

DECK THE HALL

WARBURTON'S MASONIC HALL HAS UNDERGONE
AN ASTOUNDING TRANSFORMATION.

WORDS Graeme Purdy PHOTOGRAPHS Drew Wheeler





Mark Fenech and Stephen Taranto (above left) outside their pride and joy; the building's stunning interior; and the property benefits from wonderful mountain views.

In days gone by, who knew what intriguing activities went on behind the portals of Masonic halls across the country? Most of these buildings presented a sombre face to the public, giving no indication of the secret rituals performed inside.

The tall, red-brick Masonic hall at Warburton is of this ilk, its simple, classical lines lending a rather austere appearance to the 1920s icon.

It stands in a prominent position on the highway where, diagonally opposite, is another iconic building, the old cream-brick Santitarium Weetbix factory looking for all the world like a beached ocean liner.

While this imposing building is on the brink of being transformed into a resort and spa on the banks of the Yarra, the august Masonic hall has already been reinvented as a unique and ingenious space.

The sleepy village of Warburton is stirring, and Mark Fenech is one of the people leading the arousal.

When the 48-year-old designer bought the hall for his home a couple of years ago, "it felt very urban in the country, which was nice", he said. He immediately realised the potential it offered as a studio and workspace as well as the opportunity to create a very special garden.

As he proceeded with the renovations, there were many knocks on the door from members of the community wanting to use the space for events and he knew he had a popular venue.

Melbourne people started booking the hall for parties and functions and Mark realised how good this could be for Warburton, bringing tourists who would stay overnight in local accommodation.

"I love Warburton," he said, "it's such a friendly town; just walk down the street and 20 people will say hello to you."

It now became apparent the hall offered so many options for use including weddings, parties, fund-raising functions, workshops, corporate retreats, community markets, cultural events and much more.

To ensure the venture's success, Mark asked his good friend Stephen Taranto to join him as business partner and with their combined skills and talents they launched '**Projekt** 3488.'

The renovations to the building's exterior were thorough and substantial, including work on the roof, window frames, doors, tuck-pointing the brickwork and, especially, constructing a vast, elevated deck.

Inside, however, their creative flair is more evident with some daring and dramatic alterations carried out with meticulous attention to detail.





“Atmosphere and ambience play a very important part in this space,” said Mark.

The main hall features four enormous lengths of solid timber suspended from mighty steel girders which are lowered to form two banquet tables. When the meal is finished they concertina back to the walls and the space becomes a dance floor.

An elegant, black spiral staircase provides access to a spacious lounge area on the upper level where, in the centre of the floor, a large, circular hole has been cut to allow a starkly modern chandelier to float through and illuminate both spaces.

A decorative black balustrade forms a protective ring around the hole on this level while, on the ceiling below, a metre-long fringe of fine black cords stylishly encircles the light.

On the back wall of the lounge are two immense timber doors which slide apart and invite you out onto the wide timber deck with distant views of the mountains and an enticing picture of the garden below.

At one end of the deck is an example of the inventiveness that you seem to discover around every corner of this fascinating property.

Forming a screen from the neighbours are four rectangular, rusted metal frames, two metres tall, filled with short off-cuts of wood, forming a mosaic-like pattern with subtle shades of the various timbers. It is both decorative and practical - they use the wood as kindling for the unique suspended circular fireplace in the lounge area.

Descending the stairs from the deck you become aware of the prominent colours and textures of the garden. Honey-





coloured boulders and pebbles contrast with the black mulch and the many shades of green in the foliage, especially the lush mossy mounds of scleranthus.

There are contrasts, too, in the shape of the foliage, from the spikiness of grass trees and native grasses, kangaroo paw and Gymea lily (*Doryanthes*) to the soft, lacy leaves of jacaranda, acacia and tree fern.

Many of the plants in this garden were favourites of Mark's late mother who inspired him with her love of gardening and was most likely instrumental in turning his thumbs a deep shade of green.

Water plays a major role in the garden's layout and begins with a sparkling cascade over a large boulder splashing into a pebbled-lined pool beneath the arched trunk of a snow gum.

The water overflows into a second pool then tumbles over stones into a large lily pond which captures many reflections of the garden in its surface. From here the water is pumped back to its source by way of a full-size windmill, its lower framework concealed by a vigorous kennedia vine.

The main walkway through the garden is constructed of thick sleeper-like timbers set flush into the ground. These have weathered to a soft, silvery grey that picks up the colour of the gracefully curved trunks of the snow gums throughout the garden.

Cleverly placed artefacts pop up unexpectedly throughout the garden as do a collection of sublimely graceful bowls in a range of sizes that blend perfectly with their surroundings, the work of local ceramicist Alistair Whyte.

Mark and Stephen encourage local artists and their aim is to make 'projekt' 3488 a vibrant showcase for the diverse interests and activities found in the Yarra Valley.

Mark Fenech can be contacted on 0400 215 785 or at projekt3488.com.au