

adventurous

WINDOW COVERINGS

THE DRIVEWAY IN A NEW BUILDING DEVELOPMENT IS OFTEN GIVEN A HIGHER PRECEDENCE THAN ANY DECISIONS ON WINDOW COVERINGS, ACCORDING TO IAN FROOD, WHO HAS OPERATED HIS SELF-NAMED BUSINESS FROM THE MELBOURNE SUBURB OF SOUTHBANK SINCE 2000.

"THE BIGGEST enemy for our industry is that window furnishings are not considered carefully," he says. "The driveway gets a higher priority; people might spend \$20,000 on paving the driveway and leave just \$3000 to do windows."

He is encouraging architects and designers to plan for window furnishings as early as possible in a development, while the building is still on the drawing board or at least at framing stage. "We can advise on how to achieve privacy, heat insulation, let them know that fading might occur due to a west facing space or encourage them to get wiring in early to enable automated options," he says.

While his business is making some progress convincing certain architects and designers of the merits of window coverings, he is also keenly aware this shift in focus may take some years to filter through the market and that the first signs of change will be evident in high end projects. "It is becoming more common for us to be on a building site at framing stage," he says. "We don't want to be called when the plasterer and painter are walking out the door. Window furnishings still do not have enough of a profile."

RAISING THE BAR

Frood, who began working in this sector straight from school around 40 years ago, is keen the industry 'raise the bar' to be bold and imaginative about embracing new possibilities in window coverings. A key strategy towards this goal is to establish a new facility, a library of options, at the firm's premises in Southbank.

"We're putting together a library of samples and setting up a meeting room where there will be motors, remotes, side channels, fabrics, head boxes, everything that goes into a product," he says. And he stresses there will be no display blinds on show. "It's not about telling people 'this is the way we do it'," he says. "We go the other way. We ask what they're trying to achieve, what are their issues, the aesthetics sought and combine that information with whether they have a high or low budget. Then, we piece together the components to build what they want to achieve."

Frood suggests he wants people to understand the company's capabilities. "We're not limited to a small number of components," he says. "We have hundreds upon hundreds of fabrics. There

is a vast, almost immeasurable number of headboxes, side rails, motor systems, remotes."

He empathises with the difficult task faced by interior designers who, he says, are expected to know everything about the products they recommend including technical details, aesthetics and design. "It's a tough call for an interior designer to talk about voltages," he says. "And if they don't understand those products, they may shy away from selling them. We'll have staff at the facility to discuss these products." He claims the attraction of this facility will be the potential it offers. "It's a can-do approach," he says.

The facility will be fitted with sofas, a coffee table and a 'huge' area to spread out plans. "This will be somewhere to begin a dialogue," he says. Opened by appointment only, clients are expected to receive a very personalised service. "I have some wonderful people on board with me who can see the potential of pushing in this direction," he says.

PRICE COMPETITION

Frood points to a new demand emerging from more savvy consumers who are well informed as they research market offerings before making purchase decisions. "We're encouraging our retail clients to step up the plate to meet the needs of those customers," he says. And he stresses the importance of offering a point of difference rather than competing solely on price. "If they don't do that, they go up against any reseller or direct dealer pushing a lower price," he says. "A shop in the high street could not sustain that in the long term." While Frood says he'd be foolish not to get involved even if a project's budget is restricted, he is also clear the stronger focus, the 'philosophy' at his company, is to become more involved in design. "There is a whole part of the community interested in design and better fabrics," he says. "We're encouraging people to be more creative, adventurous and to push new boundaries. And we are getting good results."

Convinced price wars are not good for the sector, he says: "The industry has had some amazing people in it over the years who have pushed the bar and the market has responded and grown. But there is so much budget pressure downwards on this market. The race to the bottom with cheap fabric is a quick one."

TRENDS

While the Australian market remains quite conservative, Frood comments that a tendency to be more bold is increasingly evident. "I've watched the industry go through a number of phases and now, we're coming out of the dark side of minimalism with cotton, canvas and calico in natural shades," he says. "We're seeing colour, design and a return to a curtaining aspect."

A more adventurous use of colour is evident in metallic muted shades such as bronzes and greys. "There is soft organic colour," he says. "Very few people are game to use colour bravely."

He notes double-layer window coverings, popular in the 1970s, are again firmly positioned in the market. This combination of blinds or curtains that enable privacy or a view as well as offering heat insulation is proving popular. "You can use sensational fabric on the sheer layer, in colours or patterned designs," he says. And he is interested in the advances being made by young interior designers emerging from Australia's universities. "They're using older inspirational designs and re-interpreting them for 21st century living, meeting their aesthetics with functionality such as heat insulation and light control," he says. "They're bringing the concepts together in a fresh, clean way."



Ian Frood

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The limitations of fabric samples became evident to Ian Frood when he was presented with an unexpected situation in the 1980s when his company produced roman blinds for a beautiful Victorian home in a leafy suburban neighbourhood of Melbourne.

He explains how the interior designer working on the project described the fabric that had been chosen. It featured leaves and branches in smudgy greens and muted browns and golds to match the slate floor in a family room that looked onto a stunningly landscaped garden. When the fabric arrived in the workroom, it fit the description Frood had been given so the roman blinds were made up and delivered.

However, the final product revealed a surprise no one had anticipated. "The fabric had a huge pattern repeat that hadn't shown up in the sample cutting," Frood said. "The unknown part was a lemur, thousands of lemurs, the whole back wall of the home was covered with lemurs. The home owner hated animal prints and the entire back wall was full of beasts." WFA