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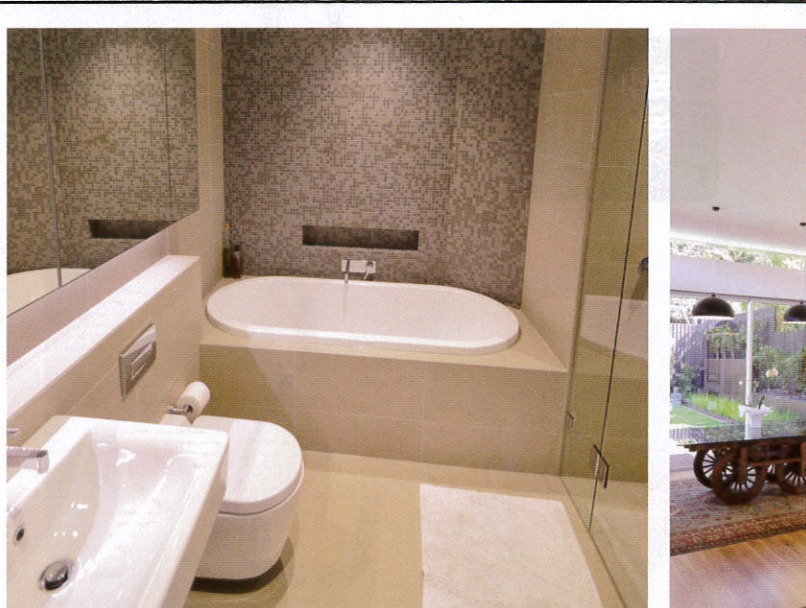
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Building *the* dream

Mittagong builder Mark Dobson is making a name for himself in million-dollar renovations, with three Dobsonei projects featuring on Channel 7's *Australia's Best Houses*. He tells MELISSA REID about the company he named after a dragonfly discovered by his grandfather

I**N 2005, HAVING JUST WRAPPED UP THE PROJECT OF HIS** career, Mark Dobson decided it was time to go out on his own. He had overseen the fit-out of nine floors for Deutsche Bank in the 35-storey Sydney high-rise designed by British architect Norman Foster ("with the goal posts at the top"). "It was a \$25 million fit-out with ceilings from Germany, bespoke dealing desks from Italy ... and it won the Royal Australian Institute of Architects' national award for best interior architecture for Bligh Voller Nield Architects. It was a very rewarding job. "After that, doing smaller fit-outs for (my employer) Lend Lease didn't seem so exciting – I wanted to do something for myself." So in 2006, Mark bravely launched his project management company, Dobsonei. Then along came the GFC.

The Global Financial Crisis dealt a crushing blow to the building industry, and Mark was lucky to have one stable job to help him weather it. For seven years he has worked on *Treeview*, a 140-home retirement village at Lithgow, modelled on Bowral's *Annesley* and designed by the same architects. Initially he project



managed its development and tendered to other builders; now he is also the builder and will do another 14 homes this year.

In 2010, he did a \$400,000 renovation in Paddington and suddenly business was on the up. Along came bigger jobs in suburbs such as Clovelly and Gladesville, then a cracker at Lavender Bay. The \$1.4 million detailed renovation led to more work with the architects (Corben Architects), and this year Mark will renovate two more multi-million dollar Mosman homes designed by the firm.

Mark moved to Mittagong in 2008 to live with his partner Fiona Holmwood, and the couple are slowly renovating an old weatherboard. Dobsoni builds in the Highlands (one large job was the Bowral Target fit-out) but high-end jobs keep coming up in Sydney, so Mark frequently commutes. He now employs Fiona's brother David Sell as his construction manager, a full-time carpenter and apprentice

in Sydney and a sub-contractor in Lithgow. He regularly uses 50 to 60 sub-contractors.

"It's been amazing, because in what was probably the hardest four years building has been through in NSW, my business grew from a \$400,000 turnover to a \$4 to \$5 million turnover", says Mark. "It's happened because people like what we do."

"I'm quite emotional about what I do as a builder. Some people

THIS PAGE: DOBSONEI'S RENOVATION OF THIS 1880S TERRACE AT LAVENDER BAY APPEARED ON AUSTRALIA'S BEST HOUSES LATE LAST YEAR. "WE STRIPPED THE WHOLE HOUSE, BUILT A MODERN EXTENSION AND RESTORED THE OLD PART TO ITS ORIGINAL CONDITION," SAYS MARK. THE TEAM: DAVID SELL, FIONA HOLMWOOD AND MARK DOBSON. **OPPOSITE PAGE:** EXTERIOR AND INTERIOR SHOTS OF A FOUR-STORY MOSMAN RENOVATION COMPLETED LAST APRIL FOR \$1.6 MILLION.



think you have to be very hard in this business but I see it as being about communication and talking through solutions. I speak to the people at *Treeview* three or four times a day. It's all about open communication. I want people to feel happy to recommend me."

