



A league of her own

Di Henshall's extensive experience, complementary skill sets and problem-solving savvy set her apart.

below: Di understands the power of opting for different sheen levels when carrying the same Resene colour across different surfaces, as demonstrated in this Sunshine Coast home. Walls in Resene SpaceCote Low Sheen tinted to Resene Alabaster, cabinetry and kickboards in Resene Eighth Lemon Grass, architraves and skirting boards in Resene Lustacryl semi-gloss tinted to Resene Alabaster and cornice and ceiling in Resene SpaceCote Flat tinted to Resene Alabaster. Build by GRJ Building. Image by Jennifer Oliphant, www.jenniferoliphant.com.



To those outside the industry, interior design may seem like it's simply the icing on the cake and that everything that is truly needed is already there. But Di Henshall knows that each of her clients is always missing something, and that her job is really about giving them what they don't have. "They either don't have enough time, confidence or intuition to turn their own home into a space that truly reflects their personalities and lifestyle. I give them that, and in some cases, much more."

The more you get to know about Di, the more you understand how much her upbringing has played a part in the way she approaches problem solving during what has already been a long and successful career. She was about five years old when she realised design was her true calling. Although both her parents are scientists, Di's mum illustrated two zoology textbooks and her father spent many years singing in the opera chorus section. And this dichotomy of rationalism and artistic talent is something Di evidently shares.

Di originally attended art college in Liverpool where she studied interior design, building office practice, the history of interior design and mixed media. She then worked for a major kitchen manufacturer in the UK as their export designer, designing showrooms and exhibition stands around the globe as well as cabinetry for private residences in the Middle East, Far East and northern Africa. After arriving in Australia, she worked for a group of architects in Melbourne before starting her own practice in 1988.

At that time, Di had two tiny kids and her husband worked away, so taking control of her working life seemed like the most reasonable solution for keeping the family all together in one place. Today, her Noosaville studio has been in business for 33 years and has completed more than 2,550 projects across locations that stretch from Northern Queensland to Victoria to New Zealand. From new builds to major renovations, she's worked on residential



and holiday homes, downtown penthouses, farmhouses, hotels, commercial offices, retail, restaurants, retirement facilities and resorts through to tiny single bedroom flats. Among her most memorable projects are ones she completed across the Tasman, in Queenstown. “We have done two projects there so far, and both of them won House of the Year awards. We are also currently working on the interior specifications for another house in New Zealand that I expect will be a favourite,” says Di.

“I love working in Melbourne as well. We did a complete makeover of an inner-city apartment a couple of years ago that was a standout. The client cried when she walked into the completed project. She couldn’t believe how happy it made her.”

While the ability to provoke that kind of ‘wow’ factor alone would be enough to set her apart, Di has a unique advantage to serve her clients above and beyond most other interior designers: she also has a builder’s licence. These dovetailing skills have allowed her to take an even larger role in her projects, with the perk of being able to create custom furniture and millwork in-house.

“Being a qualified builder is a brilliant adjunct to my design qualifications and experience,” says Di. “It’s like having a foot in both camps: practicality and creativity. I am also qualified and experienced in furniture design and cabinetry design, which opens up a universe of possibility when designing for our clients. So, we’re a sort of one-stop-shop for design and decoration – designing buildings from the ground up, right down to teaspoons.

Di says that some of her clients have been designing, renovating or redecorating for years before they land on her doorstep. “Invariably, they have either run out of time, confidence, passion or ideas and at that point they feel like they are sort of ‘resorting’ to asking for my input. But it’s when the process of working with me and my team gets underway that they begin to realise that there is a huge difference between what we do as a design practice and the other experiences that they have had in the past.

“The interesting and fairly unique aspect of what we do is the breadth of service we offer and the experience and qualifications we have. I only employ graduates from recognised, full-time

right: A deep blue green brings character to this Sunshine Coast residence’s kitchen designed by Di Henshall. Walls and ceiling in Resene SpaceCote Low Sheen tinted to Resene Alabaster and cabinet doors, panels, kickboards and open shelves in Resene Timekeeper. Build by GRJ Building. Image by Jennifer Oliphant.

