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Alicia Ferrer

Sea change

A career change to landscape design three years ago has proven to be the right choice for Alicia Ferrer, winner of the Don Fleming Student Landscape Design Award at the 2009 Melbourne International Flower and Garden Show (MIFGS), writes Alexandra Jackson.

On the back of her triumph at the 2009 MIFGS, former interior designer and graduate of landscape design Alicia Ferrer has launched a design company that showcases her winning formula of contemporary design with a minimalist edge.

Alicia's 10-year career in interior design heavily influenced her winning landscape last year. The eye-catching structure and containers mass-planted with swathes of *Acacia cognata* 'Limelight', *Hydrangea macrophylla* 'Blushing Bride', *Lomandra* 'Lime Wave' and *Pieris japonica* 'Sarabande' created a soothing multifunctional zone.

Alicia approaches landscape design with an architect's analysis of the available space. For Alicia, the potential lies not only in the horizontal plane but also in the vertical. She is especially influenced by modern architecture, citing the adventurous geometrical designs of contemporary architect Zaha Hadid as her favourites.

The seed is planted

Growing up in a town close to Spain's Valencia, Alicia dreamt of becoming an architect, but practicality drove her to interior design, as Spanish architecture courses take an average of nine years to complete. Her interior design took her from Valencia to Paris, then to Sydney and finally to Perth.

Once Alicia felt settled in her new home, she began to question her career trajectory. Desiring a more autonomous job and keen to make the most of a climate similar to that of her childhood, she considered a change.

While relaxing on a holiday in Bali her decision was crystallised. "I love the relaxed atmosphere of the tropics and I find endless inspiration in places like Bali – from its traditional to contemporary elements," says Alicia. "We all want to relax in our gardens, so why don't we do it in style? I thought that by designing gardens I could contribute to a better environment."

The lush plants of the tropics were her initial inspiration and love, but after her first year of studying horticulture on Australian soil, native plants took her fancy. "I really believe that we can mix 'key exotic plants' with certain Australian natives to create [many garden styles with] outstanding results".

The inclusion of built elements in her designs is a nod to her love of architecture. Alicia believes that as backyards shrink, their use will come to the fore. By incorporating the vertical plane, she pushes the boundaries of surface area and has more space to be adventurous with plant choice – creating an oasis in limited space. "My interior design background allows me to mix and match textures, volumes and colour with confidence. I like the idea of creating a place that evolves as seasons and years go by. I find it very poetic."

Down to business

Alicia's own design company, Kokatu Design, blends exteriors and interiors, creating multifunctional areas that are both designated garden landscapes and functional spaces in which to live and work.

Her business's philosophy mirrors her own attitude to work, and explains the thinking behind her change of career. After years of sitting at a computer all day long using desktop programs to design interior spaces, Alicia is now able to enjoy the practical application of design as well. Although she still needs to sit at a computer to create a plan, the manifestation of that plan happens outside.

Alicia thinks of design much like an artist would, with her long-term goal to "design a garden installation – entirely a work of art with my own signature patterns and elements". Until that opportunity arises, she already finds herself inundated with adventurous clients wanting to embrace her design ethic. Alicia's determination and love of garden design will serve her well as she is propelled towards achieving her dreams.



Above: Tropical Chill-out was a garden designed for Perth Garden Week in April 2009. It featured a romantic hideaway and drought hardy cordylines and bamboo.

Below: The show garden for MIFGS featured a gleaming white frame with matching accoutrements. It was a strongly contemporary design with a leisure theme.

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALICIA FERRER AND DERYN THORPE