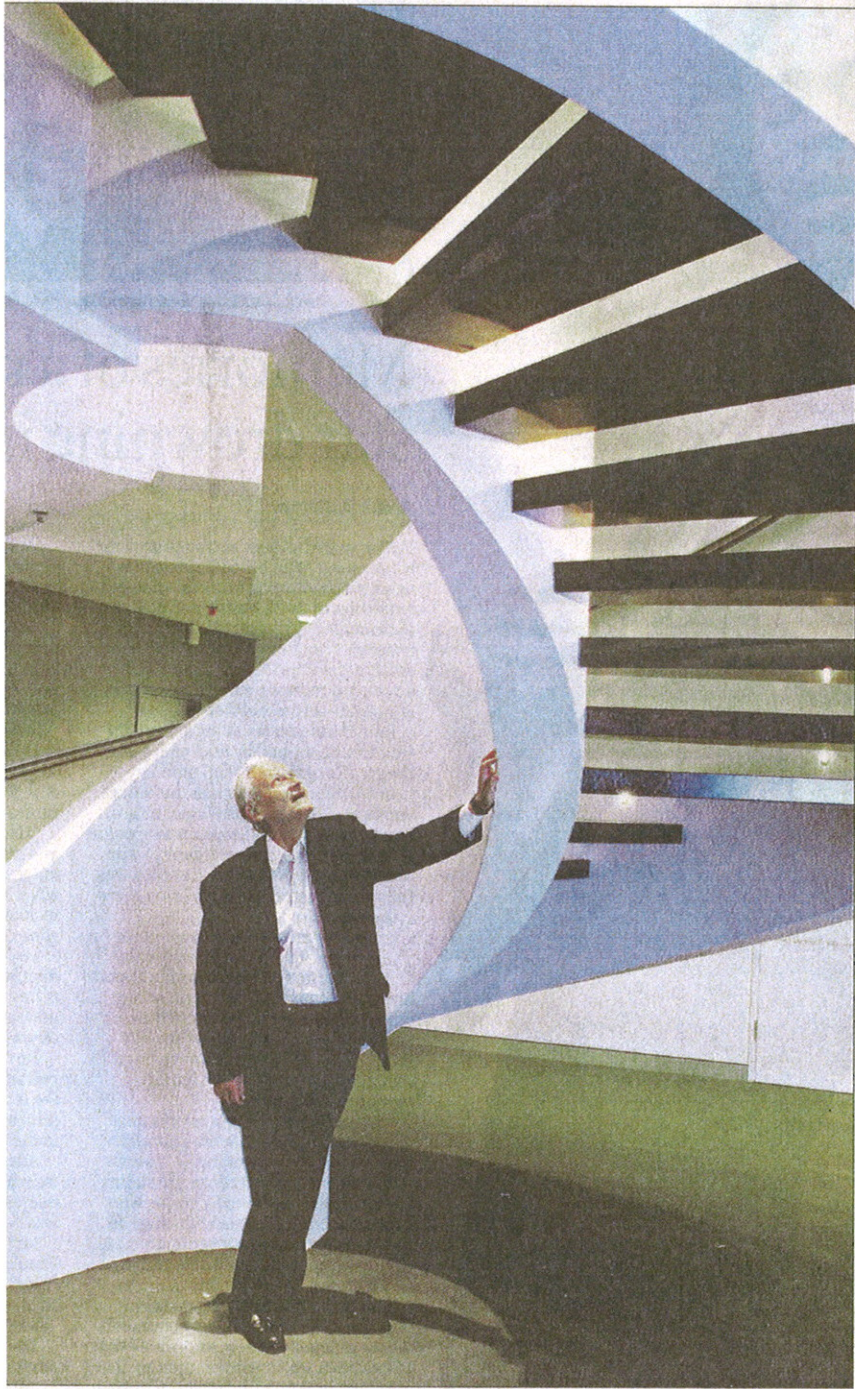
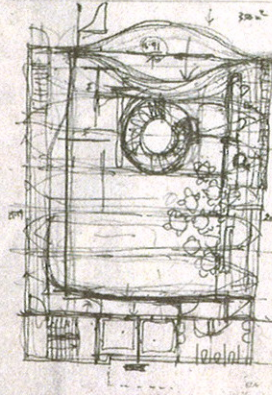


# Distinguished already, as the last Seidler design



Signature curves ... Joel Hakim inside the "very, very special building". Photos: Edwina Pickles



Seidler's vision ... a project sketch and the finished Alliance Francaise.

## Catharine Munro

THE last design of the late Harry Seidler has been built. The doors of the new Alliance Francaise centre in Clarence Street open on Monday, closing a chapter in Australian architectural history.

"This is the last to be finished," said the Bauhaus student's widow, Penny Seidler. "There's none on the boards now that he designed."

True to form, the building is taller than some wanted, although it goes nowhere near reaching the scale of his landmark skyscrapers Australia Square, the MLC Centre, Grosvenor Place and Horizon Apartments.

The Alliance Francaise is a comparatively humble 13 storeys. The architect died in March 2006, only days before a development application was submitted to the council. But he had managed to convince the City of Sydney to give him an extra five floors.

The Alliance Francaise had needed the extra floors to make its project financially viable. All but four floors are now on the market as office space to finance the \$10 million project.

Fine architecture is hardly a top priority for the Alliance but its president in Sydney, Joel Hakim, argues the building is a marketing tool.

"Our aim is to project French culture and we felt that with a very, very special building we could attract more people to come to our events," he said.

The president of the NSW chapter of the Australian Institute of Architects, Brian

Zulaikha, said Mr Seidler's office towers would be what he would be remembered for most.

"He was a rarity in architectural circles, having been trained in Europe on modernist Bauhaus principles - he remained true to those ideals," Mr Zulaikha said.

From the top floor, there is a full view of one of Mr Seidler's late works, the Horizon Apartments, completed in 1998.

The two buildings are examples of Mr Seidler's late love of curves, inspired by Baroque architects. Mr Seidler loved France and knew "most" of its public buildings, Penny Seidler said. He designed the Australian embassy in Paris, but it was in Rome where he found his inspiration for the curves that break up the planes of his own work.

Mr Seidler was commissioned in 2003 to design a new building for the Alliance's premises. Mr Hakim took the architect, then in his late 70s, to the site.

"He hung out of the windows and took photographs. I was scared when he did that," Mr Hakim recalled. The resulting sketches were provided for free.

At street level, the old cafe with its traditional bentwood chairs will be replaced with a cafe extension of the French restaurant Becasse, across the road.

The new premises will also provide a 20 per cent increase in the capacity of classes, Hakim said. Between 450 and 600 students attend the Alliance's eight-week courses.