

# HOUSING



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# certified for success

When it comes to planning and styling internal spaces, this award-winning small-town designer is big on ideas, writes Annie Reid.

**M**ichelle Burton, managing director of Designing Divas and SMB Interior Design, knows a few things about bathrooms.

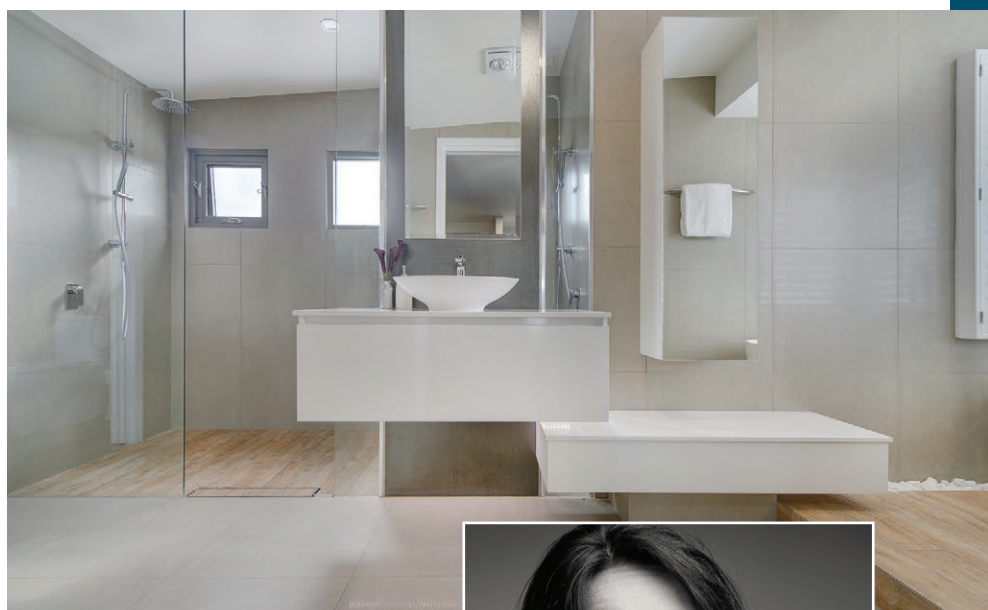
The qualified interior designer has specialised skills in bathroom design, in addition to being a certified kitchen designer (CKD Au.), a background that without a doubt assured her the HIA Northern NSW Bathroom and Kitchen of the Year awards in 2015. The stunning ensuite that nabbed the award (see text box) was part of a custom-built home in Port Macquarie, NSW where Designing Divas is based.

‘A bathroom presents the challenge of a small space,’ Michelle says. ‘There are so many challenges as well as size, so once I nail the layout I feel really good.’

Michelle’s commitment to innovation and industry trends has always been a cornerstone of her work. She moved to Sydney from California to complete her design studies in 1990 and subsequently won the Interior Designex Australasian Student of the Year award – an accolade she is still very proud of today. By 1998 she had set up her first business, SMB & Associates.

## ‘A bathroom presents the challenge of a small space’

Over the next two decades, Michelle continued her studies and certifications, entering and winning awards, before making a sea change to Port Macquarie in 2010 to launch her next business, Designing Divas. There she works with talented locals and offers property styling and landscape design, in addition to interior design, while servicing her



Sydney clients through SMB Interior Design, as it is known today.

‘This is my life and career,’ Michelle says. ‘I love what I do and being a designer is for life as long as people appreciate your talent and skill.’

To successfully establish a business within a smaller location, she says the trick is to never stand still, to keep learning, and always improve or add to the business.

‘When you work in a small town, you need to have feathers in your cap and you have to keep yourself busy,’ Michelle says. ‘If you can say you have won awards it sets you apart, and I don’t believe that I would have been accepted into a smaller community without them.’

Recently, the interior designer acquired a 100-square metre warehouse to base Designing Divas. Once complete, the new space will allow her to present and discuss bathroom and kitchen plans with clients, and add other complementary services to the mix, such as independent builders. Michelle says she will set the space up in the style of a warehouse apartment, with furniture on rotation when not in use for the property styling arm of the business.



