



The art of play

A creative couple pioneers an innovative museum where kids and colour rule.



left and opposite: The Museum of Play and Art (MoPA) in Geelong, Victoria is the first children's museum of its kind. Billie Georgieff and Tom Mahon searched the world for a similar concept before realising it was up to them to make it happen. In mid-2022, a second museum in Melbourne is poised to open, with more locations to follow. Billie and Tom painted the entire museum and all of its colourful exhibits themselves with Resene Adrenalin, Resene Torea Bay, Resene Scrumptious, Resene Roadster, Resene Biloba Flower, Resene Broom, Resene Sandy Beach, Resene Belladonna, Resene Ballerina, Resene Guggenheim, Resene Curious Blue, Resene Paper Doll, Resene Decadence, Resene White and Resene Black. Opposite image by Mandy Couzens, www.mammaknowswest.com.au.

Resene Scrumptious

Resene Guggenheim

Resene Curious Blue

Resene White	Resene Broom
Resene Sandy Beach	Resene Adrenalin
Resene Paper Doll	Resene Roadster
Resene Ballerina	Resene Torea Bay
Resene Biloba Flower	Resene Decadence
Resene Belladonna	Resene Black

It was four years ago when Billie Georgieff and Tom Mahon were welcoming their second son that they realised something was missing: a place where their children could be boundlessly immersed in art and creativity.

“Having children gave us a new perspective,” says Billie. “Tom and I are both very creative people and sought as much creative exposure for our boys, Eddie and Raff, as we could. But nothing really captured us the way we wanted. We ended up travelling to Rome, Dubai, Hong Kong and the USA to seek out creative experiences for the kids.”

As with any brilliant invention, when you notice that there is a gap in the market where your needs aren't being met, that same gap exists for others, too. “During one trip in 2018, in particular, it all of a sudden became clear that it was us that needed to build the ultimate children's museum we were seeking,” she says.

In August 2019, the couple signed the lease for a space in Geelong's Wintergardens. Built in 1854, the building has housed everything from church congregations to army operations. Over the last 30 years, it has become a cultural hub,

featuring local and international art exhibitions, art and craft retail, a cafe and a nursery. Now, it is home to MoPA, the Museum of Play and Art.

Before the launch of MoPA, Billie had spent much of her 20-year career in advertising and racked up substantial creative direction credits both for agencies and in-house retail powerhouses. “I've always loved working on brands, evolving and growing them through all aspects of creative and advertising in particular.”

“It's interesting that for two decades I worked on client brands – including some of the

most incredible brands in Australia – but never my own brand. MoPA has been so rewarding, for so many reasons, but it's also been creatively fulfilling because, for the first time, I am the client to my own work. I'm sure many creatives will relate to this, but when you know your brand intimately and you just know something is right, it can then take so much energy to 'sell' the idea. But if you didn't have to convince anyone it was right, things would just flow, wouldn't they? This is what I'm so lucky to have with MoPA. Tom and I know our organisation and



above: MoPA's colourful cityscape is a favourite creation in the Geelong museum and features Resene Roadster, Resene Adrenalin, Resene Paper Doll, Resene Broom, Resene Sandy Beach and Resene Black.

- Resene Sandy Beach
- Resene Broom
- Resene Paper Doll
- Resene Adrenalin
- Resene Roadster
- Resene Black

our customer so, so well, and I know what is right for MoPA so instinctively that my energy just builds with every idea, which compounds quite quickly. It really is incredibly rewarding to work on your own brand and see it all come to life.”

Tom's skills and background were also hugely complementary to the endeavour. “I studied advertising then worked in marketing and media on both the client and agency sides for the first 15 years of my career. Some amazing business leaders encouraged me to move into more general and business management roles towards the latter end of that, and that was where I got the opportunity to start a new division within a big business. This was my first foray into entrepreneurship, and I ended up building quite a big team, doing \$20m revenue within three years of operation. After that, I joined a startup to try and get some skin in that game and see what all the fuss was about. After three years in the tech startup landscape, I left that business feeling very tired but better educated in achieving product-market fit with new products, designing for scale and financing and managing rapid growth.”

“It was then that Billie and I went on a holiday with the kids and reflected on our careers. We wrote a massive list of all the key lessons we'd learned in our careers so far, documented what we wanted – and didn't want – in the next chapter of our life, and also what we thought the perfect recipe for a great business looked like. From that list, MoPA was born!”

“We wanted to build a museum that helped foster the specific skills in our children that are now broadly acknowledged to be abilities that aren't going to be automated and replaced by machines. For the most part, these skills are about community, human connectivity, problem solving and philosophy and, most importantly, creativity! And we were overflowing with ideas for how we'd do it.”

