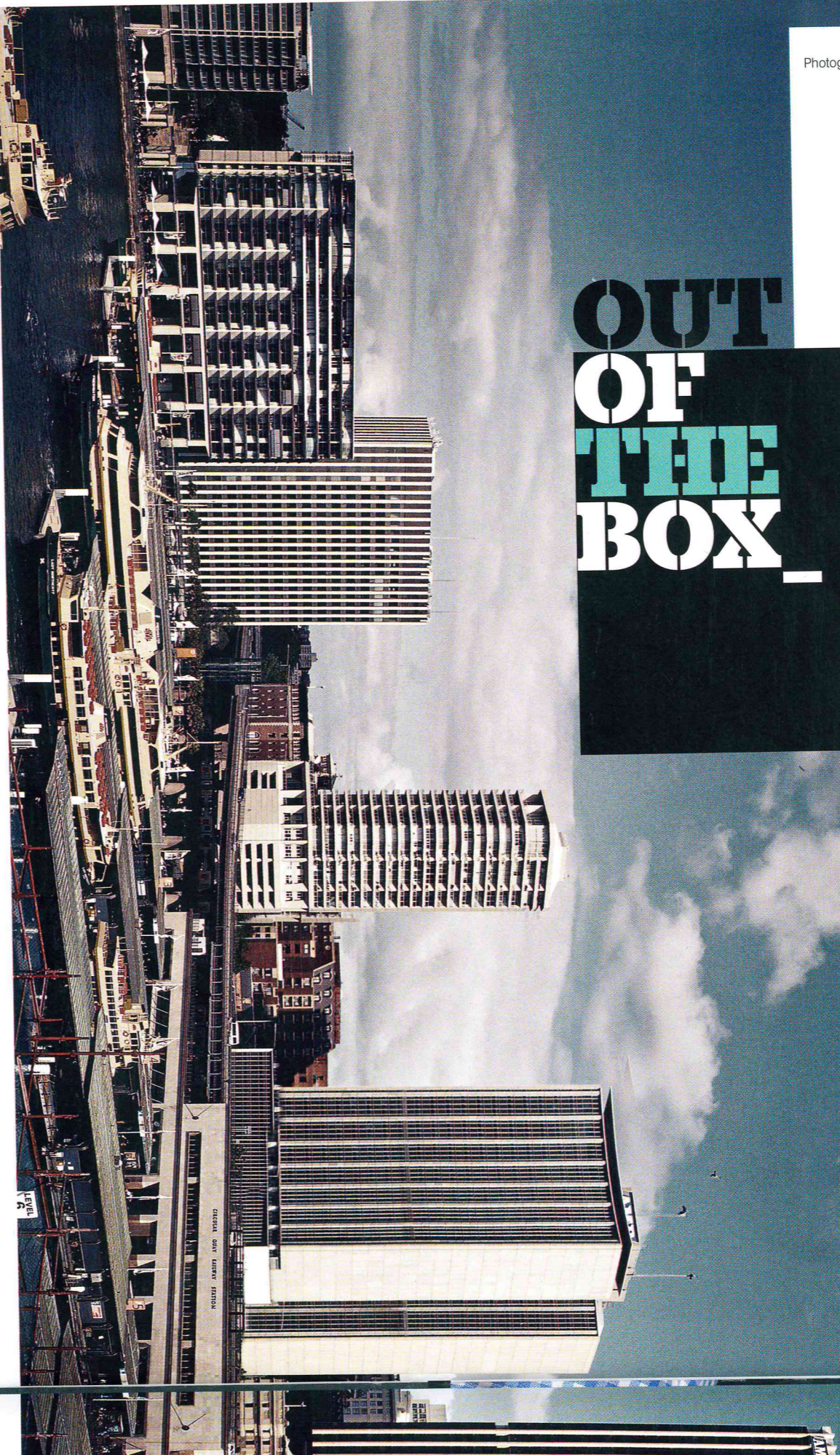
The trouble with Karl

He's famous for his gaffes, so why is his star on the rise?

Karl Stefanovic

Photography/Damian Bennett

OUT OF THE BOX



High up against the sky over Circular Quay, a 50-tonne hammerhead tower crane looms over the massive but squat yellow 50s building that houses the Museum of Contemporary Art. For the past 12 months, it has been lifting and toting for the gallery's \$53-million facelift, to be unveiled next March. It's the biggest crane the MCAs architect, Sam Marshall, has ever used on a site. One still March evening, he shimmied into a wire basket, to be hauled the 48 metres to the crane's peak and out on its 75-metre arm – a sickening 20 storeys up – so he could look back and down at the building he has been working on for almost 10 years. He says, redundantly, "I don't get vertigo at all."

