



# Whitehouse looks to re-invention and excitement

Leanne Whitehouse sets standards, and shatters them, in Sydney and now Melbourne, writes **Hannah Tattersall**.

Line, direction, colour, shape, portion, symmetry, tone, texture, repetition and gradation. Interaction of these elements and principles forms design's backbone.

But today, designers are also expected to take risks and the difference between a good designer and a great one will often be their capacity to break rules, says the founder of the Whitehouse Institute of Design, Leanne Whitehouse.

"There were rules, these awful, awful rules which now of course are all broken," says Whitehouse, whose Sydney institute celebrates its 20th anniversary this year. The Melbourne institute was opened this year.

Rules such as "blue and green should not be seen without a colour in between", or navy and black should never be worn together, were taught to Whitehouse when she studied fashion design.

"In the early '70s and late '60s there were very, very specific trends that said it was that length, and it was that silhouette and it was that sleeve," she says. "Now every designer does exactly what they want and it varies so that every designer is producing something that is unique."

After 18 years as a student and teaching in the TAFE system and a stint as acting head of the fashion design department at East Sydney Tech, Perth-born Whitehouse opened her institute in 1988 in Sydney.

"In the staffroom [at EST], all of us talked about starting our own school," she says.

"I'd written all the courses and I literally had \$1300. I put one ad in *Cleo* and I generated 25 phone calls from that one ad and 24 people paid me their deposits and said: 'We're coming, we're coming to your school'."

The old building still stands in Sydney, hidden among the Chinese and Korean restaurants that mark the start of Chinatown.

The Sydney school has 300 full-time students and 1000 part-time students. Fifty-five educators teach across three disciplines: fashion design, interior design, and styling and creative direction.

Whitehouse says she has always loved Melbourne and has been

wanting to set up a school there for a while. It was just a matter of waiting for the right time and the right space. The Melbourne Whitehouse Institute of Design has been open since May and will begin full-time teaching next year. At the moment, Whitehouse spends half her week in Sydney and half in Melbourne.

The Melbourne building is shiny, modern and luxurious and houses a sewing room and runway for students to work with. The hallway walls are painted mustard and mulberry, and lime-coloured couches rest on the mottled carpet. The Australian version of *Project Runway* was filmed there earlier this year and the fourth-year students' show during Melbourne Spring Fashion Week attracted 400 people.

But getting there wasn't a walk in the park. In the months preceding the opening, a truck travelling along Bourke street hit a fire hydrant in front of the building. A massive spout of water

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burst eight storeys into the air and flooded the fourth and fifth floors.

It happened on the day they removed the roof.

"I was in Sydney that day when they rang to tell me and I just burst into laughter," says Whitehouse. "We had to jackhammer up the entire floor."

Thankfully the school reveals no lingering signs of catastrophe. The private institution has just been approved for the government FEE-HELP program, meaning students can borrow money for their course as they do in publicly funded universities.

Fashion in Australia is a \$14 billion industry and more than 2000 companies export fashion overseas. More Australian designers are being recognised



Clockwise from top: fashion design by student Sonia Bennett; light design by stylist student Bradley Preston; Whitehouse favourite and graduate fashion designer Yeojin Bae. Photos courtesy Whitehouse Institute of Design, Steve Piniro.

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internationally, including Akira Isogawa, Collette Dinnigan, Sass & Bide, Willow and Jenny Kee.

Shandor Gancs from fashion brand Leopold says: "There are so many reality TV shows now about fashion and designer stuff that it's kind of like the new thing to do, the cool job to have.

"I think there are quite a few people who are now aspiring to be designers but unfortunately I think they have a romanticised view of what it is. When they get into it and find out how hard it is, they might think otherwise."

Whitehouse says Australian design will always be influenced by Europe and what designers are doing there but she says new design is about reinventing existing practices.

"Fashion really evolves from historical context . . . what designers did last season, last year, five years ago, 10 years ago and right back through time," Whitehouse says.

"And that is the basis of all

education in design, and then it's the reinvention of and the marriage of different components to create something new."

Whitehouse says those rare, special items are the ones that make her stop and gasp.

"That factor when you see something that is beautiful, that grabs your heart," she says.

"Your heart starts fluttering and you lose the blood from your face, and you have that wonderful, hysterical and emotional reaction to how beautiful something is."

But how do you teach that wow factor?

"There are certainly formulas for understanding that and then there's the complexity of that reinvention and that excitement. But it's the excitement which is of course always married with fantastic technical skills of pattern making and construction."

Whitehouse says the technical



side is something the institute has never lost sight of over the past 20 years.

An ex-Whitehouse School of Design student with that special combination of technical skills and creativity is Melbourne-based Yeojin Bae, a favourite of Whitehouse's.

Bae was in the first group of students who started at the school in 1988.

Her svelte designs for women saw her pick up the Tiffany's Young Designer award in 2007 and have been bought by Myer. They were shown in the Myer Spring Racing Parade at Flemington.

"I've met a lot of designers in my time and I've met many who can talk about it and many who can't do it," says Whitehouse.

"Talking about it is part of the process, however ultimately people are going to buy the garment and you have to be able to not only talk about it but translate that into product."

Design by fashion student Alison Davis. Photo courtesy Whitehouse Institute of Design