Resene
Timekeeper



right: Thanks to Di, a combination of creative lighting and bold colour use sets this Queensland commercial office apart. Walls in Resene SpaceCote Low Sheen tinted to Resene St Tropaz. Build by Woollam Constructions, constructions.woollam.com.au.

- Resene Alabaster
- Resene Tea
- Resene Masala

Resene St Tropaz

Resene Coast

design schools who either have a diploma or a degree in Interior Design. And then we also have qualified draftspeople and business graduates that support the design team.”

While residential projects are always challenging, Di finds them equally rewarding and considers them her favourite typology to work on. “It is vital to get inside the head and heart of the client in a very short space of time so that I can understand how far I can move them, how they will respond to certain colours, textures and so forth,” explains Di.

“I also love doing workspaces as the response from the teams is always a joy,” she adds.

“Some projects take years of planning and execution; others get flipped in a few weeks. In all cases, without exception, the same degree of tenacity and passion is put into each. Every project is a challenge and a great source of energy and excitement for both me personally and my whole team.”

Di says that she can’t even remember when she began using Resene in her projects, as it was such a long time ago, but she’s glad she did. “I was first drawn to Resene’s edited colour range, how it was presented, how it was clearly thought-through. The difference between Resene’s colours and the others was significant. It was only after a few years that I started to learn the real differences between the quality, application, philosophy and all the other elements that set Resene apart from the pack. Most of our clients now know the name Resene because we share this knowledge with them also.”

While it’s difficult to pick her favourite hues, there are a few Di finds herself coming back to over and over again. “My all-time go-to white is Resene Alabaster and I get ribbed about it all the time, as I can never get away from using it. It’s been in nearly every project for at least some application. Each of the different strengths of Resene Tea are also brilliant and I have been drawn to Resene Masala tones on more than one occasion. And Resene Coast is another colour I have used a few times to great effect,” she says.



Di enjoys bringing new talent into the fold of her business and finds it rewarding to mentor younger designers that are just starting out in their careers. “We have a small team, including an assistant to the design team who is currently studying interior design. She absorbs so much and gives so much back; it is thrilling to see her unfolding like a flower as she gets more confident.

“I wish I had been given more advice when I was starting out,” says Di. “There are three things that stand out to me that I do wish younger designers would adopt. Firstly, to listen – truly listen – to clients without planning in your head your response to them. Take some breathing space before replying, so you can absorb the underlying messages that are being given in their conversation.

“Another one is to take a tape measure with you everywhere you go and practice measuring things, even mundane things in your own home such as heights of hanging rails in wardrobes, heights of drawers, heights of tables and seats. They don’t teach you how to measure in uni or design school, and you will be amazed how, once you truly understand measurement without a tape measure in your hand, it affects your ability to do space planning. You’ll also be able to explain to a client how things will look and feel even when you’re standing in an empty space trying to illustrate what is about to happen.

“Lastly, colour – don’t be afraid of it, but also respect how it affects just about everything. Always view larger samples like a Resene drawdown swatch or do a brush-out before specifying a colour, as looking at a small sample of colour is no way to make a final selection.”

Like many design studios that have continued working over the course of the pandemic, the way her team operates has shifted as of late. Di used to make three or more trips abroad each year to source special furniture and textiles for her clients, but it’s been far more difficult to do so more recently. And even with the ability to produce bespoke furniture in her own studio, getting enough materials and hands to build items has become trickier. “The biggest continual issue is the supply chain and lack of human resources,” she says. “It is incredibly difficult to recruit new staff for the furniture factory and to get products to arrive on time (or at all) is an ongoing issue for both sides of the business that I think will be here for at least another year.”

But despite these challenges, her team is as busy as ever and is continuing to power through many impressive projects. And with her attention to detail and experienced eye for colour, we’re always voracious to see what Di does next. **BW**

To see more of Di’s work, visit www.dihenshall.com.au.