From inception to opening, Tom says it took two years to pull it all together. About three to six months were spent fleshing out MoPA's overarching concept followed by more months to plan the museum in detail, including all the brand elements, the cultural principles, the educational backbone of the exhibits and customer experience. When he and Billie finally found the real estate they were looking for in August 2019, it took another nine months to complete the fitout and finally open the museum.

“Geelong was the perfect place for our first museum for so many reasons. Firstly, it's the most amazing place to raise a family – with a community and lifestyle that's hard to find anywhere else in the world, really. Young families are flocking to the area, making it a fantastic growth corridor. It's also a wonderfully creative city that's home to a world-class gallery and an ever-present schedule of arts and cultural events. Plus, Geelong is still affordable. With real estate prices and the cost of living in more metropolitan areas skyrocketing, the cost of operating organisations like ours is also climbing. Geelong offers such a great lifestyle and place to operate a facility like MoPA, without the premiums of the 'big smoke'. We felt we could take a risk here without being completely silly and it allowed us to iterate it into a great model that we could scale.

“We went into Geelong knowing full well that MoPA had the potential to grow; we had plans to expand right from the get-go. But it really wasn't until we had



above: Billie says her favourite colour that she's used so far is Resene Biloba Flower. “We used it on a door in the museum alongside a deep grey with a touch of blue, and I still dream about that colour! It is as delicious as it gets.” Image by Joyce Watts, www.tothotornot.com.



right: A range of creative activities and discoveries await visitors at MoPA. Not only were Resene products used across the entire facility, but children can also try their hand at using them to decorate a donated vehicle – which has been given new life as a constantly evolving art project. Interior walls in Resene Black White, Resene Half New Denim Blue and Resene Tuna and ceiling in Resene Tuna.

Resene
Half New
Denim Blue

Resene Black White Resene Tuna

learned the lessons of the first year of operation that we felt confident we'd ironed out all the creases we needed to before setting off on the path to scale."

But of course, the project wasn't without its trials and tribulations. "Name a challenge and we've hit it," laughs Billie. "All I can say is that several very experienced museum directors with many years of experience told us that we were 100% crazy; that there was no way we could do it ourselves, and certainly no way we could make a children's museum privately viable."

"Billie is an incredibly experienced designer but she hadn't designed anything like a children's museum before," says Tom. "Similarly, I had plenty of experience starting and operating new organisations as well as basic construction knowledge, but nothing quite like MoPA. But one thing about Billie and I is that we both run at a challenge and revel in the learning process. And so, very proudly, MoPA is entirely our creation – every single inch of the place has been painstakingly conceived, refined, drawn, scrapped and redesigned over and over until we just knew it was ready to build."

Through the process, Billie learned to design exhibits and honed new spatial design skills while Tom learned to draw in CAD and render 3D buildings and intricate technical drawings. "After we had everything planned out to the millimetre, through sheer necessity, we recruited help from family, friends and some local craftspeople to physically assemble and finish the museum. But, proudly, there isn't an inch we didn't paint ourselves."

"The core ingredient we have in our partnership which gave us the confidence that we could prove them wrong is tenacity," adds Billie. "We have always been ridiculously hard working people, but we have



both worked longer and harder than ever before in our lives to make MoPA a success. In that process, we have overcome physical, financial, cultural and family challenges, and this just makes us even more proud of what we have created and what we're now scaling up."

When it comes to their favourite features, Tom says their Play and Art Based Learning Outcomes (PABLO) top the list. "PABLO is the name we've given to our rotating schedule of activations. These are always super fun and creative, they change seasonally and they are always linked to early learning outcomes that fall within the kinder curriculum. Some weeks, we partner with the local gallery to extend an exhibition into a children's craft activity. On other weeks, we bring books to life through multimedia presentation or



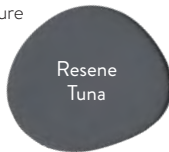
do African drumming sessions or yoga for toddlers - it's always new, always educational and always heaps of fun."

Billie says the MoPA logo was designed from bold, graphic shapes cut from paper and that fed into the overall look and inspiration for the design of the physical space. "We wanted a quirky, strong and playful brand element that could be used alongside lots of colour. During this process, the murals and colour palette were also developed then applied across all of the exhibits and interior design."

