

Mr Harry Seidler AC OBE

The degree of Doctor of Science in Architecture (honoris causa) was conferred upon Harry Seidler at the Architecture ceremony held on 6 April 2000.

Citation

Chancellor

I have the honour to present to you Harry Seidler for admission to the degree of Doctor of Science in Architecture, honoris causa.

Harry Seidler was born in Vienna in 1923 and migrated to Britain when Austria was invaded shortly before the Second World War. In 1939, he was sent with other Germans and Austrians to Canada where he was admitted to study Architecture at the University of Manitoba. He graduated in 1944 and was accepted by the Harvard Graduate School of Design to do post-graduate work with Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer.

Later he spent some time with the painter Joseph Albers at Black Mountain College, North Carolina, and subsequently worked with Breuer in New York. He was also, for a brief time, with Oscar Niemeyer in Rio. In 1948, he came to Sydney, and in 1951, won the Sir John Sulman Medal for the first house he built in Australia, the Rose Seidler House at Turramurra.

Seidler was exceptionally fortunate in his outstanding teachers, and his youthful international experience. Both influences made him sensitive to cultural differences, and throughout his career as an international architect, his buildings have acknowledged these.

In his early years in Sydney, domestic architecture was his main preoccupation. He built houses and high rise apartment blocks in many Sydney suburbs, all of which are recognizable by their strong structural features.

In 1960, Seidler began to work with the Italian engineer Pier Luigi Nervi, on the cylindrical tower for Australia Square. It was a fruitful collaboration, since Nervi's experience in building complemented Seidler's skill in structural design. The period from 1960 to the early 1970s was remarkably productive. Seidler continued his interest in high rise apartments, at the same time designing buildings of major importance - the Trade Group Offices, the High Court of Australia, the National Art Gallery (in Canberra), the Australian Embassy in Paris, the MLC Centre, the Rocks Development, Blues Point Tower, and in the 1980s, Grosvenor Place (Sydney), the Riverside Centre (Brisbane), and the Hong Kong Club and Office Building.

One of his contemporaries (Peter Blake), writing in 1973, said: "Harry Seidler really learned how to build, and to build well. I cannot think of a building by Harry Seidler that I have seen in reality or in recent photographs that reveals any serious flaws in detailing or in workmanship ... I think it is fair to say that he has explored all the ramifications and opportunities of the International Style more thoroughly than anyone of his contemporaries."

Despite his remarkable productivity as an architect, Seidler has found time to teach and lecture in many countries. He has been Thomas Jefferson Professor at the University of Virginia, and a Visiting Professor at the University of British Columbia, Harvard University, and ETH in Switzerland. Retrospective exhibitions of his work have been held at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, and at other galleries in Australia, and in Austria, Bulgaria, France and Germany.

He was the first Australian member of the Academie D'Architecture de France, received Austria's highest award, the Gold Cross of Honour (First Class) Arts and Science (1996), and the Gold Medal of the Royal Institute of British Architects (1996) and of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects (1976). He has won five Sulman and three Wilkinson awards, and many other tributes have acknowledged his distinction here and abroad.

Harry Seidler has changed the face of Sydney and many of its suburbs during his 50 years of practice. It is fitting that his most recent building - the Horizon - should look down at Sydney and its surroundings from Kings Cross like a general contemplating a successful campaign.

While his major public buildings are the best known of his works, his numerous apartment buildings in Australia, Boston, Mexico, Singapore, and most recently Vienna, have affected the personal lives of countless people. That is a story yet to be written.

Chancellor, I present to you Harry Seidler for admission to the degree of Doctor of Science in Architecture, honoris causa, and I invite you to confer the degree upon him.