



Branching out

How Sarah Straker-Williams' advertising background influenced her decision to add interior design to her repertoire of skills.

For the majority of industrialised history, workers have been pressured to choose a single career path, train up and then stick with that decision – for better or for worse – for the rest of their working lives. But in a quickly changing world where technology evolves at breakneck speed, it's become far more common to have varied careers across a number of industries rather than simply climbing up a single corporate ladder. While we have all heard stories of lawyers or doctors trading large paycheques and stressful hours for less demanding work and diminished remuneration, there are also the students who graduate to find out their dream job isn't what they expected it to be, workers who were made redundant, creatives who have broad interests and those who want to challenge themselves with something new. But despite multi-disciplinary professionals – sometimes called 'slashies' – increasing in number, those with a breadth of experience in different fields can still have a tricky time explaining to others how the pieces of their personal puzzle fit together.

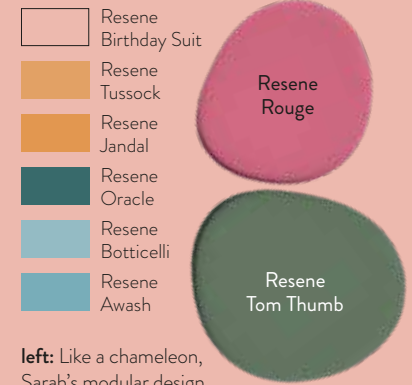
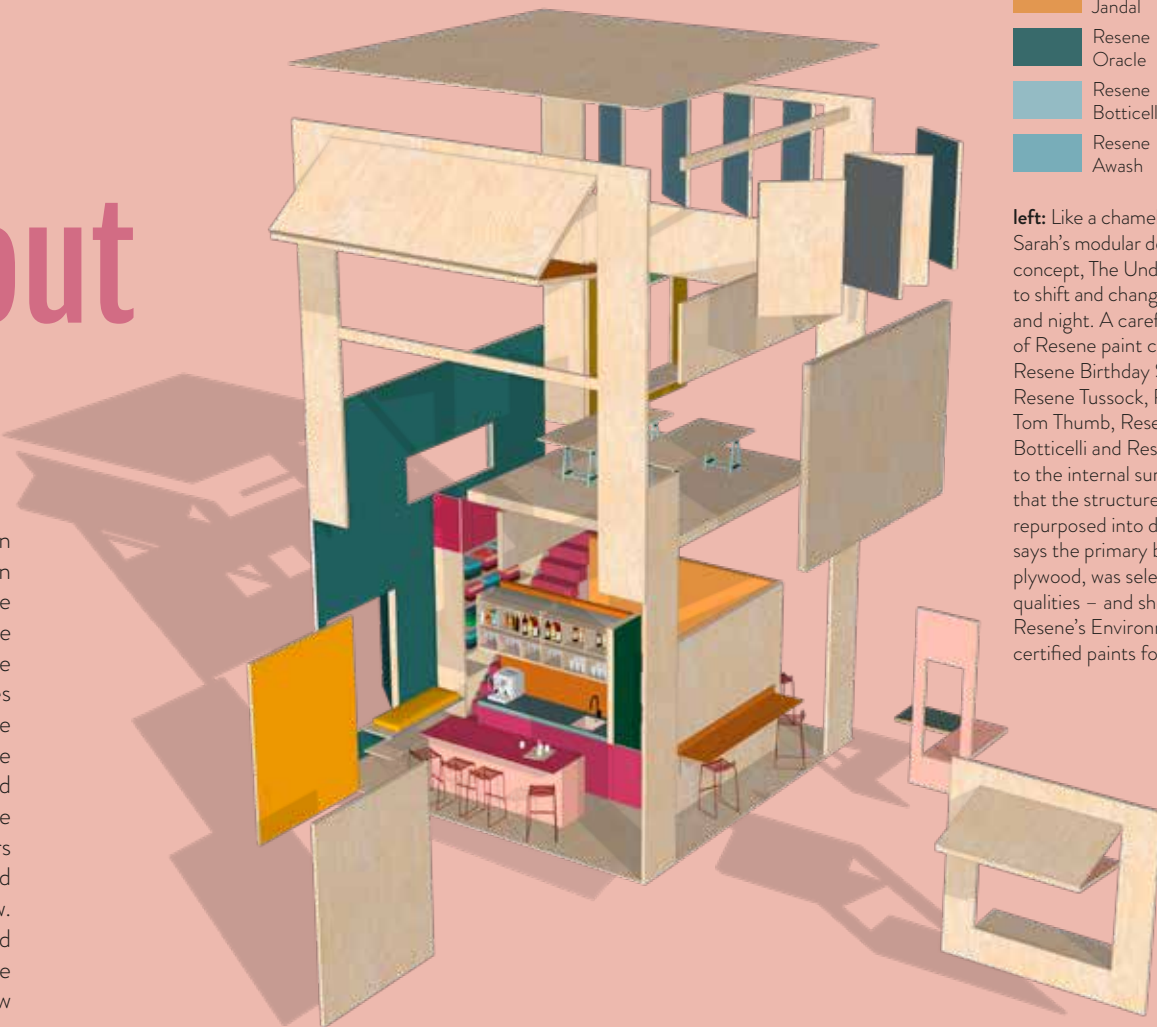
"I always find it hard to answer when someone asks me what I do for a living," says recent Sydney Design School graduate Sarah Straker-Williams. "I am hoping that I can find or create a niche where I fit and I have been experimenting with what that looks like."

