



# THE NEXT CHAPTER

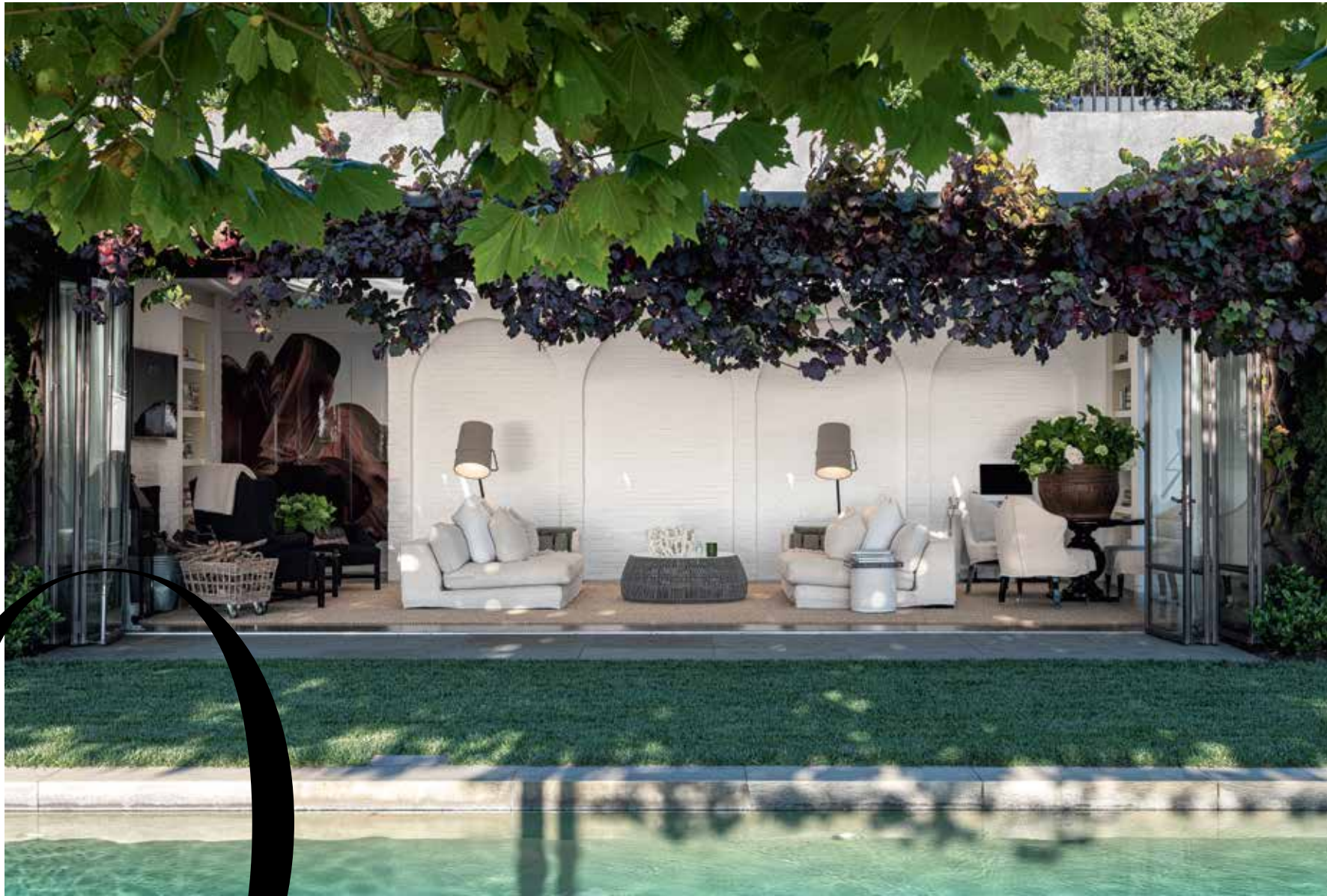
Fiona Myer is extending her fashion brand White Story into homewares and more in a further expression of her lifestyle and philosophy

STORY  
**DAVID MEAGHER**

PHOTOGRAPHY  
**TOM FERGUSON**







One day in December last year, Fiona Myer walked into the Sorrento store of her fashion brand

White Story to check on how sales were going in the all-important pre-Christmas rush. One of the store's staff told her sales had been brisk and that the store had done an unbelievable day's trade. "It's been incredible," she said. "We've sold nearly everything ... including the furniture." Myer was incredulous. "You've done what? That's all my visual merchandising!"

Myer, however, is a born retailer and took the view that a sale is a sale. So she put more furniture back in the store. And then it all sold again. And again, and again.

The demand for the décor of her newly opened store ignited a spark: Myer decided the time was right to morph her five-year-old women's fashion business into a fully fledged lifestyle brand. "I always wanted to be able to offer a mix of homewares and furniture as well as fashion, and maybe even a place to have a coffee," says Myer.

To that end, she is in the process of moving her store in Melbourne's Armadale to bigger premises nearby to offer a broader selection of merchandise. "The High Street, Armadale, store will be almost like a mini department store, with an eclectic mix of products," she says. The new store is expected to open in spring.

