

THE VALUE AND VALUES OF GOOD DESIGN

For Clare Cousins, good design is about values, delight and connection to community.

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TOP Clare Cousins
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RIGHT TOP Anything but monolithic, Nightingale Evergreen is a masterclass in multi-residential design which puts liveability and wellbeing at the forefront.

RIGHT BOTTOM The interior of Nightingale Evergreen is a seamless blend of natural materials, durable concrete and elegant lines.

Clare Cousins needs no introduction. Since founding her award-winning eponymous architecture practice at the age of just 29, Cousins has been at the forefront of exceptional Australian design across multiple typologies for close to two decades. Regardless of whether she's designing elegant, responsive and inspiring single residential homes or multi-residential developments such as Nightingale, Cousins lives and breathes values-driven good design. Good design, in her view, is not a nice-to-have but something everyone should have access to.

It was Cousins' commitment to good design — the definition of which we'll get to combined with her desire to have autonomy over both her work/life and design decisions that led her to take a leap of faith and go out on her own in 2005. "I felt taking on the challenge of running my own practice gave me more autonomy. It allowed me to make my own decisions," Cousins tells *inside*.

However, her path has not been straightforward or entirely easy by any stretch of the imagination. "I never took maternity leave for example," Cousins recalls, reflecting on the early years of her practice. "I came back to work with very small babies and that was fine. That was how I chose to do it."



ABOVE Natural light streams into the multi-zone kitchen and living area. The outside is invited in, expanding the space and providing natural airflow.

BELOW Each balcony at Nightingale Evergreen is private, angled to capture natural light and minimise disturbance from trains passing below.



Paid maternity leave didn't exist then in the way it does now. "I had quite a young team of people who really needed my guidance and input, regardless of the fact that I was a new mother," Cousins adds. "That was a bit of a challenge, but you get through it. It was a great personal lesson in resilience."

Fast forward to the present moment, it's safe to say the challenges of being a successful architect are no less pressing; they're just different. Cousins' children are now teenagers, she's in the final stages of building her own home in Melbourne with her builder husband, and has grown her practice into one of the most in-demand firms in Australia. This is not surprising given every aspect of Cousins' work is informed by her values-based, holistic approach. With a long list of awards and accolades, it is her involvement in community-centric multi-residential projects such as Nightingale and Brunswick Nursery which give her the greatest sense of satisfaction.

But of course, before we get to Nightingale or the Brunswick Nursery, there has to be an idea, a creative spark. Like so many creatives, inspiration strikes when the cacophony of work falls silent. "You can't ever design or be creative under pressure," Cousins says. "You've got to give yourself thinking space. For me, it takes shutting down Outlook and turning my phone off. This is when design inspiration often hits. It can also strike at different times, like when I'm driving my car by myself or in the shower."

Cousins is also a firm advocate of sketching and drawing by hand, seeing the fluid connection between hand and mind as the best way to let creative ideas flow, without the restrictions of thinking about whether or not something will actually work. "For me, it's so important to start a project by putting pen or pencil to paper — or stylus to tablet," she says. "Doing it by hand means you're not thinking about what you're trying to design. You're just seeing what happens in a different, purely creative way."

This direct mind-body connection, as human-centric a design approach as an architect can get in an era where technology pervades virtually every stage of the process, may explain how Cousins has developed a distinctly Clare Cousins Architects design style while retaining authenticity. Her design approach is centred on people and the way they live, work and play, rather than an over-engineered, orchestrated construction.



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When it comes to multi-residential design, this approach becomes even more vital. “This sort of typology forces you to go back to the fundamentals of a residential building,” Cousins says. “The challenge is: how do you infuse the fundamentals, which cannot be edited out of a project, with character or qualities or materiality or warmth to enrich the design and ultimately enhance the experience of the people who will live there?”

This is Cousins’ definition of good design: quality, materiality and warmth all coming together to enhance the experience and enrich the lives of those who call apartments home. However, good design goes far beyond surface materiality and style. “It’s critical these buildings are built with integrity, longevity and sustainability in mind,” Cousins explains. “They need to run at a low cost for the occupants and they have to age well with time. Multi-residential projects are hugely important to the way our cities function. If we could build more well-designed mid-scale, low-rise apartments we could house a lot of people and simultaneously create genuine communities.”

While Clare Cousins Architects as a practice, and Clare Cousins as an individual architect, champion sustainable design constantly seeking innovative solutions to the pervasive issues of waste generation and carbon footprint in the architecture and building industries – it is the creation, or rather the facilitation, of community that lies at the core of her design practice.

Cousins freely admits that architects cannot create community in the sense of physically bringing people together, but they can “facilitate

moments where the opportunity for community or fostering relationships and connections can happen”. “We should remember our values,” Cousins says. We should be thinking about ethics and be principled about the work that we do.” Arguably, this is what good design and good architecture can and must achieve.

Designing from a place of values is embedded into every aspect of Cousins’ practice. It’s evident in her thoughtfully articulated buildings, where every detail, from the way a staircase is designed to maximise functional space and offer borrowed light, through to the clients she chooses to work with. Every moment and every interaction are carefully considered.

Reflecting on how her values and approach to sustainable, good design have evolved over the course of her career, Cousins says she has become much more conscious and strategic about who she works with. She now asks at the outset, “Are our values aligned? Is the client well-intentioned?”

This alignment of values, and the exceptional outcome on both architectural design and community facilitations level, found almost perfect expression in the Nursery on Brunswick mixed-use building, which includes multi-residential, retail and commercial tenancies.

Having worked with the client previously, Cousins knew their values aligned. “For the client, it wasn’t just about getting a site, maximising it and selling on to the next thing,” she says. “When they came to me, they were adamant that they needed to retain the original memory of the Fitzroy Nursery, which had occupied the site for 40 years.”

Working collaboratively with the client, the decision was made to create a large atrium in the central area of the site. This lush verdant section serves as both the new nursery retail space and an organic lung that the apartments on the upper levels gaze down on. “It’s really beautiful. Talking in development terms, it cut out a huge amount of yield, but they wanted to do something that they would be proud of.”

Being proud of one’s work and making a positive contribution to people and the planet is arguably what all architects strive for. However, unlike other architects, Clare Cousins’ values-based design ethos permeates everything she does, right down to who she chooses to work with. In every aspect of her life and work, everything always comes back to integrity and community. To drill down even deeper, it’s less about design and more about human connection – connection to others and connection on an individual level. It all starts with putting pen to paper.

PREVIOUS TOP LEFT
The verdant green lung of The Nursery on Brunswick serves as a source of delight for residents and passersby alike.

PREVIOUS BOTTOM RIGHT
From this vantage point, the cutaway void reads as a breezy, open invitation to pause and relax in an ultra urban environment.

ABOVE The Fitzroy Nursery retail premise is integrated seamlessly into The Nursery on Brunswick’s building scheme, creating a sense of community on this busy inner north corner.