

STORY **DAVID MEAGHER**

Like the gardens he creates, the career of top landscape designer William Dangar's has flourished, as he reaps what he sowed 30 years ago with 'a little lawnmowing business'

# ROOT & BRANCH



MICHAEL WEE



Despite having an interest in many businesses, Dangar is a true collaborator, and in his interview with WISH he continually referred to people in his field he admires and others who have helped him along the way. First among them is his wife Julia, who convinced him to make that move to Sydney and got him started in gardening. Another is the landscape designer Marcia Hosling, whom he worked with for four years, implementing her designs. “She did all the creative work and I did all the physical work,” says Dangar. Then there’s Eric Matthews, a former editor of *Belle Magazine*, who Dangar says inspired the creative side of his work and who gave him the self-belief that he could go out on his own. And William Clifton, an apprentice carpenter he met on a job and with whom he founded the Robert Plumb line of businesses.

All the associated businesses, Dangar says, have been started out of necessity and/or a way of keeping all aspects of the design and construction of gardens and houses in the same like-minded family as the right business partners came along. “We’ve just organically morphed into a few different things over the past three decades,” he says. The process has given him multiple income streams, and despite its size it has freed him to concentrate on his first love: garden design and consultancy. And it’s the one part of his work, he says, he will never let go.

“It’s a very rare day when I don’t enjoy my job,” he says. “The hardest part of my business is telling people that unfortunately I can’t work for them; we just can’t fit everyone in. The consultancy work is fixed, and as soon as we scale up my involvement in the projects diminishes, and I want to be involved in the design of all our projects to varying degrees. Nothing leaves our office without me approving it, and I don’t mean that in a controlling way. It’s just that I want our clients to know that although I might not be intimately involved in every aspect of their project, I have overseen it and approved it.”

The company structure has also given Dangar the means to indulge his other passion: architecture. “Julia and I love renovating and having our own building company has connected us into a wonderful network of creatives,” he says. “Some of the houses we live in, some we Airbnb and some we sell.” One house the Dangars decided to hold on to – but not live in – is the multi award-winning Bismarck House in Bondi, which is available for short-term holiday rentals. The house was designed by Andrew Burgess Architects and is one half of a pair of semis in a fairly unloved part of Bondi. A laneway runs alongside, and the genius of Burgess and Dangar’s collaboration is that, although the house is on a small and narrow block, they have created a true urban oasis that blurs the line between indoor and outdoor space. “We always look to buy properties that are on the corner because we want to showcase what we do,” says Dangar.

“I’ve been friends with Andrew for many years. His parents were clients of mine, and I just rang him up and I said I want you to do this project for Julia and I but there is one caveat,” recalls Dangar. “It can’t be like anything you’ve done before.” Dangar says he and Julia are very attached to the house and will hold on to it, and that the experience of collaborating with so many of his favourite creatives – stylist David Harrison and his wife, author and design expert Karen McCartney, as well as Burgess – was so rewarding that he is looking for similar projects to sink his teeth into.

Together with Clifton, Dangar owns a parcel of land in Oberon in the central tablelands of NSW. It was once a pine forest, and the pair are currently in the early stages of a conservation plan for the site. “What shape and form our vision for Oberon takes we’re not quite sure at this stage,” says Dangar. “We would like to build a series of interesting tiny architect-designed houses for ecotourism. That’s the plan, but it’s very early days. Basically, we’re not doing anything with it now because we don’t have the money, but we will save up for that. It’s a 10-year project and I think that will probably see me out.”

When it comes to creating a new home from the ground up, a client today engages the services not only of an architect but also often an interior designer and a landscape designer as well, to ensure the three elements combine into a whole greater than its parts. Dangar, however, is not just interested in working with some of Australia’s leading architects for the sake of it.

“I love architecture, but I’m more interested in how it interfaces with the landscape,” he says. “It doesn’t matter so much the size of the budget or the project, all that matters is the client’s willingness to do something interesting, and the relationship between the built form and the landscape needs to be balanced from the beginning. So many people are looking to maximise the floorspace ratio of the built form to the detriment of the landscape, and on very few of our projects have people asked to make the house smaller because they want a bigger garden.”



Clockwise from top left: Hunter Valley garden; house in Bellevue Hill; two views of landscaping for a Mollymook property on the NSW South Coast; interior of Bismarck House, Bondi; Barangaroo House; pool and garden in Vaucluse

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