

# Top of his game

Harry Triguboff AO, aged 86, is pulling no punches, writes *Tess Durack*

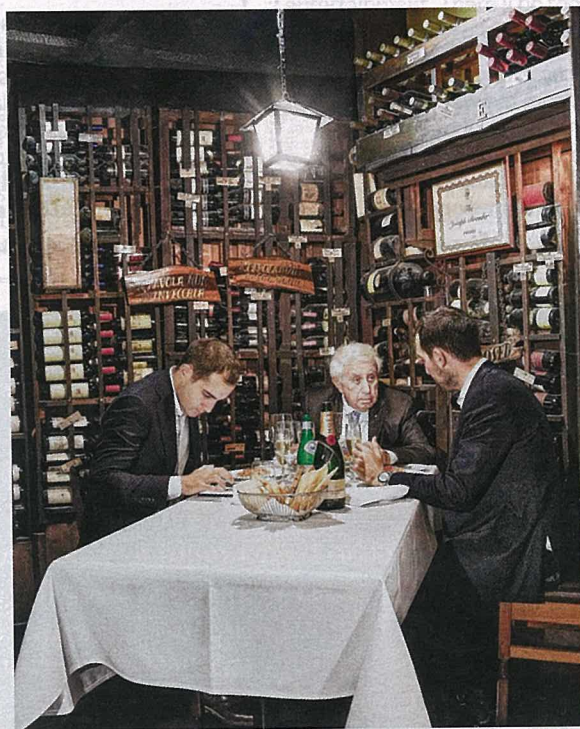
At the 86th Gala Birthday dinner of Harry Triguboff AO earlier this year, a diverse crowd descended on Darling Harbour's ICC ballroom. Titans of business intersected with Orthodox Jews, tradies and sub-contractors from an array of ethnic backgrounds and families who work for — or whose livelihoods depend on — Triguboff.

Gathering on a sultry night in late February, they paid tribute to the billionaire property developer whose image was beamed on huge screens around the ballroom, and to raise funds for the hugely successful Our Big Kitchen charity which Triguboff has long backed.

An introduction from Rabbi Dovid Slavin, founder of Our Big Kitchen, and it was time for the guest of honour to speak. "I'm very lucky that I found you," the founder of Meriton told the crowd of over 200, "and you are very lucky that you found me!"

It was a typically candid comment from a man renowned for speaking plainly in a thick Russian accent which lingers despite calling Australia home these past six decades. But even those accustomed to Triguboff's direct conversational style were taken aback by the apparent stream of consciousness that followed that night, as he took aim at national parks and watered-down forms of the Jewish education in a speech that drew an audible gasp or two from some in the crowd.

"Sydney is a very strange place,"



Right: Triguboff with grandsons Daniel and Ariel Hendler at Beppi's restaurant in Darlinghurst  
Picture: Nic Walker

he ruminated. "The only place in the world where they have so many parks. Everywhere, national parks. They are only good for snakes."

