

trade secrets | Mari Gibson

## Building on experience

**PETER DOWNES DESIGNS**  
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### MOST POPULAR REQUEST

Open living spaces with lots of light.

Life in design:  
Peter Downes.  
Photo: Jane Dyson

**“IT STILL** blows me away that you can start off with an idea in your head, get that down onto paper and then a couple of years later there's a building there as a result.” That's how Peter Downes feels about his job as a building designer.

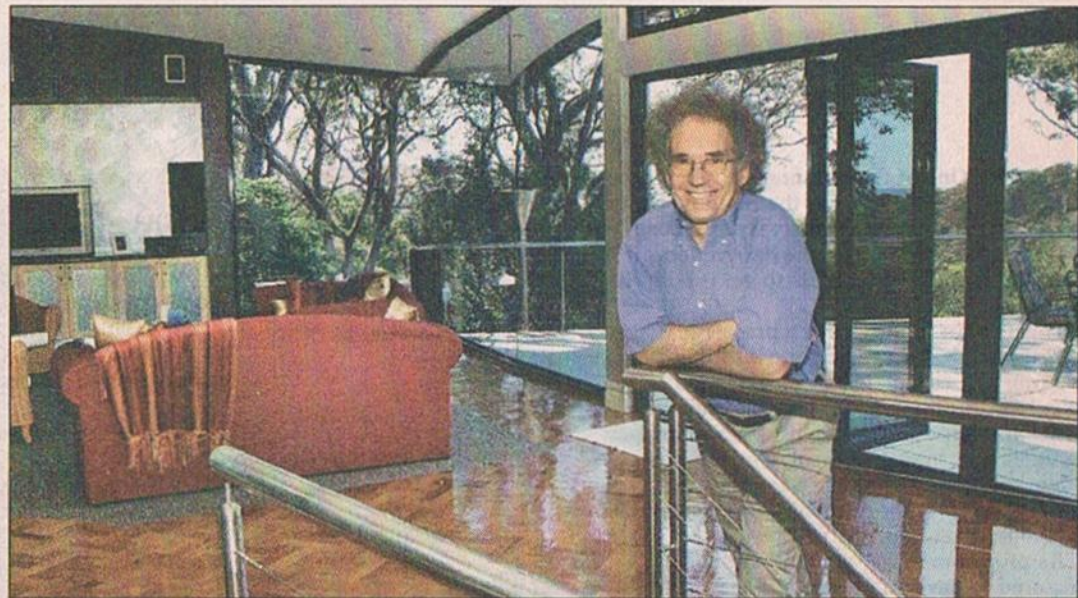
It's one he got into by accident. After 20 years of designing heavy machinery in the mining industry, Downes bought and extended an “old fibro shack” at Avalon: “As a result of that, people started approaching me to do more design work.” Since then he has been designing houses for about 13 years.

“I guess my background is reasonably typical of building designers, or non-qualified designers, in so far as I came from a practical background rather than a theoretical background,” he says. “It's a good place to start because you can then add the creative level on top of a sound practical knowledge base.”

Any comparison with those other designers of buildings – architects – leaves him unfazed; he is happy to “compete in the open marketplace. I don't try to attract work by being cheaper than architects. I hope they [clients] make a decision on a merit basis.”

### Trader's tip

Speak to a building designer's recent clients to find out if they're happy.



Downes specialises in “difficult, challenging blocks” and 90 per cent of his work is on the northern beaches. The designer-client relationship starts with an on-site meeting (for a nominal fee). At times, says Downes, “people have no idea what they are allowed to do and not allowed to do,” so he works through a checklist with them – council regulations, orientation, overshadowing neighbours – and looks at the options. “I then come back to them with a fee proposal.”

For a typical project – a three-bedroom house – his fees are about \$16,000-\$20,000, which includes a preliminary design, co-ordination of other consultancy work (like a topographical survey, flora and fauna report or a hydraulic engineering estimate), submission to council for the relevant

approvals, and the final design. “I take people through from where they've got an urge to have a house to where they've got permission to build,” he says, which can take “easily a year”.

The client must then find a builder (no mean feat these days, although Downes may help with suggestions). Roughly, the cost of his homes is \$1600 to \$1700 a square metre, which includes balconies, garages, driveways and demolition of the existing house.

Downes likes to create “interesting but simple, geometric shapes”, using lightweight building materials and bold colours. Interiors are kept simple. And his clients? They are “all fantastic, brave enthusiastic people. I'll say, ‘Look, I've never actually done this before but I think it'll look pretty good’ and they're happy to take my word for it – and they're spending \$800,000.”