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David Hicks' new luxury design tricks

One of Australia's most celebrated interior designers
is taking on the world one luxury apartment
and boutique resort at a time.

David Hicks established his eponymous design studio in 2001, taking on projects such as the Port Melbourne penthouse (facing page).

Renowned Australian interior designer David Hicks is one of the country's finest when it comes to high-rolling luxury homes and lavish apartments. The modern maestro, who has worked on projects in Asia, the USA and the Middle East, has spent the past 18 years building a portfolio that's the envy of his competitors.

From mansions in the Hollywood Hills to multimillion-dollar penthouses in Melbourne, his thirst for modern design, an understanding of vintage quality pieces and an appetite for chic minimalism has proven a winning formula for the 44-year-old perfectionist.

Hicks has an eye for detail, doesn't fuss over trends and keeps his storytelling chic and eternally optimistic. There's a soft spot for marble, an appreciation for clean lines and artwork is dotted in his final vision but never dictates the storyline. There's bold antique lust and mid-century curiosity in all he does—but just how they meet is the secret to his luxury success.

Born in Darwin in 1974 [the year tropical Cyclone Tracy devastated the Australian city on Christmas eve], it was mere luck that Hicks wasn't asleep in his cot at home at the time—instead he was with his parents and older sister in Perth visiting family for the festive season.

His family relocated to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia the following year and lived there until Hicks was nine years old. His father Ray had been working with a concrete pipe manufacturer in Darwin when it was wiped out by the cyclone and helped move the business to Asia thereafter.

Being raised in the tropics certainly informed his design aesthetic—and while not immediately obvious—there's a subtle line that can be drawn, explains Hicks.

Growing up in an expatriate community in Malaysia, Hicks tells of becoming friends with the son of a British high commissioner and spending an afternoon sitting on the porch of their old white colonial mansion eating scones and fairy bread.

"It was a surreal and amazing time. I remember his family had a silver Rolls-Royce pick us up after school one day and whisk us back to his family home for afternoon tea. We'd wait under the car port at school until the drivers turned up and called out our names," recalls Hicks.

His mother Gail was an architectural draughtsperson before she married and always maintained an eye for design and detail. She poured her passion into decorating their family home in Kenny Hills—where decorative screens and a wraparound verandah left an impression.

"Living in Malaysia definitely influenced me, but not so much directly, it was more about being influenced by how mum decorated it," says Hicks, who heads a firm in Melbourne.

"We had a '70s home, sort of like a version of a Californian bungalow. It was sprawling and all on one level. There were terrazzo floors and plenty of open spaces. It was very clean and simple architecture and mum decorated with an eclectic mix of items from Persian rugs to Malaysian antiques and contemporary '70s sofas with pieces of the time. A lot of my interest in mixing styles came from her," he says. "I loved the house I grew up in. It was very rigid and an organised space. In Asian design, everything is aligned and you have plenty of clear pathways. I think it's fair to say I channel that regiment in my own and the decorative component from mum."

When his family returned to Australia in 1983, his mother opened an art gallery in Fitzroy. He was also reunited with his sister who had been in a boarding school in Melbourne. Being surrounded by his mother's passion for art and conversations around design, Hicks knew from a young age he wanted to be an architect. "It was never a case of wanting to be anything else," he says. "Ever since I was a kid I would construct my own elaborate cubby houses. And then when I did work experience in Year 9 at an interiors firm, I started to look at what happens inside as something that appealed to me more."

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Top: the clients' love for France inspired the interiors of this South Yarra apartment.
Bottom: Hicks gave this 1930s mansion on Struan St a complete makeover.

Hicks graduated from RMIT with a bachelor of arts in interior design [honours] in the early 1990s, spent a few years working for others until he decided to open his own firm in 2000.