Nor does Marshall seem spooked by the size of his task although his wife, designer Liane Rossler, says he comes home every night carrying what seems like a foot-high pile of

drawings. "I'm not joking," marvels Rossler, one of the co-founders of Dinosaur Designs and therefore a mistress of the hand-crafted, the small, the perfectly formed. "He can design on this huge, big scale but then he checks every single detail and he knows where everything is."

Every so often, an architect lands a commission that will change the way a city looks and works. It also changes the architect's life and legend: Frank Lloyd Wright and New York's Guggenheim; Richard Rogers and Paris's Pompidou Centre; Jørn Utzon and the Opera House.

Now it's Marshall's turn to step up, to take a bully of a building – originally designed in the '30s to house the Maritime Services Board and to dominate the harbour – and to give it a new face and heart. "A lot of people would have loved that commission," says Allen Jack+Cotter principal and architect Peter Stronach. Award-winning architect Louise Nettleton adds with an insider's relish: "It's the ultimate project.

The scariest thing is what everyone's going to say at the end. I don't envy him that ... but it's an exhilarating process, too."

Until this commission, Marshall, 55, was a respected architect, known for modernist, edgy design and a knack for imaginative use of everyday materials like concrete, galvanised steel and plywood. He'd won the Australian Institute of Architects' Wilkinson Award in 2000 for a warehouse conversion. (It was his own property and he built a lot of it himself over nine years with his dad's help on weekends.) He had also been key in the battle to save Luna Park. But the biggest public assignment he has had to date is an extension to the Campbelltown Arts Centre, completed in 2009.

It probably helped his nerves that when he won the MCA commission in 2002 – from a shortlist of six firms – he thought he was only being asked to fix the existing museum's problems with its confusing levels and accessibility. Instead, with Elizabeth Ann Macgregor, the sparky Scot who runs the



Lofty vision_
 Architect Sam Marshall is implementing his favoured modernist approach to the MCA's refurbishment and expansion.

DUBBED "THE RUBIK'S CUBE" BY SOME, THE MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART'S \$53-MILLION MAKEOVER HAS SO FAR DIVIDED CRITICS. Shelley Gare MEET'S SAM MARSHALL, THE ARCHITECT BEHIND SYDNEY'S BIGGEST DEVELOPMENT THIS YEAR.

MCA, prodding her board, the job expanded. And expanded. Determined fundraising saw the state and federal governments each chip in \$13 million, and a \$15-million donation from Sydney philanthropist and now MCA chair Simon Mordant.

At each stage Marshall won the tender so that, like his rise in the crane's cage, he eventually found himself – in partnership (because of the breadth of the job) with the NSW Government Architect – sitting on top of a project that, with a five-storey extension, the Mordant Wing, has added 4500 square metres of floor space to the MCA. Gallery space has increased by a quarter (including two galleries with 5.3-metre-high ceilings), the permanent collection now has a home and there is a sculpture terrace and educational centre to grow new audiences.

"One of the best sites in Sydney," says former NSW Government Architect Chris Johnson, who helped select Marshall. Incredibly, the new extension sits on land once given over to a car park. Now, pedestrians on the harbour-side can

see a sharp-edged building emerging that will unite water and land, the Rocks and the Quay, the old and the new, and beckon in visitors with glass, light, wide stairs, space and cubes of white, brown, grey, black.

Squint, and it looks like an abstract painting from the '60s and '70s, the period Marshall loves and in which he grew up. "It was that postwar optimistic era," he explains, the era now revived in the cult TV series *Mad Men*, all sleek design, clean lines, eye-popping colour. "Modernism has been the biggest influence on me. The modernist philosophy is that there is a future; we can make this a better place."

But when Marshall's modernist vision for the MCA was revealed in late 2008, there were a few bloggers who went at the plans like medieval English villagers confronted with the devil. Columnist and architectural critic Elizabeth Farrelly announced in *The Sydney Morning Herald* that she was unimpressed. "The MCA proposal has no shaping idea ... it is little more than a 3D

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THE HISTORY OF THE SITE

1809 - 1813 Commissariat Stores built in sandstone to plans by Lieutenant-Colonel Joseph Foveaux.

1939 Architect William Henry Withers designs new headquarters for the Maritime Services Board; Commissariat Stores building demolished, despite protests, to make way for MSB building.

1940 Work on building halted because of World War II. Restarted after war.

1952 MSB building officially opened.

1990 MSB building refurbished by architect Andrew Andersons of Peddle Thorp & Walker for a new Museum of Contemporary Art.

