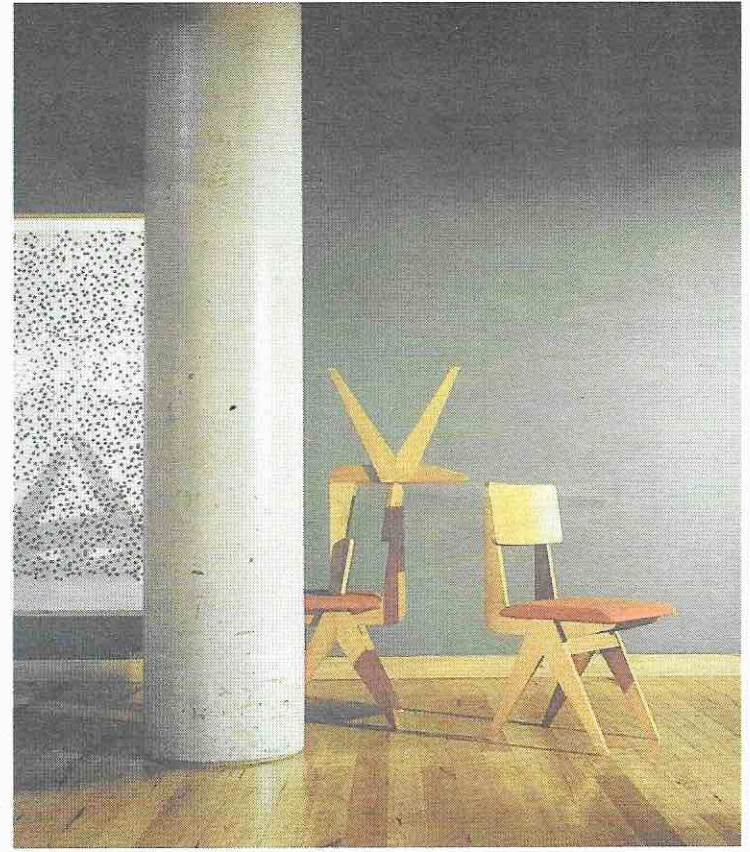


**DESIGN INFLUENCES**



Above: upholstered chair, angled coffee table and curved couch of unknown provenance; dining chairs by George Kóródy, 1955. Below: Kóródy Coachwood single bed, 1947, and Japan sideboard, 1955, bottom.

# The Modernists we almost forgot

Hotel Hotel is carrying the torch for the vibrant immigrant community behind mid-20th century Australian design, writes **Stephen Todd**.

The house Harry Seidler built for his parents, Rose and Max, in 1950 marked the hi-vis arrival of Modernism in Australia. Its minimal lines made for maximal impact, making the boxy residence “the most talked about house in Sydney” and turning the 27-year-old architect into a design superstar more or less overnight.

In all the kerfuffle, what most people failed to note was that the slick interior fittings and many of the furnishings were in fact the work of another Austrian immigrant, Paul Kafka.

A new book edited by cultural heritage expert Rebecca Hawcroft reveals to what extent the “Other Moderns” were a vibrant cultural force in mid-20th-century Australian design.

The son of a Viennese furniture maker, Kafka emigrated to Australia in 1939 to escape Nazi persecution. Within two years, he’d founded a factory on William Street, Darlinghurst, before moving to bigger digs on Botany Road, Waterloo around the time Hitler committed suicide in April 1945.

Kafka’s idiomatic and prolific output found favour with the immigrant intelligentsia of Sydney and Melbourne, friends and acquaintances living in newly chic suburbs such as Double Bay and Bellevue Hill, Toorak and Caulfield – places nourished by the visionary “populate or perish” immigration policy of the Chifley government.

So widespread was the Kafka aesthetic that Sydney’s pre-eminent mid-century furniture dealer, Ken Neale, reckons “Oh, that’s a Kafka!” became the standard reaction of anyone looking at Australian design of that era.

But in reality there were a dozen or so creatives making remarkable furniture at the same time, many of them European immigrants bringing with them the reductive elegance initiated by the German Bauhaus school. (Seidler himself had been a student of Bauhaus founder Walter Gropius – paradoxically, a notorious anti-Semite – who had exiled himself to America to teach at the Harvard Graduate School of Design.)

The names Susan Kozma-Orlay, George Kóródy and Heinz Gerstl may not roll off the tongue of furniture aficionados, but their

influence is undeniable. This is so especially in the interior look and feel of Canberra’s Hotel Hotel, an establishment *Condé Nast Traveller* esteems for its “swagger”.

