



Harry Seidler's vision, and how ERCO helps to protect it

Timeless architecture and lighting work together to keep architectural visions alive; qualitative lighting design with wallwashing stands the test of time. Even decades on from their original construction, Seidler's designs remain 'valid'. This demonstrates remarkable prescience. The lighting tools used are modernised to meet today's sustainability and energy efficiency challenges.

Australia's claim to Harry Seidler as an architectural icon is tenuous: Austrian born, Canadian educated and US influenced, his inventive modernist masterpieces are found all over the world. Yet the practice that still bears his name, and many of his most iconic buildings, are in Australia.

Seidler arrived in Australia in his 20s. His personal design style prized clarity and rationalism well-suited to the times, and he quickly earned a series of commissions, private homes distinctive for, amongst other things, their use of light. Seidler veered away from the ubiquitous centre-ceiling oyster fitting popular at the time and brought light into his designs from hidden sources; recessed into the architecture, concealed behind furniture or flooding down curtains. Conceptually, this is in line with ERCO's "Light not luminaires" philosophy.

"At night a building takes on quite a different new personality – one that I like to manipulate to create drama; to make walls glow with the colour of their material, receiving light from virtually invisible sources and to emphasize structure by contrasting lit surfaces against non-lit surfaces."

Harry Seidler

A proponent of Richard Kelly's lighting ethos, when it came to Seidler's divergence into the commercial sphere, he met with Kelly and so began an enduring lighting partnership – including, amidst his 119-project strong resume, office towers in four of Australia's major state capital cities. Kelly was behind the New York Seagram building 'tower of light' created by Mies van der Rohe using Edison Price incandescent wallwashers. You can see this inspiration in many of Seidler's early tower projects, and he continued working with Price protégé, lighting designer Claude Engle, on projects from the mid-1980s on. Engle is

quoted as saying that he learned from Price to begin with what the architectural design called for and develop lighting fixtures to achieve it.

Having learned the ropes from the ground up under Seidler, his eponymous practice is now led by architects Penelope Seidler and Greg Holman, who continue to value many of Seidler's core principles, including the importance and application of light. Holman himself was introduced to ERCO on the Hong Kong Club project in 1980/81, where Engle specified the brand's fittings.

In the 1997 New York Times obituary for Edison Price, it was said,

"Stroll into the lobby of almost any high-style modern office building or walk through and major museum or art gallery, and if you have trouble working out where the light is coming from, you can be sure that Edison Price or one of his disciples has been at work."

One of the reasons Seidler's designs have remained so important – and many carry 6- or even 7-star energy ratings of Australian labels today – is that he was an early proponent of green design principles. He used the architectural element brise-soleil to protect windows from direct sunlight and built on angles to prevent direct glare; he incorporated sheltered pedestrian precincts that could be enjoyed regardless of weather. And most important: he insisted that light quality and proper luminaire placement was more important than light quantity. Still a cornerstone of ERCO's philosophy and a key consideration in relighting projects. ERCO supports with two approaches – either by replacing existing lighting with LED and by relighting with customised light solutions that meets individual requirements.

We visit three of the significant projects here, illustrating the durability of excellent lighting design, benefits of LED-relighting and wall-washing for high ceilings.



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Magical light from an unseen source MLC Centre (now 25 Martin Place) & Theatre Royal, Sydney (Construction: 1972-1978)

Project data:

- Project: MLC Centre (now 25 Martin Place) & Theatre Royal, Sydney
- Construction: 1972-1978
- Client: Civil & Civic
- Lighting design: Harry Seidler
- Artwork: Robert Owen (1+3)
Charles O. Perry (2)
- Photography: Jackie Chan

Renowned as the highest concrete structure in the world at the time, Seidler set out to incorporate an existing popular theatre into an iconic Sydney commercial tower, adding retail as well in an L-shaped structure built atop two levels of public space.

Wallwashing of a central core remained the model: reflected light was the sole source, adapted according to the nature of the wall and floor finishes, and the ceiling height and foyer depth. Despite reluctance from developer, Civil & Civic, Seidler insisted on incorporating large scale artworks as part of his MLC foyer, complementing his concept of using light – placed firmly on the vertical artworks – to draw the visitor in.

