



## SPARKING JOY — ALEXANDRA DONOHOE CHURCH OF DECUS

Words by Jessica Bellef • Photography by Dave Wheeler and Anson Smart

Dozing off in a landscape architecture lecture at the University of New South Wales in the early 2000s, Alexandra Donohoe Church realised a career filled with soil and plants was not for her. A quick pivot to an interior architecture degree set her on the path to establishing the award-winning Sydney design studio Decus, which now comprises 13 staff and a hefty portfolio of high-profile residential design.

**T**he degree switch also represented a full-circle moment that brought Alexandra back to her childhood curiosity for interiors. “When I was younger, my mother would drag me from one antique store to another, and I would rearrange my room all the time. From a really young age, I was fascinated with how spaces made you feel,” says the designer.

After graduation, Alexandra worked for notable architectural practices and discovered her passion for the residential realm. The arrival of the GFC led to her redundancy but also presented an exciting now-or-never sliding door moment. “I could either go and work for someone else, or I could have a crack and make a go at it. Those first three-to-five years of my business were really galvanising,” Alexandra explains. Hustling through the down times gave the designer a thick skin and a growth mindset. “When you have to think laterally about where to find projects and paying clients, you approach it from a different place than when the work freely flows towards you,” she says.





Monsieur G (left) and Ultramarine (right) encapsulate Decus's joy-filled approach to interior design.

Decus has evolved into a full service studio since officially launching in 2009, but Alexandra's dedication to cultivating positive relationships with aligned people has remained a constant. "We want to feel joy doing it," she explains. "My email signature is 'spark some bloody joy' because that's genuinely how we want to operate." Alexandra cannot overstate the importance of knowing clients on an almost psychoanalytical level to deliver a truly personalised outcome. The biggest trick, she says, is understanding what people value. "Some people value quality, and some value aesthetics, or how things function. If you can get to the bottom of that and then work out how the client likes to be communicated with, the rest is easy."

A Decus interior turns expectations on their head, inviting serendipity and coaxing delight. It is where traditional detailing meets contemporary materiality, and intricate, highly crafted junctures ground sweeping sculptural gestures. Bespoke and beguiling, each individualised outcome is lush with a sense of rebellious creative freedom.

The artful manifestation of a Decus architectural shell is met with an equally curated approach to the decoration. Alexandra's urge to hunt and gather the unexpected and untapped gives each project an authentically

unique feel. International sourcing trips and atelier visits are crucial. "We've been doing a lot with Australia-based folks, but we are keen to spread out and work with more makers and artists overseas. Trips will be far more frequent now that we can travel again," says Alexandra. The globally-minded team has its sights on launching a satellite studio abroad, the location of which is yet to be confirmed.

The worldly inflection of a Decus interior is owed to an approach that encourages curiosity and experimentation, overlaid with academic and instinctive design knowledge. This creatively charged proposition is reflective of the Australian design landscape at large. "We aren't beholden to a particular aesthetic here, unlike the English or French, who have a long line of design DNA that they subscribe to," Alexandra reflects. "We don't have that in the same way – we can make up our own design language."

As a homegrown industry leader that is also forging a reputation overseas, Decus continues to build a powerful design vernacular that resists categorisation. The client's personal story and a humanist energy celebrating living well are at the root of their every expression. As Alexandra says, "it's about sparking as much joy as you can, in the little moments as well as the big."