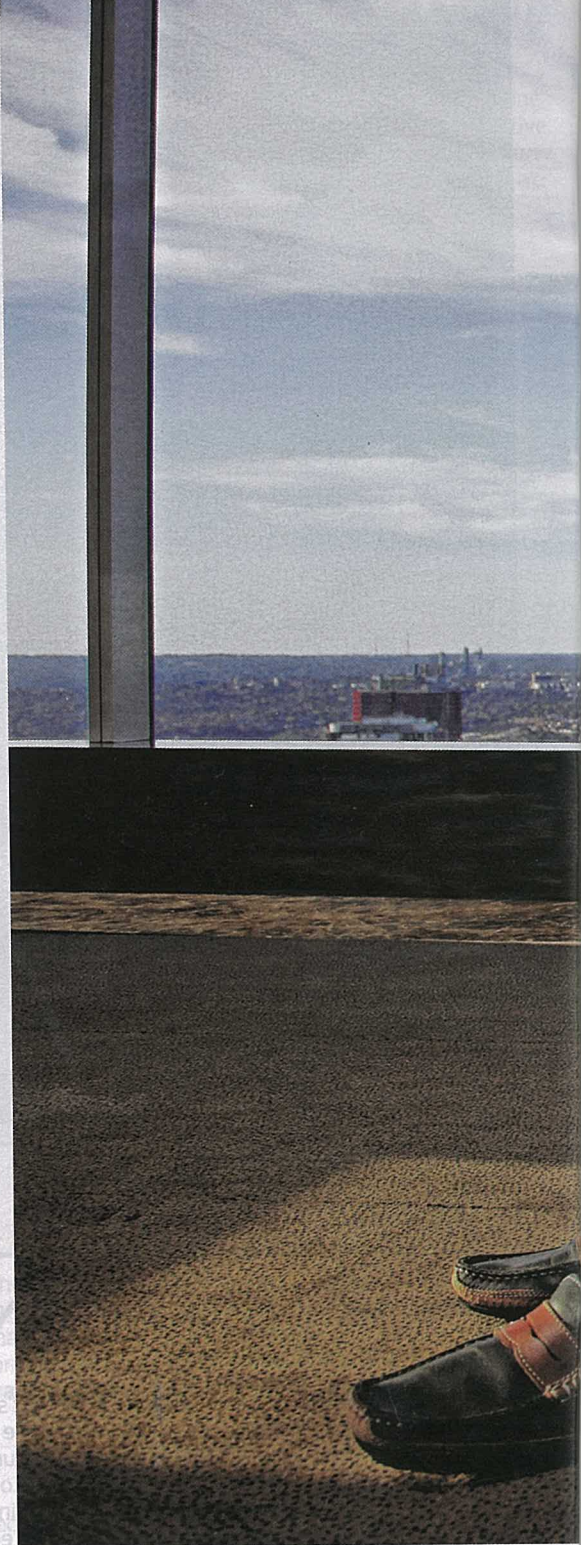
"No one else goes there."

Cue the gasps.

Two months later, Triguboff has agreed to give an interview to the *Wentworth Courier* in his huge office at Meriton HQ on Kent St in the city. In the weeks following the birthday gala he launched legal action against the NSW government — during the thick of its election campaign — over a tower he is building in North Ryde.

Does he feel optimistic about the result? "Well I have to really belt them up," he says with that trademark pugnacity. It's something that has to be done.

"Whenever I win a case against council — which is very often — I like it to be of benefit to everyone and if I can win this case, it will be of great benefit."



Seated on a low couch in shirt sleeves, his thick white hair swept back, he bristles with vigour and impatience, as one might expect of the country's third richest man.

I ask him how his day has been. "My day? Fine! I have no bad days! If somebody is giving me the shits, I knock them out."

Annotated financial reports sit on the table in front of him and staff hover outside his office. The space is filled with Chinese ornaments, signed sports paraphernalia and a stunning indigenous artwork in vivid pinks.

I ask him who the artist is.

"I don't know, I don't care," says Triguboff, his voice gruff and com-

Main: at Meriton World Square suites, CBD  
Picture: Adam Y...

Left: with wife Rhonda at the Australian Open in January. Picture: David Geraghty





“I have no bad days. If somebody is giving me the sh\*ts, I knock them out”

manding. “People who know painting – they know who it’s by.”

Triguboff might not know art, but he certainly knows development. The impatience dissipates as he talks about building, replaced by boyish enthusiasm as his face lights up.

Since he founded Meriton in 1963, the private company has designed, developed and built more than 75,000 apartments across the east coast of Australia, according to trade website, *The Urban Developer*. Today, Meriton has 4023 apartments in its rental portfolio with a further 3389 under management and 4000 hotel suites.

“I like to go on the site,” he says.