1991 MCA opens. Leon Paroissien is director.

1997 First competition to select a plan and architect to develop building announced. Won by Kazuyo Sejima.

1999 Elizabeth Ann Macgregor becomes MCA's director.

2000 Second competition announced.

2001 Outrage as proposal for demolition of MSB becomes public. State government confirms no demolition. Judges select winning architects in second competition, German-Anglo team Matthias Sauerbruch and Louisa Hutten.

2002 MCA selects Sam Marshall to put together a five-year plan of fixes for existing building.

2006 Decision is made to use whole site. Fund-raising starts.

2008 MCA reveals plans for refurbished and extended MCA.

2009 MCA wins planning approval.

2010 State and federal governments each pledge \$13 million after current MCA chair Simon Morland donates \$15 million. City council has also donated \$1 million. In August, building begins.

2011 MCA function rooms start operating.

2012 New MCA is due to open.

diagram tracked up with multicoloured concrete," she wrote. "Do something wild," she urged, dismissing Marshall as "a youngish Sydney architect".

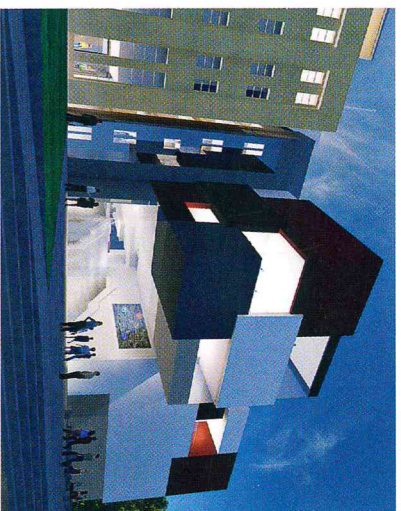
At the time, Marshall was 52. So much for "youngish" although, even three years on, with his energy, fair good looks and narrow-legged black jeans, he seems at least 10 years younger.

Courteous, restrained and dry humoured, he isn't letting criticism – or expectations – crowd him now. "Sure you can slag it off," he says one day as we stand, surrounded by builders, in the dust of the unfinished site, "but have you experienced the spaces? Have you stood up there? The building reveals itself by using it."

Nor is he a fan of difference for difference's sake. Describing his approach, he says, "It's not just a whim ... it really is based on reason. It's not: let's do this! Like [radical Canadian-American architect] Frank Gehry; let's crumple up a bit of paper and try to make a building out of it."

Marshall can unpack each of his design decisions: the fundamental idea of a building made up of boxes pulled apart to create narrow gaps that pick up on the walkways that thread through The Rocks; how the colours of the cubes match The Rocks, too; the way the asymmetry of the new building responds to and reacts against the severe bisymmetry of the old building.

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Initially, Marshall was surprised – hurt – by the vitriolic, anonymous posts online. He wonders aloud if some of the comments came from his own profession.



Cubism. Marshall, in one of the new, half-built galleries, has designed the exterior of the extension using cubes of white, brown, grey and black.

think the architecture profession is even more bitchy than the art profession," says Macgregor).

"He's taken up a fantastic opportunity," explains architect and friend Philip Thalis, who won the 2006 international competition to design the Barangaroo development before finding himself excluded by later politicking. Thalis points out how few times Sydney architects get such chances – and smaller firms hardly ever. "The big firms – architects, developers – often try to elbow you out. A commission like this can make someone's career. In architecture, you have to be a bit of an opportunist. You don't know what's going to be offered to you and you really have to grab it and go."

Marshall says easily, "If this doesn't work, I'm going to have to leave town." Then he laughs. A bit.

Liane Rossler remembers being surprised by Marshall long before she met him. As a fine arts student, in 1991, she had walked into

Rex Irwin's gallery in Woollahra for a young architects' show and been drawn to what looked like a concrete box, except it was inset with view-finders and lit-up slides of Marshall's projects. "You walked up to the wall," says Rossler, her eagerness making it sound as if it had happened yesterday, "and there was this tiny little window and you looked and there was this beautiful thing Sam had created. That always reminds me of Sam because it's very quiet but then you come closer and look and there's a delight there."

It took years for the two to actually get together, although they had plenty of mutual friends. Thirteen years ago, they sat next to each other at a lunch at Tim Olsen's Paddington gallery and clicked. Off they went to another gallery, then dinner, caught up the next day and have been inseparable since.

