

Designed from inside out!



Jane Stark is an interior designer as well as a garden designer. She says 'maximalism' is back in interior design. Photo: Michel O'Sullivan

Whether designing the interiors for a home, rejuvenating a garden or just building her business, for Jane Stark it has always been about adding more layers.

She launched her Sydney-based Stark Design as a qualified interior designer circa 1995. But in a crowded market of designers and decorators in Australia, she resolved to stand out from the crowd by creating a "unique full-service business" that would offer design solutions for both indoor and outdoor spaces.

"I believe I am the only design professional in the country with qualifications for both interiors and gardens," she says.

"Usually when homeowners engage a designer they are dealing with a team of people, not always with the same vision."

The Australian lifestyle, Stark says, lends itself to a focus on indoor and outdoor living areas. She says the combination of services in the past 10 years has seen a spike in revenues and her business has grown 20 per cent year on year.

The only time growth encountered a blip was in the aftermath of the global financial crisis, where homeowners tightened their belts for the 2010 and 2011 financial years.

Stark has chosen to specialise only in the residential market, and at any one time can have eight to 10 projects on her books, valued from \$20,000 up to \$300,000.

About 60 per cent of revenues are yielded from interior design, the remainder from landscape design.

Costs are kept to a minimum as Stark contracts work to her list of architects, artisans, landscape gardeners and furniture manufacturers, who could number up to five a project, depending on the size.

"It has taken me years to distil the fine team of people I work with," she says.

She has no borrowings against the business, preferring to grow organically.

Again, it is all about layering, as Stark is resolute about retaining her personalised, bespoke service.

"If you want to stay small and boutique you have to offer extra services. The garden design has changed the nature of the business and means we are working with clients over a longer period."

Stark says professional qualifications are another important point of difference. She holds a diploma of horticulture and landscape design from the Ryde TAFE, completed after five years of part-time study.

She is also accredited with the Design Institute of Australia, following a five-year interior design course by correspondence from the New York Institute of Interior Design about 1990, again part-time. It was "the only correspondence course on offer at the time".

A native of Christchurch, she arrived in Sydney in the mid 1980s as a trained teacher, but found work in IT as a product manager for Digital Equipment Corporation.

Stark credits her career in IT with teaching her to find a point of difference. Over her 10 years with

Digital, Stark was charged with helping the sales team launch their proprietary versions of email, spreadsheets, graphics and scanning software – all the pre-cursors to Microsoft Office.

"We had to differentiate ourselves from what IBM, Hewlett Packard, Wang and others were doing" she says.

Her website was developed for about \$15,000. Stark says the lion's share was spent on photography as the site's purpose is to be an "electronic brochure". This year she also engaged a social media specialist with a view to "engaging a younger demographic through Instagram and Facebook".

She says spring is "peak hour" as clients start to think about Christmas and refreshing their homes.

"The best interiors and gardens look like they have evolved over time. They develop a patina and should be reviewed annually."

That ensures relationships with clients are ongoing. All of her clients have come via word of mouth and, of a list of about 300 since inception, 25 per cent are repeat business as they "upgrade or downsize" their domestic arrangements, or review and edit what is already in place.

Fees start at an hourly rate of about \$250 – to take a brief from a client – and thereafter vary

depending on what members of her team are involved and the size of the job.

"It's an hour of listening and asking questions about how they live and what they want," she says.

"We all know what we love if only we put our minds to it. My job is to help express that and include all the important accoutrements to a home life, whether it be art works, furniture, collectibles, photographs or any other favoured items."

She says the IT industry also taught her to listen and look after clients. "Most people are not interested in dealing with myriad tradespeople and designers. My job is to listen, design, organise and then plan, plan and deliver, deliver, deliver in spades."

Clients come from all over Sydney, in a radius of about 20 kilometres from the CBD, she says. She has branched out recently to Byron Bay, while an earlier job in Bondi led to an award-winning renovation for a client in the Gold Coast district of Chicago in the United States.

Future plans involve incorporating more travel as part of her business "because travel is the greatest inspiration of all".

She visits Europe and the US every second year but has eyes on Turkey and India because of the contemporary trend signalling "a great return to pattern

and colour".

"I see more people becoming more courageous in their homes as they combine contemporary and antique furniture and mix art with bold colour," she says. "Maximalism is back!"

Television shows from The Block to Grand Designs have been a fillip to the design industry, Stark says and she notes Asian manufacturing has reduced the cost of furniture and enabled broader access for home owners. "That said, I am a huge supporter of Australian and New Zealand-designed and manufactured furniture," she says.

It is her life's work, and her passion, and Stark has no plans to ever stop doing what she does, always with the trained eye of a perfectionist. Which may explain why the incomparable fashion editor, the late Diana Vreeland, is high on Stark's list of women whose unique personal style sets them apart from the crowd.

For Vreeland, as it is for Stark: "It's a fine balancing act between translating what the client wants and giving them what they never knew they wanted."