“In fact, it’s more exciting than it used to be because of improvements in technology and research and development.

“We are doing things quicker and better. Before I would need 1000 people to build 1000 flats – now I can do it with 500 people.”

Later today he will continue a 26-year battle to gain approval to secure a block of land on the northern beaches.

Infuriated by the interference of councils, he says too many bad decisions are made because aldermen are worried they’ll lose their seats. That he is not distracted by such motivations puts him in a good position to win. “I don’t think

I will win or lose my seat. I do what I think is right.” The ability to do the “right” thing is something he respects and counts Israeli PM, Benjamin Netanyahu and John Howard among those he admires.

“I don’t think I like him,” he says of the former, “but I have to admire him because he did such a good job for the country.

“And everyone loves John Howard. He will do anything for anyone... without thinking what’s in it for himself, he did a good job for the country.” Framed clippings from Forbes and other financial journals that attest to his success and Rich List status adorn his walls.

What does he make of these



Left: with then treasurer, now Prime Minister Scott Morrison at Meriton’s Pagewood Green last year. Picture: John Appleyard



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rankings? "I am very happy and very proud," he acknowledges. "But that's not really what I'm after."

"The more money I make, the more development I can do and that's what I like. And it's good for all of us."

How so? "Because the more I develop, the less people will live in granny flats. The more I build, the more people can make money – I employ thousands of people, directly and indirectly."

"So everyone is happy."

"I live quite modestly – because if you work very hard you don't have the time to spend it anyway!" He laughs at this.

Harry Oskar Triguboff was born in China to Russian parents and sent with his brother Joseph to Sydney at the end of World War II.

Despite the boys' dogged efforts, their parents, Russian Jews who found success in textile trade and later in building, were unable to secure visas to join them and died later in Israel.

Schooled at Scots College, he lives in his Vaucluse waterfront home with his second wife, Rhonda.

Thinking back to what the east was like as a boy, he reminisces about the old Double Bay milk bar 1, 2, 3 now long gone and reflects on how the area has changed.

"There are so many more restaurants now and people sit outside. In those days it was thought not hygienic to sit outside."