It's a long way from the original vision for her brand

White Story, but morphing – or in the current parlance, pivoting – is a hallmark of everything Myer sets her mind to. Fiona Malley, as she was known then, started her career in fashion as a model in the 1970s and eventually found herself working at Melbourne's upmarket department store George's as a fashion forecaster. It didn't take long for her to be approached by a recruitment firm for a forecasting job at a rival department store and when she found out which one – Myer – she was in a bit of a quandary.

"I was dating Sid at the time, but the recruiters didn't know that and so it was all a bit awkward," she says. Sid is Sidney Myer, grandson of the Sidney Myer who founded the Myer department store in Bendigo in 1900. The Myer family no longer owned the retailer, but they still had an interest in it. Malley ultimately took the job and later married Myer. After four years with the department store, she left and set up her own trend forecasting consultancy. Then she took time out to raise her three children, a period that included a stint in Malaysia.

While living in Malaysia, Myer worked with local artisans to produce homewares and furniture that she would ship home to sell. When the family returned to Melbourne she continued developing furniture and ceramics, and took up positions on various arts and philanthropy boards. By 2016, however, she was ready to get back into the fashion business.

Myer chose the name White Story for her fashion brand because, she says, she wanted to eliminate the "white noise" in fashion and for her offering to be an alternative to fast-paced fashion cycles. She wanted the brand to have a single focus and a philosophy of simplicity.

"Five years ago I was asking myself, does fashion really matter?" she says. "I mean, who cares what you wear? For me, when it comes to what I like to wear, it was all about blue jeans and a white shirt back then. So with my new brand I wanted to pare it right back and really take the clutter out of fashion. I love and respect fashion, but it wasn't really where my head was at the time. So I started the business in our garage in Toorak with just eight white cotton shirts."

The shirts were a hit with customers and soon retailers were keen to stock her brand. But a collection of white shirts ultimately proved to be too small an offering for major retailers such as David Jones, Matchesfashion.com and Moda Operandi. As well as tops, they needed bottoms. It was another problem that Myer solved simply by shifting the focus of her business.

"They needed pants and skirts and jackets and blazers to go with the shirts, so very quickly we found we actually needed to be producing a full ready-to-wear collection." Today White Story is a complete fashion

*Myer wanted to eliminate the 'white noise' in fashion, for her brand to have a single focus and a philosophy of simplicity*



Clockwise from top: Tunnel from the main house to the pool house at Fiona Myer's family retreat on the Mornington Peninsula; three views of the immaculately maintained garden at the 16ha property; dining room Opposite: Pool house, furnished in Myer's signature style







Clockwise from above: **Three mazes, one for each of the children; view from the property; horses over the fence, on the neighbouring estate owned by Sidney Myer's parents; the main house; Fiona Myer with the family dog**



offering, including knitwear, dresses, pants and accessories – all of which are proudly manufactured in Melbourne. “I have no interest in manufacturing offshore and I insisted from day one that I want to support our local industry,” says Myer.

There are just the two stand-alone White Story stores at present and Myer says she has plans for more. She is passionate about bricks and mortar retail as, she says, it allows her to get up close and personal with her customers to better understand what they want. However, ecommerce, on the brand’s own website, has become increasingly important to the company and it has COVID-19 to thank for that.

“When the pandemic hit, I went into our studio in Cremorne and told the staff they had to stop what they were doing and start making face masks,” Myer recalls. The masks the brand started producing, made from Belgian linen, sold out immediately. In total, Myer estimates White Story sold more than 30,000 face masks, which not only kept her workforce employed but also raised the profile of its online presence as word of mouth about her masks

spread. Today, online purchases account for most of the brand’s sales and are double those of the present Armadale store. “But I will always have the bricks and mortar store because I think they’re important and a great way to communicate to your customers and to tell them what you’re all about,” says Myer.

Extending her fashion business into a full lifestyle offering makes perfect sense. It’s easy to see why her customers would want to emulate Myer’s style and taste when you look at the way she lives. For this story, WISH was given a rare tour of the Myer family’s 16ha Mornington Peninsula retreat 45km from Melbourne.

The couple bought the property adjacent to Sidney Myer’s parents’ estate 28 years ago. At the time it was wildly overgrown and contained just a small weatherboard cottage. A new main house was built and a pool house – connected to the main house via an underground tunnel (which also sometimes serves as a dining room) – was added 12 years ago. Both dwellings have been decorated in Myer’s

distinctive style, with neutral colours, comfortable sofas and oversized bunches of flowers everywhere you look.

But it’s the estate’s garden that is one of Myer’s true creative achievements. There are rows and rows of manicured hedges – including three mazes planted for each of the couple’s three children, a natural amphitheatre, gravel-covered paths and drives, a grass tennis court, a unique sunken garden, and symmetrically planted beds of all manner of flowers and shrubs. From the main house you can see the city of Melbourne to the north and the beaches of Port Phillip Bay to the west and, like her fashion business, the garden is very much a work in progress.

“I didn’t want rambling spaces in the garden, I wanted to create private little niches that were surrounded by open spaces, like rooms in the garden” says Myer. “I’d love to say that a lot of research went into the planning of the garden, but honestly there’s been none. We just walk around and get ideas and then do them. Like a lot of things that I’ve done, it’s just evolved.” <sup>(w)</sup>