

international flair

This Sunshine Coast interior design and building consultant is making waves nationally and abroad, writes Gabrielle Chariton.

When asked to describe her highly successful interior design business, Di Henshall talks not about herself, but her clients, who literally define the way she works: 'My clients...are all highly educated; a lot of them are self-made,' she says.

'Their stories are invariably so uplifting and motivational because they have gone through thick and thin to get where they are. So when I design for a client, I want the job to reflect their success and their lifestyle.'

It's this innate affinity for people, and a wholly solutions-driven approach to design, that has seen Di Henshall Interior Design grow, over 27 years, from a one-woman show working out of a tiny studio into an internationally-recognised design and building consultancy.

'In interior design, there's a huge emphasis on psychology and getting an understanding of someone's personality and lifestyle,' Di explains. 'I never influence clients with my opinions –



it's my job to adapt the right design solution to their particular needs – so at the end of the day they can look at that house and know that it's theirs; it's not something that somebody else created that they have to conform to.'

A British ex-pat, Di says she aspired to be a designer from the age of seven. She studied interior design at art school in the UK, and, after several years working as an export designer for a large cabinetry manufacturing company, headed Down Under and did interior design for an architectural group in Melbourne. She established Di Henshall Interior Design in 1988 after

settling in Noosa, on Queensland's Sunshine Coast.

After 10 years of steady growth, working on new homes and renovations, Di increasingly found the scope of her work constrained from a technical perspective, and decided to get her builder's licence.

'Being a qualified interior designer doesn't allow or qualify you to make building decisions, which I found quite frustrating. And also I wanted to be in complete control of our projects,' she explains.

After a gruelling 18 months of study, which she did through HIA, Di was qualified to offer a cohesive, all-encompassing design and building consultancy service, in which she was 'completely in charge of concept, development, project management, building and sign-off'.

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As a result, Di Henshall Interior Design, together with spin-off companies Resident Hero Custom Furniture and Kitchens by Resident Hero, can realise a project in its absolute entirety. 'For our clients, rather than having an interior designer, an architect, a builder, a project manager and a decorator, we encompass all those things. They have one single line of communication [so] the project runs more efficiently and the finished result is more cohesive.'

Thanks in part to Noosa's cosmopolitan nature and the number of international and interstate visitors to the town, word of mouth has attracted business from a broad geographical area. Di Henshall Interior Design has clients right up and down the eastern seaboard as well as overseas. (Among the jobs currently on the go is a nightclub in Noosa's main

Left: Di's new state-of-the-art, 1000 square-metre office, showroom and factory, Noosa.





Above: Owner of Di Henshall Interior Design and HIA Professional Woman of the Year, Di Henshall.

street, a large home in New Zealand, and a homestead in country Victoria.)

With around 20 projects running concurrently at any one time, Di says: 'It's like an army exercise...we are constantly regrouping and reprioritising to make sure that we're on top of everybody's progress. We have eight staff, and everybody on the team has a specialised area of expertise – CAD designers, researchers, admin people, finance managers. My role as design director is to first of all support them; I come up with all the designs and I'm the front person for all the clients.'

The year 2016 has been a landmark year for Di. After devoting 12 months to designing and building a state-of-the-art, 1000 square-metre office, showroom and factory, the three Henshall Group businesses moved into the new premises

earlier this year, which has heralded quite a change.

'Logistically it's so much easier: it's like a one-stop-design-shop, and our clients can look down from the design studio onto the factory floor and actually see items that we've designed being made for them.'

Then, in August 2016, Di was named Professional Woman of the Year at the HIA Recognition of Women in Industry awards.

'I will never win an Olympic medal and I'd never win an Oscar, but for me, that was the closest thing,' she says. 'There were 43 nominees...and they were all really gobsmackingly awesome people. So to win an award was just really fantastic.'

When asked if she has encountered challenges working in a male-dominated field, Di quickly replies: 'Yes – all the time'. These issues revolve around entrenched stereotypes that can be hard to overcome.

'People are sceptical about having a female builder,' she explains. 'They look at me and say, "How can you be a builder? You don't have a nail belt." And that's because I'm not a carpenter, I'm a builder: a head contractor that is in charge of all those subcontractors which include carpenters. My job as a builder is to manage the project to make sure that it's built correctly, in a timely manner, and in the best possible way.'

With the business now settled into its new premises, Di has several goals for the near future.

'I'd like to design a new range of furniture that hopefully will be rolled out across Australia,' she says. 'I'm planning to devote more time to writing articles and delivering guest lectures, and, as an extension of that I'd like to get more into the educational side.'

'I think that's a legacy that a lot of people in my position should be asked to do, to pass their knowledge on.' **H**

Design heroes

The Henshall Group of companies includes Di Henshall Interior Design; Resident Hero Custom Furniture – bespoke furniture design and manufacture; and Kitchens by Resident Hero, which manufactures cabinetry for kitchens, bathrooms, laundries and wardrobes.

Founder Di Henshall says that the Resident Hero businesses were created to manufacture interior design solutions that simply weren't available on the Australian market.

'Australians are very well travelled and well educated. They are well aware of what's available in the world, but unfortunately our population isn't big enough to sustain a ready supply of these products that they know are out there,' Di explains.

'Going back 20-odd years I would design something and have no chance of getting it in Australia, so we started manufacturing our own as a support for the design business.'

'It was, and still is, always our aim to come up with designs that no-one else would have, that are uniquely for the client.'