"It was important to us that the space felt sophisticated and interesting as well as bright and colourful. We needed flexibility within the colour palette as the applications went from pipes on walls to an entire hand-built city that measures 10 metres long! The suite of colours we chose reflected that brief and was divided quite simply into brights, pastels, primary and secondary colours. From here we added a highlight colour where needed and mixed the palette in interesting ways. I never felt like I needed more options and the result was a harmonious space that felt alive and welcoming.

"Rather than print colours on vinyl - like many would have in our circumstances - we really wanted to paint everything." Billie continues. "It just gives it a different feel. Firstly, we wanted our

left and opposite: Imaginative and quirky creatures are signature figures across MoPA's facility and brand and boast a bright and energetic paint palette that features Resene Adrenalin, Resene Torea Bay, Resene Scrumptious, Resene Roadster, Resene Biloba Flower, Resene Broom, Resene Sandy Beach, Resene Belladonna, Resene Ballerina, Resene Guggenheim, Resene Curious Blue, Resene Paper Doll, Resene Decadence, Resene White and Resene Black. Outdoor duck pond in Resene Ballerina. Interior walls and ceiling in Resene Black White and Resene Tuna. Opposite right image by Joyce Watts.



 Resene White	 Resene Scrumptious	 Resene Roadster
 Resene Sandy Beach	 Resene Belladonna	 Resene Curious Blue
 Resene Paper Doll	 Resene Broom	 Resene Torea Bay
 Resene Ballerina	 Resene Guggenheim	 Resene Decadence
 Resene Biloba Flower	 Resene Adrenalin	 Resene Black



colours to be the richest, deepest paint colours we could find. Our local paint shop suggested we look into Resene, and our world really changed from that moment on.”

Throughout the museum, murals, walls and displays light up the space in an array of bold and engaging paint colours: Resene Adrenalin, Resene Torea Bay, Resene Scrumptious, Resene Roadster, Resene Biloba Flower, Resene Broom, Resene Sandy Beach, Resene Belladonna, Resene Ballerina, Resene Guggenheim, Resene Curious Blue, Resene Paper Doll, Resene Decadence, Resene White and Resene Black. The walls were first prepped with Resene Quick Day waterborne primer undercoat before the colour coats were painted in Resene Lumbersider then sealed with Resene Aquaclear satin.

“It wasn’t just the colour that led us to exclusively use – and continue to use – Resene,” says Billie. “One thing we’ve learned about children’s museums is that they need to be bulletproof. If a hammer can break it, a three-year-old can too!”

“When it came time to build our second museum, we applied all our learnings from creating Geelong and built things a lot differently. The paintwork at MoPA Geelong is, remarkably, as bright, sharp and clean as the day it was painted. We keep a

fastidious cleaning regime, and so everything is wiped several times a day, yet nothing has faded or marked permanently. We actually think it’s incredible, really, how well the paint has held up in these conditions. And so it was an absolute no brainer that we’d use only Resene for the new museum in Melbourne, too.

“It’s the quality of Resene’s products and the service that we appreciate. Lots of children’s facilities we have seen use plastics to achieve a long-lasting exhibit – but the colour is often pretty average, and so we took a punt and decided to paint everything rather than seek artificial finishes. The result? Well, we’ve had professional painters comment on how flat (smooth, not dull!), bright and vibrant the finish is, in all the paintings at MoPA. And there’s no doubt in our minds that this is the result of incredible products, applied with passion and care.

“While we are not professional painters ourselves, we couldn’t have been more passionate and careful with this project. We continuously seek advice from the Resene team and there isn’t a single time they’ve not had valuable expertise to share. From colour consultation to treating timber to undercoating, topcoating and clear coating – which helps give the museum its vibrancy and tenure – the staff’s knowledge really is pretty incredible.”

Tom says MoPA Melbourne is set to open in mid-2022, which is an exciting marker of their concept’s success. “It’s three times bigger than the Geelong museum, which actually makes it one of the biggest children’s museums in the world. We have applied a mountain of learnings from Geelong to the design and build in Melbourne. And this time – with the help of funding from the Australian Arts Council – we were able to engage a builder and a host of other experts to help with the build.

“We think MoPA Geelong is pretty incredible, but having more resources this time means that not only is the Melbourne museum far bigger, it’s also far more refined and even more impressive. It really is something to behold; we can’t wait to throw the doors open and see all the smiling little faces run through the door.

“We already have plans in the works for more museums, and not all of them will be in Australia,” adds Tom. “We can’t give too much away, but it’s safe to say we’re going to be busy little beavers for the next few years and will have the privilege of providing rich and creative experiences to children and their families for a long time to come in Australia and far beyond!” **BW**

To find out more about MoPA, visit www.museumofplayandart.com.au.