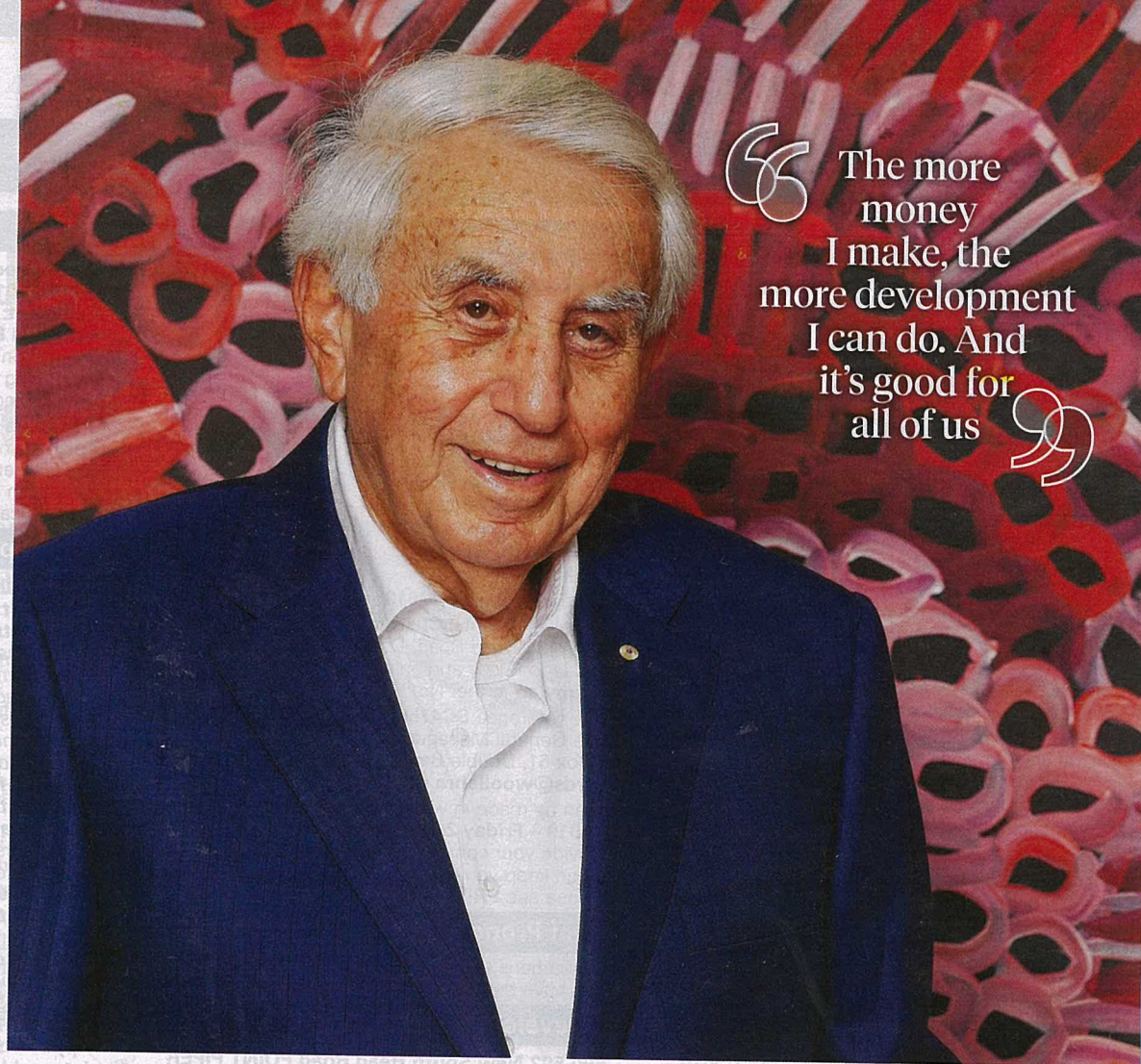
"This is much better – people enjoying their environment."

Of development in the area, however, he says there could have been more.

"Can't say they built much," he says disapprovingly. "Everywhere that is built, there is progress – freeways, trains."

"If you stay where there is no development, you go behind."

Triguboff's grandsons Daniel and Ariel Hendler, who are in their 20s, are reportedly fated to take over the business.



The more money I make, the more development I can do. And it's good for all of us

"Well, we hope. It's a long way off yet," he qualifies.

Is there anything from his childhood that he wishes they had?

"In a way, it was easier for me," he says after a long pause.

"When I started, I had nothing – I had to get something. They have everything."

He is quick to clarify that they are very "fine" boys who are clever and learn well but he assumes they think he is crazy to work so hard.

And yet it's the the hard work he thrives on. "There is no halfway; you have to give it all. And then you'll be very happy."

More than anything, Triguboff

wants to see Sydney grow, "but it can't grow without the country growing, so I would like to see many more people here. I think Australians are geniuses that they can run a whole continent with so few people... nothing will stop us if we grow bigger."

I press him on the speech he made in Darling Harbour a couple of months ago. Surely he can't mean for us to build on our national parks?

"It's true what I'm saying," he replies.

"Sydney is the only city in Australia where we have so many national parks."

"The problem... is that nobody uses them, they are just wild – all that is there are snakes so nobody can go there."

"The city sprawls because of these parks – you have to go around them."

"In fact, they give me the chance to be so successful – the further people had to move away, the more they wanted to live close, so the more I could build."

And with that we are finished. "Right," he says getting up from the couch with the ease of a man half his age.

"Very good. Can I go now?" And he does.

Harry Triguboff in his office in Kent St, Sydney.

Picture: John Appleyard

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