

SEIDLER

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**In an exclusive first, an Australian icon
is recounted through the eyes of an insider.**

Story Jonathan Seidler | Photography Saskia Wilson

← **The facade of the Rose Seidler House in Wahroonga on Sydney's North Shore remains an outstanding example of modern architecture, designed by the late Harry Seidler and built between 1948 and 1950.**



The Seidlers are a family of storytellers. There's probably no other clan in this country that enjoys the sound of their own voice more than we do, and that extends to everyone from babies to grandparents. It doesn't hurt that the story of how we all landed in Australia is entangled in one of the country's most startling pieces of architecture. And so it is that I find myself on the road with my father as he starts telling me his story of the Rose Seidler House, travelling back over half a century to when it was still called 'Grandma's.'

Nestled in the evergreen fringes of North Sydney, the iconic residence with which I share a surname was built in the '50s by Rose's son, Harry, on commission. She challenged the then-fledgling architect to design her a grand estate worth living in, and ended up with a lot more than she had bargained for. Harry threw out all her furniture, filled the place with futuristic appliances and built a house so uncompromisingly modernist that Australians are still talking about it seventy years later. That's another thing I should probably mention about the Seidlers. Our stories never end up anywhere near where they started.

"There's a wooden balcony with a ramp. I used to like to mow the lawn there, there was a hand mower and my grandmother kept it underneath the house and I would often push it up the ramp and roll it down again..."

↑ **In a 1991 interview with the ABC, Harry Seidler explained that the "house explodes the surfaces that enclose a normal house or spaces and turns it into a continuum of freestanding planes through which the eye can never see an end."**



The outdoor wall of the sun-lit balcony is a mural painted by the author's grandfather, Harry Seidler's brother Marcell.

We're walking through the light-soaked, open-plan property, and my father is checking to see if everything is still in order: the Eames chairs, the outdoor mural painted by his father Marcell, one of the first dishwashers for private use in Australia, and so on. He has an incredibly rich, photographic memory of this place, where he spent much of his youth while his parents were overseas.

"It was absolutely space age. People used to come on the weekend and gawk at the house," he says of the dissected cube, which won the first of Harry's five John Sulman Medals for Architecture in the year he was born. "I remember there being a small crowd at the top of the hill, some of them venturing down just to see the one house that didn't have red tiles."

"I thought it was amazing. There was a big womb chair by the window, where I used to sit with my grandfather and he'd tell me stories about 'the old days'. He'd sort of repeat himself ad nauseum, wrapping me up in this bear hug that I couldn't get away from."

My father's history is enmeshed in the history of this house and the people who lived here. Harry's legacy does seem to be another filial bear hug from which he will never really escape, and nor does he want to. It's certainly become more problematic for the Seidlers of my generation, constantly questioned about our name and our relationship to someone who passed away when we were not yet old enough to appreciate his work.

"It was a fantastic place, full of excitement and wonder. There was so much space to run around in, which was a luxury you don't really have in a big city."

When my father was born, many of his extended family actually lived in the Rose Seidler House. By the time I entered the picture, it was already in the hands of the Historic Houses Trust, generously bequeathed by Harry after his parents died. I couldn't run up and down the ramp into the Bauhaus spaceship as my father had. Nobody sat with me on the Eames chairs and regaled me with stories of the war. I was a visitor, just like everyone else.

Now I walk slowly with my father through the house built for my great-grandmother in an effort to understand how a dispersed group of Viennese Jews ended up having Sunday lunches in Wahroonga.



↑ **Inspired by the American way of life, where Harry had previously spent time, the dining setting adjoins the kitchen via a sliding window.**

← **Smooth lines and clean surfaces characterise Harry Seidler's architecture and interior design.**

→ The 1946-designed 'Womb' chair of Finnish architect Eero Saarinen (right) is an example of the furniture Harry Seidler installed in the house.

↓ The architect maximised light in the home with floor-to-ceiling glass windows overlooking the leafy surrounds of the north shore suburb.



I learn that Rose was an avid gardener, just like my father is, tending to some forty or fifty orange and lemon trees built on the five acre property alongside strawberry plantations. That Marcell had to argue the case for zoning the property with the local council so his brother could build it in the first place and that Rose would often actually invite the staring neighbours in for tea rather than have them standing up at the gates.

I discover that my father's borderline obsession with new and dazzling technology may well derive from having spent his summers at a house where every object was something that had hitherto not existed in Australia. From the kitchenware to the crockery, the blinds to the bathrooms, it was like having a new Apple toy in every corner of the house.

"This was Rose's bedroom. I remember she had a Philips radio here and it was the first transistor plug-in radio I'd ever seen. Everyone else had huge radios with valves."

Perhaps most refreshingly, in the caressing solitude of the shrubland, far removed from the hyperactive suburbs that my family now call home, I am struck by the notion that some attributes really do carry across generations. The house may now be a museum, but in a way, it's really an enduring exhibition of Seidler exhibitionism.

Harry designed this house for his mother, but also for Australian society at large, as a means of announcing his arrival and an intention to do things his way. 'I am a Seidler,' Marcell's Miro-esque mural seems to shout, 'And I will talk to you until you listen.' It's that same reason my father generates as much demand for his public speaking engagements as he does for his medical consultations, why I harbour hopes of a career in broadcast despite already working as a print journalist. Ours is a family that literally builds its own stories before we even have the opportunity to tell them.

"Do you mind rolling up the shade over on the mural?" my father asks the attendant, who is now charged with looking after this splendid house. "My father painted this, you know..."



The Rose Seidler House in Wahroonga NSW is managed by the Historic Houses Trust and can be visited between 11am and 4pm every Sunday. Visit hht.net.au for admission details and further information.