

# Tara's design for living

In just her second season with *Our House*, designer Tara Dennis is blooming, like one of her colourful room makeovers. TONY JOHNSTON reports

**P**ETITE and vivacious Tara Dennis has evolved into one of Aussie TV's brightest young things in just a tick over three years in the business.

Since she started out as one of the designing team on *Changing Rooms* in 1998, through to her present gig as the principal designer on *Our House* (Nine, Sunday 7pm), Dennis has grown in stature and confidence.

Fans who have followed her from one show to the other will also have noted a blooming of the lady herself, as well as her talents.

She seems more attractive, more bubbly than ever, a sure sign of professional and domestic contentment.

Has she consciously worked at this transformation?

"There hasn't been any pressure on me at any stage to pay attention to my looks or my weight," she says.

"But, on the other hand, you do begin to think about those things, and you can become a little paranoid about it if you are not careful.

"I certainly don't want to become a messed-up freak."

Dennis has addressed this common side-effect of TV fame by staying focused on her professional skills. The physical transformation is a byproduct of being happy.

As we meet for a chat, she has just completed a painting master class and intends doing another one later in the year.

"I like to freshen up my skills, and I hope to take a couple of other different classes in the next few months," she says.

Her particular passions are ceramics, watercolours and soft furnishings.

Being the single mother of an active and inquisitive nine-year-old daughter, Avalon, Dennis is very much aware of planning for their future. Until recently, she had a long on-going working relationship with artists paint company Chroma, acting as a products adviser and demonstrator.

It was this that first attracted the *Changing Rooms* team. Her TV career grew from those humble beginnings. Initially she advised the show's designers of the products' applications, then she was asked on-board as a designer.

A couple of months ago she finally left Chroma, but says it was a reluctant parting.

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**Makeover in progress:** *Our House* presenter Tara Dennis is busy reorganising her life and career to ensure the future for herself and her daughter.

"The main reason was I needed more time to be with my daughter. I was just running out of time to meet all my commitments.

"Falling into television, as I have, hadn't really allowed me to plan ahead until now," she says.

Her upgraded role on *Our House* — this year she will probably do design makeovers between 40 and 50 rooms — and the amazing response she has had from viewers

through letters and the program's web page made her realise she needs to cash in on what is happening. And to use it to cement the future for herself and Avalon.

"TV may not yet be my career," she says, with refreshing honesty.

"But the good thing is it is opening up my eyes to many other possibilities. So I'm finally starting to plan ahead."

She has registered her own internet domain

name, with the aim of developing her own advice site. She will also use it as a promotional adjunct to her publishing plans.

Overseeing product publications and design books for Chroma taught her enough to initiate her own projects. There is already a design book in the works, with the clever premise of providing "room recipes".

"Basically, I would like to be able to inspire people in some way," she says, "but in such a way that my designs are achievable."

What about the doctors' and lawyers' syndrome? Do her friends and family now ask for design and craft advice?

Her eyes glaze over, and she lets out a little chuckle.

"It is so much harder to give good advice when you know the people, so I tend to be very vague when giving them design advice.

"If the house belongs to strangers I can be more objective," she says.

What about her own house? Is it coffee-table-book trendy?

"I'm renting from (*Changing Rooms*') James Lunday, and he lets me do stuff (make little "improvements" here and there).

"But to be honest, people would be amazed at the amount of stuff — Dennis' favourite word, employed to describe bric-a-brac, artistic supplies and works in progress — I have in the house.

"I'm always in the process of preparing stuff for the show or whatever. It can be quite stressful, surrounded by all this constant stuff."

But here, too, things may be about to change.

Her boyfriend, Martyn Rushby, has recently given up his managerial job to become a property developer, and this has inspired Tara and Avalon to start looking to buy their own house, closer in to Sydney.

Dennis says she and Avalon have developed a best-friends relationship as well as the mother-daughter one (she separated from Avalon's father when her daughter was just three).

"I don't really molly-coddle her, and she loves to just potter around the house with me and work on our stuff."

Even better, young Avalon provides reality checks on her career.

"She will say 'Mum, all my friends are saying it (your bit on *Our House*) is starting to get boring'."

Which is mum's cue to lift her game.