The MLC lobby was the first upgraded with ERCO LED luminaires in 2013, initially 30-32W luminaires that, in Holman's opinion, struggled to deliver the powerful glow of the former technology. Property owner GPT however, under pressure to conform to environmental standards, insisted the changeover be made, and all parties learned a lot about garnering the potential of LEDs.

"... begin with what lighting the architectural design calls for, then design the develop fixtures that achieve those goals."
Claude Engle



LED replacement: an upgrade on durability

Grosvenor Place, Sydney (Construction: 1982-1987)

Project data:

Project: Grosvenor Place, Sydney
 Construction: 1982-1987
 Lighting design: Harry Seidler
 Photography: Ian Barnes

Persisting with his determination to use geometry principles to optimise the use of space and views, the original Grosvenor Place lighting design called for a perimeter ring of downlights to complement the core wallwashing. A wider foyer than Australia Square, more light was needed to make the space feel bright and radiant.

Original incandescent luminaires presented some practical challenges in Seidler’s foyer designs. They devoured energy and often delivered a lifespan of less than 12 months (necessitating the incorporation of an architect crawl space in every ceiling void!). Inconsistent failure rates and manual mismanagement by cost-conscious facility managers who tweaked the dimmers challenged his goal of delivering an even wash on the vertical surface.

Holman recalls that he struggled with the switch to LED, as the first replacement lamps had their problems: The good colour temperature was offset by poor colour rendering. Today, the ERCO luminaires with their high-quality LED modules and market-leading lighting technology are a stroke of luck for building managers and all those who appreciate Seidler’s design.



Light for 10 meter high walls and outdoor art

Shell House (now 1 Spring Street), Melbourne
(Construction: 1989)

Project data:

Project: Shell House, Melbourne
Construction: 1989
Lighting design: Harry Seidler
Photography: Jackie Chan

Originally known as Shell House, and built to house the Australian headquarters of the Dutch petroleum giant, 1 Spring Street occupies a prominent corner site at the southeastern tip of Melbourne's central business district. Like Grosvenor Place, the site presented the potential for marvellous views for tenants, and Seidler's double curve, with an inner core housing lifts and mechanicals, made many aspects highly rewarding. Insisting on including a shared public domain, the bottom four levels are accessible and lit by his central core. In order to simplify lift lobby lighting, Claude Engle's ideas led to the development of the double wallwasher – the glare-free, single luminaire option for using even, reflected light in a narrow space.

Today, the lobby's 10-metre ceiling height, is hung with a magnificent porcelain mural by artist Arthur Boyd. Powerful recessed ERCO downlights line the concrete ceiling spokes, whilst wallwashers make the most of the

mural and the natural materials of the core. A definitive shell-like sculpture by sculptor Charles O. Perry has graced the forecourt since the beginning. Silver ERCO Tesis in-ground luminaires form the perfect counterpart to the warm gold tone of the artwork.

“Architects come up with a design and lighting engineers talk ad nauseum about getting so-many lux on the wall, and so-many lux on the floor, but at what point do they actually ask ‘yes, but what do you want it to look like?’”.
Greg Holman

About ERCO

ERCO is an international specialist for high-quality and digital architectural lighting. The family-owned company, founded in 1934, operates globally in 55 countries with independent sales organisations and partners.

ERCO understands light as the fourth dimension of architecture – and thus as an integral part of sustainable building. Light is the contribution to making society and architecture better and, at the same time, preserving our environment. ERCO Greenology® – the corporate strategy for sustainable lighting – combines ecological responsibility with technological expertise.

At the light factory in Lüdenscheid, Germany, ERCO develops, designs and manufactures

luminaires with a focus on photometric optics, electronics and sustainable design. The lighting tools are developed in close collaboration with architects, lighting designers and electrical designers. They are used primarily in the following applications: Work and Culture, Community and Public/Outdoor, Contemplation, Living, Shop and Hospitality. ERCO lighting experts support designers worldwide in transforming their projects into reality with highly precise, efficient and sustainable lighting solutions.

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