The jewel in the crown of the Molonglo Group, helmed by brothers Nectar and Johnathan Efkarpidis, Hotel Hotel is a mid-rise cabinet of immense curiosity, its rooms and public spaces filled with covetable pieces by contemporary designers including Adam Goodrum, Lucy McRae and Trent Jansen, but also historical collectables by the likes of Kafka, Kozma-Orlay and Kóródy.

*The Other Moderns* tome is co-produced by Hotel Hotel, with much of the 300-page book’s highly evocative imagery shot in the various restaurants, rooms and bars of the hotel that reignited the university quarter of New Acton.

“It didn’t make sense for me to be developing a hotel in Australia and for that hotel to be a kind of derivation of European or American design sensibility,” says Nectar Efkarpidis by phone from Athens, where he

## What’s instructive about their work, beyond the mastery, is its humility.

is about to initiate a new venture. “We asked ourselves, What is the Australian heritage and what is out there?”

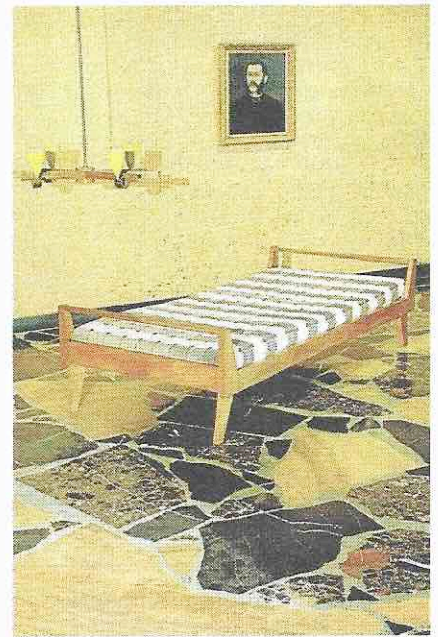
The son of Greek immigrants, Efkarpidis stumbled across Neale’s vintage furniture showroom, which was then next door to the Sydney Jewish Museum on Darlinghurst Road (Neale has since moved one block up the hill to Darley Street).

“I pestered Ken for months to let me visit his warehouse until one day he just had to give in,” says Efkarpidis. “What I discovered there was all these incredible pieces by Eastern European immigrants. They had a very evolved sense of craft but they were also less ostentatiously ‘designed’ than the Italian work of the mid-20th century.”

“To be honest, I had become a little sick of looking at Italian and Scandinavian



Paul Kafka, above; Nectar Efkarpidis of the Molonglo Group, right; and Susan Kozma-Orlay, below.



**Need to know**

**The Other Moderns**  
Edited by Rebecca Hawcroft and co-published by Hotel Hotel and New South Publishing. \$49.99

**The Other Moderns**



furniture. It had become all-pervasive to the point where it had inspired a whole counterfeit industry. I was thirsty for something else.”

Home-grown from transplanted European root stock, the *Other Moderns* offered a nuanced new-world elaboration of old-school Modernist rigour.

Kind of quirky, almost flirty, Kóródy’s typist chair, for instance, is a simple padded wooden disc perched atop slender conical legs, its diminutive round back attached by spindly prongs. Almost animate, it seems a distant ancestor of Marc Newson’s emblematic Embryo chair of 1988.

The elongated profile of Kóródy’s timber Tear Drop coffee table of 1955 has been very explicitly transposed to Newson’s carbon-fibre Black Hole table, also of 1988.

(Newson himself is the grandson of Greek immigrants.)

The Molonglo Group holds the largest collection of Other Modern pieces in private hands. But rather than sequester them behind glass or in out-of-bounds areas, these museum-quality pieces are dispersed around the hotel, which was designed by Melbourne architects Fender Katsalidis and opened in 2013.

What’s instructive about the work of Kozma-Orlay, Kóródy, Kafka and co – beyond the evident mastery of their craft – is its humility. Sure, as Neale points out, Kóródy’s penchant for rich marquetry “can be a bit overpowering at times”, but in general these designs sit close to the ground, keep a low profile, are compellingly self-effacing.

They are object lessons for the Instagram generation, a user’s guide to humility as a driver of longevity.

“When I learnt the stories behind these pieces,” says Efkarpidis, “I began to appreciate the histories of their creators, these people who had lost pretty much everything, who had to flee their homes and had arrived in a completely new world and yet still remained faithful to their craft.”

“It’s such a big deal for someone to be uprooted and still feel so compelled to create. That level of resilience, of sheer commitment not to just to a craft but to a community. These designers weren’t doing a job, they were exercising a calling.”