"We all went, 'Thank God Sam has met Liane,' because they're so similar," says Louise Nettleton, who knew Sam from parties when she was a 17-year-old Abbotleigh girl and he was keeping up family tradition by attending Sydney Grammar, where his father, Ted, an engineer, and both grandfathers had gone. "All the girls had an eye for Sam."

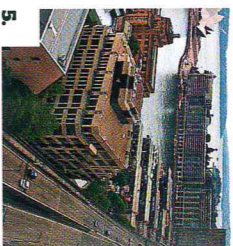
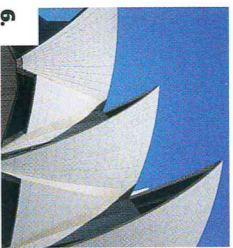
Marshall has been her rock, says 46-year-old Rossler, who left Dinosaur Designs last year and is working on design initiatives like her recycling project Supercyclers, exhibited in Milan in April, as well as acting as an ambassador for AI Gore's non-profit Climate Project. "He's always supportive, solid."

Appropriately, we're standing in the front garden of their Queens Park home, a walled space of Australian silver-green natives set off a 1920s bungalow, now rendered in white cement with an entrance-way lined with tall concrete blades. It looks tough but inside the home bursts with bright colour set against gleaming whites, open spaces, skylights, sunlight, fresh air.

Everywhere there are paintings as well as artefacts – woven baskets from the Daintree, an Asmat shield from New Guinea – and stray fancies like a nodding Japanese ceramic cat. One nine-metre shelf is lined with tiny vases, bowls, sculptures. I keep worrying about the dusting. "Oh, twice a year," says Rossler breezily. Four bikes rest against the floor-to-ceiling back windows. This is no pin-neat, minimalist architect's home from a magazine spread.

Beyond the pool, the garden is planted with vegetables and fruit trees. The couple is dedicated to sustainability. "We don't say it's a green house, it's just a house," says Rossler. "It's designed so it doesn't have heating or cooling but it has light and it has space; it just has everything that makes it a nice place to live in."

Rosler's father was also an architect but died before she met Marshall. Meanwhile, Marshall had grown up in Pymble, one of a tribe of neighbourhood kids on bikes, building bush cubbies. On weekends, his mother, Neryl, a housewife who had the dining-



room walls glazed in lime-green, would take him and his older sister around Paddington's galleries.

"That sparked my creativity," he says, explaining his decision to become an architect. "In grade 4, I won a competition at school to draw up house plans which for some reason I had always studied in the Sunday paper. The combination of my father's practicality and ability to build anything and pull anything apart and put it back together, and my mother's interest in contemporary art and creativity, were the ingredients."

The next biggest influence on Marshall, once he graduated from the University of NSW, was US-born architect George Freedman, who had worked for the architect and furniture designer Florence Knoll in the States. Freedman, now in his mid-70s, is revered for his detail and sophisticated, modernist interiors.

Marshall remembers his first – career-changing – meeting. It was 1984, he was disillusioned by dull first jobs and was making an animated film. Then Peter Stomach gave him an introduction to Freedman. Marshall recounts what happened next: "George said, 'Come in and let's see your work.' So I went in, never even heard of them, and showed them my work, and I'd sort of had enough of it by now, so I said, 'Marshall's voice goes punk-aggressive – "Yeah, and what do you do?' And George shows me his work, and I said" – and here, his voice softens, warms – "Ohmigod, this is amazing! So he's my mentor. That's where I really learnt to be excited about architecture."

Freedman remarks of Marshall, "People say good enough is okay. It's not. And I think that was one of the things Sam and I had: good enough is not okay."

They worked together for the next five years. Marshall, with colleague Stephen Varady, was also holding slide nights for architect friends in their tiny offices near Central Railway Station so they could view each other's work. "Sam was known for being civic-minded, altruistic," recalls Thalís.

Now, when Marshall looks at the old invitations – filed neatly, like everything else from his career – he recites names that have since become stellar: Iain Halliday, Tina Engelen, Neil Durbach.

What drove him then was ideas; they still do. Guests at a recent brunch at his home included art dealer Ray Hughes and his son, Evan, former associate director of the Sydney Writers' Festival Lisa Torrance, and Clare Stewart, the ex-Sydney Film Festival director. Okay, it sounds like name-dropping, except he's providing names so he can go on to say, "They're the people we like, creative people, and the discussion was amazing ... You know things are dead when people start talking about what film they've seen."

Through the '80s and '90s, Marshall campaigned to save Luna Park after it was closed following a fatal fire in 1979. He'd first gone as a 12-year-old and loved the sheer fun of it. He wanted that preserved for kids of the future, video games or not. "When Luna Park was like a ruin, I remember taking some friends' kids over there, and there were some old wiggly mirrors and the kids still got a thrill out of the mirrors making them fat or thin. You're halfway through a battle and you think, 'I'm right; I think kids will still use it!'"