"My business has slowly evolved over time," says Hicks diplomatically. "When you're younger you take more risks and are more daring in your approach. You also don't care much about the money side of things. It's the naivety that makes you succeed. I felt things started to turn around when I wasn't perceived as the young newcomer anymore. I was happy to move into being seen as a mature and more established business and the work just kept coming in."

His aesthetic leans toward Italian classicism as much as it borrows from Nordic minimalism—it's the converging of both that wins clients.

When an LA client [an actress we can't name] asked Hicks to refurbish her new purchase [and where Hollywood actress Ginger Rogers once lived], he didn't think twice.

The two-level 1920s home in the Hollywood Hills would get the Hicks makeover—where a nod to old-world glamour while remaining mindful of the home's era all informed his final bigger picture.

"They're really into vintage in LA so you find lots of amazing antiques you don't find anywhere else," explains Hicks.

"Working on that home was great because it was a lot looser and I could really have fun with the furniture. The palette was simple and warm and I managed to get a little old Hollywood and modern LA with it."

The home was decorated with artwork by German artist Thomas Wachholz, while pieces from Gucci and Christian Louboutin combined with authentic 1920s vintage furnishings gave it the ultimate starlike sheen.

"Like most homes in the Hollywood Hills, there are a lot of stories about famous people who have lived in them before. While it's a nice story, it's not the crux of my storytelling. You could definitely tell someone creative had lived there prior, but I was about capturing a new vision for it too."

Gili Resort in Lombok, Indonesia is Hicks next pit stop. He is working on a luxury boutique resort where modernism takes a cue from local artisans too. The project, which is due to be completed next year, was delayed due to the earthquake that struck the tiny island in August. Luckily, none of the concrete build of the resort was affected, but many homes were devastated and the locals were impacted by the tragedy.

"There aren't many luxury places to stay on this island, so the resort is a nice segue into a remote way of life with all the beautiful trimmings," says Hicks. "The resort is all about delivering upmarket villas with marble floors but is respectful to its environment. We have *alung alung* woven ceilings and woven wallpaper and handmade terrazzo flooring that we're getting from the locals. It's a place for people who don't want to rough it, but want to go somewhere only accessible by boat. There are no cars on the island and you get around by donkey and cart. It's a unique experience people are waiting for."

Meanwhile, back in Melbourne, Hicks is working on Albert Place with Gurner, where 120 luxury apartments will be built on the banks of Albert Park Lake [home of the Australian Grand Prix]. But instead of designing all the apartments, Hicks has been called in to work on 20 of the prestigious penthouse suites which start at AUD5 million, while the most expensive sits at AUD20 million and comes with a pool.

"People are buying into a lifestyle, it's not just a home they want anymore and they're willing to spend a lot for the experience," says Hicks of the demand for luxury.

His clients include wealthy families from Singapore, Malaysia and China who send their children to Australia to study.

"A lot of our apartment refurbishment work on St Kilda Road, Melbourne is coming from families who send their children abroad. They want a base for their children, somewhere nice with a view and a luxurious apartment that

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Eclecticism is the order of the day, emphasising the relaxed, informal aspect of coastal living at this beach house in Portsea on the Mornington Peninsula.

they would be accustomed to in Singapore,” explains Hicks. “Luxury is a very big market for us. These apartments are bigger than houses and it’s a sign that people are willing to pay anything if it’s giving them the lifestyle they want.”

In Dubai, the demand for bling is even bigger—and with a brief that covers contemporary, classic and Middle Eastern-inspired themes, Hicks has come up with three concepts for residential homes which will be sold via display home suites and sold to multimillionaires.

“Dubai is where it’s at for premium luxury,” says Hicks. “This is very high end where AUD15 million homes are being built by the hundreds. We don’t have to think of budgets, it’s amazing to get to work in this space and see that the demand is there and people won’t settle for anything less. This is where developers come up with concepts for multi-residential apartments and homes and engage teams of architects and interior designers worldwide. It’s an exciting format to work in—and proof you don’t need to be in the same city to make things happen.” ■