*Above: Michelle Burton, managing director of Designing Divas and SMB Interior Design.*

‘Having my own big warehouse allows me to be seen as more flexible and independent, which is all part of the overall strategy,’ she says.

Modern advances in technology and product innovation have resulted in better solutions for clients too. They mean less time translating her ideas onto software and more time creating a personal service for clients, with ever-growing options for materials, such as LED lighting and tiling for her bathroom designs.

‘Tiling is such a creative expression,’ Michelle says. ‘These days you can

specify 1000x3000mm slabs with thicknesses of 3.5–5mm, which gives you more flexibility. The variety of decorative tiles you can choose from is overwhelming.'

### Elegant ensuite

Four was better than one when it came to winning the HIA Northern NSW Bathroom and Kitchen of the Year awards for 2015.

Michelle Burton of Designing Divas teamed up with building designer, Collins W Collins, Brandon Calder Homes and Designer Living Kitchens to construct and install the award-winning rooms.

The brief was for the overall interior design to incorporate spaces that displayed a visual flow with a relaxed, harmonious feel in keeping with the home's surroundings. The client emphasised that the ensuite bathroom be a place of relaxation and tranquillity, with views of the Hastings River.

This was achieved by using a natural colour palette featuring warm greys and whites, which are layered with timber-look porcelain tiles in the double shower as well as on a raised bath platform.

A highlight is the river bed containing pebbles within custom-made drain troughs, with the effect accentuated by crisp stainless steel fittings.

'It's a further example of the timeless beauty of natural-looking products [and] working with the stunning architectural lines of contemporary bathroomware,' Michelle says.

Michelle is actively engaged with the local industry through HIA and also turns to the international kitchen and bathroom event, EuroCucina, held in Italy, which is known as the global authority on design and industry trends. (See page 58 for more.)

'EuroCucina is such a great source of inspiration, and it has helped shape me as a designer,' she says.

Michelle believes passionately that designers must be connected and committed to the industry here and abroad to continue to provide a professional service to clients. She's attended EuroCucina twice now, and enjoys attending HIA professional events and days, networking and attending trade shows, as part of her 10-year membership with the association.

'I believe that everyone in the industry should attend these regularly. That's part of being viewed as a professional by clients and the industry.'

There's an even greater need to stay on top of bathroom trends with the increase of renovation programs on our televisions, where everyone's suddenly a bathroom or kitchen expert. Gone are the days when inspiration was solely from magazines and travelling. Today, simply a swipe or touch of the remote yields an overwhelming choice of design from around the world, with an underlying message that it's acceptable to strive to be different – and the more interesting the better.

Luckily for Michelle, the explosion of media has reinforced the importance of her work as an interior designer.



More Australians, she says, are turning to design professionals to interpret their ideas, who then work with the architects and builders to see if their plans can be built within their budget.

'I am seeing that homeowners are becoming more adventurous,' Michelle says. 'I have such a mix of clients from different cultures and backgrounds, and I have learnt that everyone uses their kitchens and bathrooms differently.'

As an industry professional and experienced public speaker, Michelle is well placed to comment on industry movements, and is currently noticing a welcome change that values the contribution of interior design.

'I even think that builders and developers are finally realising the positive difference a qualified interior designer can bring to their team. Too often builders thought we were in competition to their building designer or architect. Thankfully, that mindset seems to be shifting.'

With the benefit of experience, Michelle is confident to put her ideas forward if she feels the project is moving away from the design brief or towards a solution that may not suit the client's lifestyle.

'After all, my company is called Designing Divas and we look after our clients,' she says. 'We strive for the very best for their home, in terms of functionality and style.'

Today, Michelle says she's happy to keep her business small, but successful, with a strategy to continue promoting a high quality service.

'Not compromising on design or professional fees means the interior design industry will continue to gain pace as an integral part of the building and renovation process.' **H**

