



## Entrepreneur **Clare Cousins** discovers the pros and cons of establishing a young practice.

to take off, and news spread through word of mouth, or once every few months through design magazines. The short, sharp turn-around of retail proved to be a valuable marketing tool for Cousins, with store fit-outs completed in a matter of weeks and offered up high exposure – thanks to the public nature of retail.

However, the lucrative prospect of mass retail rollouts didn't tempt Cousins at all. "So many times we had the opportunity to do retail rollouts and turned back those jobs, because it just doesn't interest us. For us it's always been about the creative process and thinking 'new'."

Maintaining a small studio has continued to serve Cousins well. She is loath to compromise on her business vision, which tends to favour the more intimate and gradual process of residential projects. "Because we're a small practice and can only take on so many projects, we're particular about the work we take on," she says. "And we've been fortunate that the business has had slow and steady growth. We've never been reduced to [panic] projects."

Cousins has gained a reputation as a facilitator and a diffuser – often between architect, client and builder. "The way you work with people is so important," she says. She describes her company as being 'full services', that is, easy to work with and approachable. Repeat business is also important – and in some ways more valuable than one-off engagements, because reliable clients invariably mean reliable cash flow.

The science and strategy of business is almost as enjoyable to Cousins as the architecture – although she freely admits that her first employee was a bookkeeper. What she does enjoy is the process of architecture. "Not just the design stage, in fact, the amount of design we do every week is such a small portion of what we do – you need to enjoy the process," she says.

If there's one defining element within Cousins' work it is a focus on the 'macro' details, and materiality. "I'm interested in how material is applied and used. Why not try to express what a building is built from, rather than layering it with materials?" This refined approach to architecture and construction, combined with Cousins' service-oriented ethos, is what gets her those repeat customers.

A focus on residential sectors has shielded the studio from the volatility of the global financial crisis, so the rough patches – if any – have manifested elsewhere. "In the early years I often thought about taking on a business partner, that I couldn't continue to operate without a business partner," says Cousins. Timely advice helped her see that it was a skilled workforce that she needed. "I never really found the right person to be my business partner. Having developed a fantastic team around me I was reminded that I can do it myself. I just needed more help." ●

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### WORDS

*Alice Blackwood*

**O**ften it's a large project that provides the catalyst for going out on your own. Between designing, client liaison, documentation and site visits, time is tight, prospects are bountiful and your options are suddenly wide open.

For Clare Cousins, founder and principal of Clare Cousins Architects, establishing her own practice was a quiet undertaking. She started out small, but the timing, she says, was perfect.

Cousins' earliest jobs were in construction and small architectural practices. As an undergraduate architect, she contracted for a builder on the Prince of Wales Spa Retreat development (St Kilda, 2001) – an interesting and unusual undertaking for an architecture student. "But it gave me a great sense of being located out on site every day," says Cousins.

The experience taught Cousins the value of communication, from liaising with builders to diffusing 'situations' and establishing an open exchange of ideas with the client. "It's not just about being creative," says Cousins.

In one of Cousins' most formative career moves she worked with Wood Marsh, a steep learning that introduced her to multi-million dollar residential projects and a variety of responsibilities.

"That's what I love about working in small practices, you have a lot of contact and interaction with clients and consultants. I've always been interested in having a connection with people and engaging with a project on many different levels," says Cousins. "I find I need the variety to stay stimulated."

Establishing her practice was a gradual process with Cousins taking on small jobs – a kitchen here, a bathroom there. "There was something nice about starting super small and doing these small interior projects. Then a couple of renovations came in and I started building the business."

The early 2000s was a different time and place for design start-ups. Blogging and social media was yet

Clockwise from  
top left / Mornington  
Beach House project  
by Clare Cousins;  
Clare Cousins, Photos:  
Shannon McGrath



# CLARE COUSINS