Sarah is a woman of many talents and hasn't had a traditional career path. But over the course of her journey, she has been

certain of at least one thing: she knew she wanted to bring design ideas to life. While growing up in Christchurch with a painting contractor for a father and a real estate agent for a mother, Sarah's parents frequently bought, renovated and sold houses, and she believes that has had a significant influence on her. "My mother, in particular, has always had great style and taste – and she would have

made a great interior designer. I guess her abilities have rubbed off on both myself and my younger sister, who is an artist," she says.

After a gap year and a brief stint at Otago University, Sarah attended Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology where she trained to be a graphic designer then landed her first job in Wellington. "Although I thought I would love it, I didn't.



left: Like a chameleon, Sarah's modular design concept, The UnderCover Bistro, is able to shift and change throughout the day and night. A carefully selected palette of Resene paint colours including Resene Birthday Suit, Resene Rouge, Resene Tussock, Resene Jandal, Resene Tom Thumb, Resene Oracle, Resene Botticelli and Resene Awash add energy to the internal surfaces, with a view that the structure can be reused and repurposed into different forms. Sarah says the primary building material, plywood, was selected for its sustainable qualities – and she was drawn to Resene's Environmental Choice-certified paints for the same reason.



Designing annual reports was not what I had signed up for. And back then, graphic design was all print-focused.”

Sarah quit and took a punt on an unpaid internship at Saatchi & Saatchi. Under the mentorship of a couple of advertising legends, she found this type of work better resonated with her. She spent the years that followed working as an Art Director in New Zealand, London and Australia for big agencies like Ogilvy London, DDB, M&C Saatchi and TEQUILA / TBWA.

“One thing that good agencies understand is how much the spaces we inhabit matter; that if you create an inspiring environment to work in, you make people want to be there and you make them feel better. When people feel good, their productivity increases and they create better work. It’s cyclical. In some ways, this was the beginning of my interior design education.”

Sarah recalls working late on a pitch and realising how much the studio’s lighting affected her. “I started noticing all the finishes and materials, observing the joinery details and the impact my surroundings had on me. I was hooked. On weekends in London, I began frequenting design shops. I loved the seasonal windows of Liberty of London, sitting on the many chairs in The Conran Shop and checking out boutiques around Columbia Road.”

A few years later, Sarah moved to Sydney, got married and became a mother but found it a struggle to balance her demanding career with home life. “My husband and I have always strived to be super engaged parents and share the load. But being a mum in advertising with two little boys was challenging,” she says.

“On the eve of the Covid-19 pandemic, I was freelancing for an agency in Pyrmont, helping them work on a pitch. I was told

to pack up my desk, and they armed me with a computer and sent me home. Little did I know, I’d be there for a number of months. At home, it was busy – but I had time to slow down and think, to once again look at the tiny details of life and the spaces we inhabit. I started listening to podcasts about people who are ‘more than one thing’ and being inspired by Antipodean design and architecture studios like Hecker Guthrie, Alexander & Co and Frost Design. I started designing solutions to fix our terrace and quickly realised that, to do it properly, I needed to upskill. So, I took a break from advertising and threw myself into being a student at Sydney Design School.”