In 1990, the state government preserved the land and in 1995, Marshall published his tribute book, *Luna Park: Just For Fun*. He and Rossler now take their own kids, 10-year-old Lana and seven-year-old Scarlet, there every few months. "I'm not forcing them. 'Want to go to Luna Park?' 'Yes, we do.' They love going. So to me it was worth fighting for."

Until Macgregor's arrival in 1999, the only time Sydneysiders had fallen in love en masse with the MCA was in 1995 when American artist Jeff Koons'

Puppy – a 12.4-metre, four-storey-high, steel-frame sculpture of a West Highland White Terrier puppy that sprouted plants and flowers – was set up on its forecourt. But, says Macgregor, by the time she arrived, the museum was bankrupt.

She introduced free admission, wrangled a sponsorship deal to make up the shortfall and has been wrangling on the museum's behalf ever since. Annual attendance figures are now well over half a million.

She also had to deal with the fallout from two very public architecture competitions. In 1997 and 2000-01, to develop the troubled MSB building. There were international winners each time – but nothing happened. Funding was the issue but so confused was the process that the first competition winner, the now-lauded Japanese architect Kazuyo Sejima, was asked if she'd like to compete in the second. "I thought I'd already won that one," was apparently her cool response.

Macgregor can't help laughing as we go over the history. "That's so Sydney! Oh no, that's off the record!"

Yet Sejima and her design – a kind of translucent glowing box – hover like delicate ghosts over the MCA's new works. Off-the-record comments reveal some still hanker for what might have been, even though Sejima's design couldn't have been built anyhow, says Macgregor, because of the historic 18th- and 19th-century docks buried below the building. "I don't think we could have done this with

"People say good enough is okay. It's not. And I think that was one of the things Sam had: good enough is not okay."

an international architect," says Macgregor firmly. "You needed someone on the spot who was working through it, through all the stages, all the time ..."

Marshall describes his approach to the task as "going forth cautiously. Making sure they're the right steps. You know, a leopard could jump out of the woods so you're going through slowly."

What he most wants is for everything to work so well that people don't even notice his work. "It's there for art; it's not for an architectural edifice."

Of any criticism so far, Macgregor says, "I think most people have been incredibly supportive of Sam. If you talk to the Brian Zulaikhas of this world, the Ken Mahers, that sort of generation [of architect], that sort of stature, they're not bitchy; they're very generous."

She adds, in her Scottish lilt, "I'm so elated, I must say, there's been lots of sleepless nights and worries ... But now ... the scale of the transformation is, I think, bigger than I had envisaged."

The pair, architect and director, tramp around the site regularly in workers' boots, do hard-hat tours on Fridays, watching as drawings become three-dimensional reality.

"You have the building in your head but when you see it, you think, 'My God, that is huge,'" says Marshall. "We know the size of the Opera House; there's this amazing pond out the front here which is Circular Quay. You've got the Bridge, the huge face of Luna Park. Our big scale is a good fit."

1 Australia Square Tower, 264 George Street, city

"It's hard to go past Harry Seidler for great Sydney buildings. I love the simplicity of the round tower, with its elegant proportions and how it tapers as it goes up to reflect the changing structural conditions. But most important to me is where the street flows in and around the building on both street frontages. Private land is given over for the public's use; it's not a stingy building grabbing every square millimetre it can get its hands on."

2 Governor Place, 255 George Street, city

"Seidler's work here is

similar. The curved facade provides occupants with great views and the facade changes as its orientation changes to reflect the different sun conditions."

3 Capita Centre, 9-11 Castlereagh Street, city

"Seidler again. Housed on a very narrow site, this is very clever as it gets sunlight right down into its depths."

4 The spaces under expressways

"The space under the Western Distributor in Darling Harbour (not the buildings, the space) and the curved arches in the Harbour Bridge approaches – for example, Burton Street at Milsons Point. It is insane that they park cars in that

last space and don't use it for other purposes. And Fig Street, Pyrmont, between Watlie and Harris Streets. All inspirational spaces, big and uplifting in scale and all very self-conscious of themselves."

5 The Cahill Expressway

"I like the way it gives all drivers a great view of Circular Quay, the Opera House and the bridge and acts as a belt to hold back the corporate world from grabbing our harbour's edge there."

6 The Opera House

"If it had only been finished the way Jørn Utzon had designed it,"

