



Drifting on a dream to the Drift House

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Drifting down to Port Fairy: former Melbourne couple John Watkinson and Colleen Guiney are the creative minds behind the transformation of an old Port Fairy landmark into the Drift House.

By Carol Altmann

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #8F9F59;"] W [/dropcap]e have all done it: browsed the property pages and found a renovator's delight that prompts you to dream and ask "what if....?"

Except Melbourne couple **John Watkinson** and **Colleen Guiney** didn't just close off their dream by closing the newspaper – and it was only the newspaper then – but took the next, huge step of actually buying the place.

"We had been looking at a couple of properties with a view to setting up luxury accommodation, and this ended up being the right one," Colleen explains.



That property was the prominent, two-storey, historic home (b:1875) on the corner of Gipps and Regent streets, Port Fairy, a once majestic, white-washed stone building that had fallen into disrepair, but has since been spectacularly transformed into the Drift House.



A new life begins: the former 'Riverdale' building, built in 1875, has gone from being derelict to the top luxury accommodation in the south-west. Image: supplied.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #8F9F59;"] T[/dropcap]he house formerly known as "Riverdale", for its proximity to the Moyne River, was owned at that time by well-known locals **Tom and Irene Bartlett** who at one stage operated a gallery on site.

"Tom was a bit of a collector, to say the least, and when we came to look at the place, even though it had been unoccupied for about five years, it was absolutely full of every conceivable thing you could imagine and multiples of those things," John recalls, smiling.

That was eight years ago and when John and Colleen began the slow process of renovating, rebuilding and restoring the house, many of these things came in handy before they were relegated to the skip.

"We would come down on weekends from our place in Richmond and camp out here in the backyard and our boys (Milo, now 10, and Toby, 8) loved it. There were old kettles and toasters, about 14 chairs, six spring base bed sets...and it became their adventure playground," Colleen laughs at the memory.



Looking remarkably like one of Colleen's art works, the restoration of the 'Riverdale' building revealed its many layers from the past 130 years. Image: Supplied.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #8F9F59;"] F [dropcap]ortunately there was also a working shower and flushing toilet, so the family set up a temporary kitchen in what was a brick double garage and spent the next six and a half years developing their dream.

The planning approvals alone through Moyne Shire Council took three years to finalise as it grappled with the contemporary-meets-historic design by Melbourne architects, Multiplicity, who also transformed the double garage into a small residence for the family.

And then there were the inevitable delays and cost blow-outs that come with any grand design.

"I must admit there was a couple of times when I wanted to give up," Colleen says.

"There is no doubt it ended up costing a lot more money than we anticipated and also took a lot more time..but it has been worth it," John adds.



Son Toby enjoys a bit of time out on one of the make-shift lounge chairs during the six year restoration and renovation project. Image: Supplied

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #8F9F59;"] T [/dropcap]he Drift House was finally launched as boutique, luxury accommodation in December 2013 and combines the skills of both John and Colleen perfectly.

While both had only limited experience in running accommodation ("John's parents had a B&B in the

UK and we looked after that for a little while when we were in our 20s,” says Colleen), they have a sharp eye for what works.

John was previously a marketing executive, while Colleen, [who is also a practicing artist](#), worked as a visual merchandiser – a person who styles products to make them appealing if not irresistible.

This potent combination explains why Drift House hit the ground running and has attracted awards, attention and accolades from around Australia and internationally since virtually the day it opened.

It was named best luxury accommodation in the Qantas 2014 Tourism Awards and recently took out the RACV Victorian Tourism Award for Luxury Accommodation for the second year running. It also made the finalist list in the prestigious Smith Hotel Awards 2014.



Colleen and John inside the lounge of the renovated double garage that now serves as their home behind the Drift House.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #8F9F59;"] S [/dropcap]uch was the enormous interest in the building, John and Colleen held an open home so that locals could wander through and take a look at the transformation.

The gold-coin-entry event was so popular, it raised \$3000 for the Port Fairy rail trail.

Its appeal lies not only its funky design (such as slices of retro carpet on doors and fence railings as door handles) and its luxurious interiors, but its walking proximity to all the unique bits of Port Fairy, including the Merrijig Inn, Blarney Books & Art, the Whale Bone gallery, the Stag restaurant and on it goes.



'Deer': one of Colleen's art works that features in her home. Colleen's art is also displayed in parts of the Drift House. Image: Supplied.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #8F9F59;"] T [/dropcap] these are the very parts of Port Fairy

which Colleen and John have come to love and neither misses Melbourne.

“We work seven days a week, and sometimes late hours, but I still get to swim at the beach every day, do yoga or get down to my studio in Port Fairy, and John gets to cycle without having to get up at 5.30am to miss the traffic,” Colleen laughs.

“It’s a pretty good life,” John says, smiling.

[box]You can find the Drift House [on the web here](#). You can also visit Colleen’s visual [art website here](#).[/box]



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Author

carol