

Feeling a building in your bones



Warrnambool building designer Donna Monaghan at her old school – the former St Joseph’s Primary in Lava St – which she transformed into a childcare centre as part of an award-winning makeover.

By Carol Altmann

In this world there are two sorts of people: those who look at buildings and those who really see them.

Donna Monaghan is definitely the latter.

“I am the sort of person who will look at a worn down bluestone step and wonder how many people it took to wear that step down,” the Warrnambool building designer says with a laugh.

“I have always been this way – I have always looked at buildings – and I didn’t realise until I was older that other people didn’t look at them in the same way.”

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So when you talk with this award-winning designer about a building, it is not only a conversation about the light, finishes, materials and flooring, but also about the bones, the story, and the emotions.

“Buildings should make you feel something when you step into them. It should not be just about building four concrete walls, but connecting that building to the people who use it,” Donna explains.

“It doesn’t matter whether you are talking about a heritage building, or a brand new, ultra-modern building – and I like both – but they need to have some character and make us feel good.”



The original St Joseph's primary school building in Lava St, Warrnambool, which was built in 1935. Image supplied.

Donna's business, Form & Function, has recently been recognised – again – by the Building Design Association of Victoria (BDAV) for her talent and skill by winning a major award for the transformation of the former St Joseph's Primary School in Warrnambool into a childcare centre.

As we walk through the old school in Lava St, originally built in 1935, Donna reveals that it was in fact her old primary school in the days when she was known as Donna Carney.

"When I first stepped back into the school, it was highly emotional," she says.

Anybody who has ever returned to their school for a reunion will know that feeling: the years contract and you feel huge standing beside the tiny chairs, tables and toilets, as your head fills with a million memories.

"It tapped into something I hadn't thought about for a long time and reconnected me with a space that I hadn't been in for, well, 30 years," Donna says.

The designer in Donna rubs her palm across a solid brick wall inside the old school and explains that it is not single, not double, but triple brick. These walls were built to last.



Donna on the school's central stairwell, which has been retained and now leads to staff offices.

The \$1.7 million re-design has also retained many other distinctive features of the original school, which closed in 1985, such as the stairwell that once echoed the sounds of boisterous children, and the beautiful banks of windows that overlook Lava St.

Until the redesign, however, the window panes were all filled with opaque glass – perhaps to discourage daydreaming during prayers.

“Even when renovating, it is important to retain original architecture to tell the story of the building,” Donna explains.

“We took the context of this place, its view, its light and its spaces. We borrowed it and condensed it into a new box of tricks.”



No dark and dingy rooms here. Adding clear glass to the multitude of windows was just one part of what is a light and bright transformation. Image: Tracey Togni, Phinc Photography.



Sliding poles add a touch of the old school yard to the new reception area. Image: Tracey Togni, Phinc

Photography.

Donna used a similar approach when redesigning the farmhouse of author **Paul Jennings** and partner **Mary-Anne Fahey**, for which she won three BDAV awards in 2010, despite having started her business only four years earlier and, at the time of the awards, being heavily pregnant with twins.

“When Paul described what he and Mary-Anne wanted to do with the house, he said they wanted it to feel as comfortable as an old slipper and I thought, ‘I have got to get this job! They so understand!,” Donna says, laughing at the memory.

(You can [see a short video of the renovated farmhouse here](#).)



Over-sized lights and banks of windows have turned once gloomy hallways into tunnels of light. Image: Tracey Togni, Phinc Photography.

Like us here at *Bluestone*, Donna loves old buildings, including mid-century gems which may not be that old, but full of – here’s that word again – *character*.

“I was really sad, for example, to see the [old brick buildings next to the Salvation Army](#) go because they really added something to the streetscape...and often what we see replacing these older buildings is something that is poorly designed,” she says.

Donna says the Fletcher Jones site is another example of the rejuvenation of a space that still has a huge community connection, despite being almost written off.

“I don’t think we need to keep every old building, but the way we evaluate the worth of our buildings needs some serious consideration.”

[box]You can visit Donna’s [Form & Function website here](#).[/box]

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