

DESIGN INTERIORS

The transformer

Yasmine Ghoniem's bold makeover of an anonymous '90s build has design circles swooning, writes **Stephen Todd**.

Sitting fireside with Yasmine Ghoniem in the house she recently completed in Sydney's windswept Dover Heights, it feels like we're on the set of a super chic TV chat show. (I'm trying to restrain my inner Graham Norton, aiming more for an Ellen kind of vibe.)

Ghoniem, the reigning "It girl" of interior design – having won three Australian Interior Design Awards in May – is enthroned on a sculptural Utrecht armchair, designed by Gerrit Rietveld in 1935 and an icon of modernism to this day. Me, I'm on the couch.

I had wanted to meet here because it's this home, known as Budge Over Dover, that garnered Ghoniem her most recent accolades (and saw her shortlisted for three more). Frankly, it's not hard to see why.

While the house itself is a somewhat anonymous 1990s build, the two-floor interior is astounding in its newfound equilibrium. Poised between the classically modern and the edgily avant-garde, the 160-square-metre ground floor is open plan but subtly articulated as a series of discrete zones.

From the entrance, views now flow straight through to a patio, pool and garden; between front door and backyard are an airy lounge area to the right (where we're seated) then a large central entertaining area, open kitchen further on the left, and a breakfast nook occupying the opposite corner, delineated by bespoke booth seating in plushly padded leather.

It's one of those interiors that feels simultaneously futuristic and as if it might always have been there. I'm wondering what the designer's first thoughts were on walking into the previous incarnation?

"Get rid of everything!" she laughs, joking-not-joking. "It was endless terrazzo throughout, with non-supporting walls on the ground floor creating a lot of confusion. I don't typically come into a property and proclaim my vision, but in this case it was clear that we needed to start afresh."

That meant removing interior walls to restore the integrity of the ground-floor volume. It's a tactic designers regularly resort to when trying to find clarity in a space. But it's what Ghoniem did next that marks this as an interior apart.

She decided to raise a section of floor by 12 centimetres, and lower a corresponding ceiling section by 30 centimetres, in effect creating an inner pavilion. It's a quietly dramatic gesture, completed by slender



white columns in a supporting role, handmade terracotta tiling laid as a stage. The effect is evocative of Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion, a performative but rational box within a broader "landscape".

Adding to a sense of textural depth, the ceiling of the dining area is finished in hand-trowelled plaster pigmented a precise tint of baby aubergine. "I literally took an aubergine to the paint shop and said, 'Mix me this,'" says Ghoniem.

Walls in the lounge are likewise pigmented in satiny plaster, in a hazy eucalyptus green; the effect is echoed upstairs in the master suites – his a moody verdigris, hers a dusty mauve.

The curvaceous, hemp-rendered fireplace is designed by Ghoniem, as is the surrounding concrete perch and integrated bookcase. In fact, much of the furniture and almost all the fittings are custom-designed by Ghoniem for this house.

"If someone doesn't want me to design the furniture and fittings for their interior, they might as well move on," she shrugs. "For me, it's about creating a unique interior, not simply styling some rooms."

Back to the chat show: Where was she born? In Kuwait, to an Egyptian father and an Australian mother.

What did she want to be when she grew up? A performer: "As a child I loved to sing, and I took dancing lessons from the age of four." She had her heart set on fronting a band. "But that wasn't something you were meant to do in my family, which was a very strict Muslim household," she says. "I was



meant to marry into the faith, but that wasn't going to happen."

Instead, she enrolled at the Savannah College of Art & Design in the United States, "as a way of getting out of the Middle East".

"If I couldn't become a performer, the next best thing I could think to do was to be an artist. But then that wouldn't have given me the kind of qualifications I needed to emigrate, so I decided to study interior architecture."

After jobbing at American architectural practices large and small, then working as a

Yasmine Ghoniem created an airy lounge area with a curved wall over the fireplace, above, and walls pigmented in eucalyptus green. Upstairs the colour scheme is moody verdigris for him and dusty mauve for her, left and above left. PHOTOS: PRUE RUSCOE



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Yasmine Ghoniem

volunteer in Kenya and Vietnam, Ghoniem migrated to Australia just over a decade ago.

She began taking on freelance design work, moonlighting at night with her band The Conversations – Ghoniem on throaty vocals, brother Ben on acoustic guitar, playing with a cousin and some friends.

Of their 2012 EP, *The Conversations We Never Had*, Triple J music critic Nick Findlay wrote that the group ticks "the nu-folk box pretty nicely. There's a simple, haunting property to these songs which draws you in."

But possibly not as much as Ghoniem's interior designs do.

She set up the Amber Road studio in 2013 with another sibling, half-sister Katy Svalbe, a landscape designer.

For seven years, the sisters and their tiny team authored some punchy residential and hospitality interiors, including the Garden Room at the Lord Dudley Hotel in Paddington, and the Edition Coffee Roasters eatery at Darling Square.

Earlier this year, the siblings split to set up separate entities, Ghoniem establishing YSG (her middle name is Saleh) on the auspicious date of 20/2/2020.

"It was just time for us to focus our different skills sets," says Ghoniem, noting Svalbe & Co designed the garden of this house, intended to mature as the interior patinas. "I'd like to think that we can design interiors and their surrounds the way Frank Lloyd Wright did, where every element is integral to the whole so that nothing can be removed without compromising the entity."

And that, as they say in the trade, is a wrap. **L&L**

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