The owners of three of his projects selected for *Australia's Best Houses* late last year were clearly happy praising his work. Homes at Clovelly, Lavender Bay and Mosman were filmed for the Channel 7 series.

The Clovelly renovation involved a bungalow duplex in a very tight location, where Dobsonei knocked down the back of the house and built a two-storey extension. "When the clients showed us everything they wanted, including wardrobes from a Louis Vuitton brochure, we said it would come to \$1.1 million. They had a budget of \$600,000 and we were still able to build something pretty special for that."

The Lavender Bay project was a renovation of an 1880s terrace with stunning views of the Opera House and Harbour Bridge. "It had barely been touched since it was built", says Mark. "The attic was covered in bird poo and an internal staircase had stickers saying, 'Don't walk on this'. We stripped the whole house, built a modern extension and restored the old part to its original condition.

"One of the biggest challenges was a long window in the extension that wrapped around a corner, and the windows slide back to become an open space. The architect had never done anything like it so we had to come up with how to build this thing.

"Every day with building is about finding solutions. With the first Mosman house (finished last April for \$1.6 million) the logistics were phenomenal. It was an old weatherboard, four storeys high, with a kidney-shaped pool in the backyard and a mound of rock. They wanted us to level the whole backyard so we had to excavate everything and take it down four floors."

Mark also does smaller projects and says he would like Dobsonei's reputation to be founded on high quality rather than high-end. "I'm building a studio in the backyard for myself that is going to be amazing – and it can be done cheaply. You don't have to use the



most expensive marble or the most expensive finishes. Depending on the stone or timber or finishes you use, it can be a \$200,000 or a \$300,000 build and look largely the same."

Mark started his career as a carpenter, doing an apprenticeship with Perisher Skitube. He grew up moving around the country from Perth to Sydney, Canberra and Cooma. His dad made pine furniture and built houses everywhere the family moved. Mark helped him build at Cooma and Jindabyne.

During his apprenticeship, he competed in the 1993 World Skills Australia finals and came seventh in the country in carpentry. He got his builder's licence at 21 and did a degree in property economics at Hawkesbury Agricultural College (now the University of Western Sydney).



Mark worked for Huxley Homes and Built before moving to London where he worked for Bovis Lend Lease on major commercial projects. He was one of 45 management staff on the nine-storey Sainsbury headquarters, “one of the largest fit-outs done in the fastest time in London”. “They spent £70 million over nine months, so it was an amazing experience.” He went on to fit out an advertising company opposite Harrod’s and to work on the Lloyds TSB headquarters. The experience was fantastic, he says, but he missed Australia and returned, setting up his company a few years later.

He called it Dobsonei (pronounced Dobson-E-I) after a dragonfly discovered by his grandfather. “My grandfather was a naturalist who studied dragonflies and birds and there’s a dragonfly named after him at the CSIRO called Dobsonei. So that’s on my logo. I liked the idea of a family connection; it’s less predictable than Dobson Constructions and everyone asks, “What does it mean?”

Mark runs another company called The Building Coach, where he provides advice to people embarking on the design and building process, and he also studies law part-time – although

THIS PAGE: THE CLOVELLY RENOVATION HAD A BUDGET OF \$600,000 “AND WE WERE STILL ABLE TO BUILD SOMETHING PRETTY SPECIAL FOR THAT”, SAYS MARK. IT INCLUDED THE ADDITION OF A SLICK TWO-STORY EXTENSION. **OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** THE LAVENDER BAY HOUSE FEATURES STUNNING VIEWS OF SYDNEY HARBOUR FROM THE MASTER BEDROOM; THE LAVENDER BAY BATHROOM; THE MASTER BEDROOM AT CLOVELLY.

he’s not sure how he’ll keep fitting it in. Fiona helps with Donsonei’s paperwork but is also a high school teacher, and life revolves around three girls, Skye, 12, Peggy, 9, and Gabby, 5.

Unsurprisingly, their home renovations are taking a while, as Mark is doing the building himself on weekends. He still loves carpentry and occasionally puts the nail bag on at work to make sure everything’s on track. “The biggest benefit for me is that my carpentry skills are rock solid. Helping dad in those early years too has just stayed with me.

“But I couldn’t do carpentry every day any more. What I love about my job is that every day is different. Yesterday I was speaking to clients in Lithgow and picking up tiles, tomorrow I’m meeting a client in Mosman. Every day is finding solutions.” 