Sarah caught the attention of the judges of the Resene Total Colour Awards when she submitted a strong, environmentally-focused concept coloured with a well-curated array of cheerful



above and left: Resene Birthday Suit, Resene Rouge, Resene Tussock, Resene Jandal, Resene Tom Thumb, Resene Oracle, Resene Botticelli and Resene Awash are used strategically to highlight and draw attention to the negative space created when The UnderCover Bistro’s structure is opened. Sarah strategically placed these colours to transform sight lines and highlight the building’s changeable form. The transformative walls have the ability to deliver different colour vignettes depending on where users stand and how they interact with the structure, opening up a rich and rewarding human experience for customers.



and engaging Resene hues. It was evident how much thought had been put into it, and it earned her a Resene Total Colour Rising Star Colour Maestro Award. Dubbed The UnderCover Bistro, Sarah had designed a pop-up restaurant within Carriageworks, a well-known institution in the heart of Sydney's Redfern neighbourhood, as part of a school assignment which would come to life during the city's annual art festival. Her concept was themed around a chameleon – a reptile that famously adapts to its surroundings by changing the colour of its skin. Similarly, her temporary structure transforms, folds and shape-shifts to suit whatever environment and purpose is required of it.

"This project is really close to my heart, and it was the first time I tried to capture all the parts of my background and piece them together – creating a concept, interior, branding and human-centred experience," explains Sarah. "After researching Carriageworks, I learned it was once a coal factory and that the building has changed over the years to suit the times and shifting demographics. For me, there was a nice conceptual thread between a space that has transitioned from a coal factory to a performance space and a farmer's market; that the buildings and land have been evolving over time. The history is colourful and parts of it have faded into the background."

Initially, Sarah considered creating a mirrored structure that would both reflect and blend in, but she instead opted for plywood. "I wanted to steer away from visual clichés and move

with the times, and for me, using sustainable materials was mandatory. I also wanted to create something that did not leave a lasting imprint and, like Carriageworks itself, could develop into something else over time."

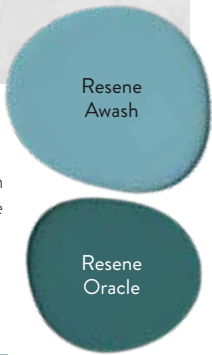
Sarah says she spent hours labouring over the colour choices that would bring character to the pop-up's different components, toying with many different combinations along the way. "I decided to select Resene colours that were both playful and unexpected so that the users would experience the space differently no matter where the modular components were situated. I really enjoyed how the various colour combinations changed the overall feeling of the space. I also managed to source an Eperara Siapidara pendant designed by Alvaro Catalán de Ocón for PET Lamp that perfectly complemented my finalised Resene colour palette. I love how the lamp and paint speak the same colour and design language."

Before getting into the interior design world, Sarah says she had long been admiring Resene from the sidelines. "Since my dad was a painting contractor, he used Resene and used to talk about the quality of their products. Creating colours and naming them is a skill; I love Karen Walker's Resene colour palette and that a fashion designer can switch lanes and produce a harmonious paint collection. That's inspiring to me."

Since graduating, Sarah has continued multi-tasking – freelancing for ad agencies while also designing interiors – and

above: The UnderCover Bistro can be folded up into a plywood box when not in use. When open for business, it springs forth to show off its colourful 'chameleon' skin featuring Resene Birthday Suit, Resene Rouge, Resene Tussock, Resene Jandal, Resene Tom Thumb, Resene Oracle, Resene Botticelli and Resene Awash. When it's closing time, the pop-up restaurant is disassembled and ready to take on another creative form.

	Resene Birthday Suit		Resene Tussock		Resene Botticelli
	Resene Rouge		Resene Jandal		Resene Tom Thumb



she says every day is different. As she looks to further grow the interior design portion of her business, Sarah has been thinking a lot about what her path forward could look like. "I am conjuring up a future that embraces all parts of me, and I am hoping this includes creating conceptual commercial spaces. Rather than force myself into one lane, I have recently learned to embrace that I am more than one thing – an interior designer, graphic designer and art director. My career doesn't have to fit into a perfect little box." **BW**

To learn more about Sarah and her multi-disciplinary work, visit www.straker-williams.com.