



Source: House Detective Website

# Words on the Street

Tales of a House Detective

→ Interview and Article by Hannah Taylor

Have you ever wondered how your suburb got its name, or who owned your house fifty years ago? Marianne Taylor, also known as The House

Detective, has made a career out of these questions. Through archives, photos, and reminiscences she connects the dots to create micro-histories of Brisbane based on houses and the people who lived in them, occasionally calling on her dedicated social media following to crack clues. It's the culmination of years of hard work and soul-searching.

From a young age, Marianne Taylor wanted to be a forensic scientist. “I have no idea how I came up with such a grim career choice,” she said. “Maybe Patricia Cornwell books or something?” Marianne followed this grim interest into tertiary study,

completing a Bachelor of Science at Griffith University. The lack of forensics programs in Queensland, however, meant that her degree related little to her passion for investigation.

Following graduation, she moved to Sydney and worked in a variety of chemistry jobs that quickly became unfulfilling. “I was working in labs and things and just found it really boring,” she said. “I wasn't really doing the detective work, which is what I wanted to do.”

Yearning for a career change, Marianne moved back to Brisbane, where she volunteered for several local heritage organisations and archaeological digs. “I really got sucked into that and loved it and

decided that I wanted to do that full time,” she said. This newfound passion led her to complete a graduate degree in Local, Family, and Applied History at the University of New England while she continued to work full time in labs.

While her new career direction was vastly different to the work she had been doing, there was much to gain from her time in STEM. “I thought I'd wasted my life doing four years at uni in science. But it turns out, it's really similar and it's really useful. You're effectively doing the same thing - you're doing the research, you may be forming a bit of a hypothesis, and then you're analyzing all the data and information and you're coming up with conclusions.”

After a string of volunteer and temporary positions, Marianne started work as a Heritage Officer with

the Queensland Government, assessing applications for the development of heritage properties. She soon tired of the bureaucracy and precarity of the role however and moved to a Heritage Strategist role at



Queensland Rail, where she managed the company's heritage buildings and sites. While this role was a step in the right direction, it erred more towards property management than the investigative work that she had hoped for — “I had to leave my job because my mental health was just missing.”

Her study and time in the heritage sector had given her a clearer idea of what she actually wanted to do, however. “I'd loved this subject called Australian architectural history [during my degree]. And that was what really got me hooked. So I decided that that was what I wanted to do.” With that, Marianne started The House Detective, an architectural history consultancy, and never looked back.

The work of The House Detective demands competency in many types of history – Marianne described her work as encompassing architectural history, genealogy, and social history. The research starts with a house, but eventually becomes much more. The history of suburbs and streets also often comes to light. “In researching [a house at Gaythorne], I uncovered that the area used to be called Rifle Range, because there was a military rifle

range there,” she said. “You research a suburb, but then you end up uncovering this whole other story about training for the First World War, and you know, how army camps were established.”

The stories of simple houses then have the potential to become something far bigger, something that the wider community has recognised in Marianne's work. The House

Detective Facebook page boasts a large and active following, who often help with clues that Marianne stumbles across in her work. “I got a lot of positive feedback from Facebook and Instagram posts. And I think it's that people are generally interested in that,” she said. “Houses are something we can all relate to.” The public's positive response also reflects the reception that Marianne receives when she visits the houses that she investigates. Her work involves lots of kitchen table chats and cups of tea, and she finds that many homeowners are happy to have their stories shared online. “I'm really surprised how open people are in even sharing photos of inside.”

## “Houses are something we can all relate to.”

This is the power of Marianne’s work – it makes history real and accessible to people. “I try not to sell history, but package it in a way that’s bite sized and interesting and connected, rather than reading just like 80 pages of text,” she said. “That *Lost Brisbane* book, which was mainly based on photographs just epitomizes to me that you need to hook them in with some good images and something recognizable that they can compare to today.” The House Detective’s focus on the visual and relatable is therefore a huge reason for her success.

The images and stories that Marianne shares also tie into another commodity of the modern age – nostalgia. “I find with my Facebook stats, anything that is particularly strong, nostalgic wise, tracks really well. Particularly popular posts are ones where I share photos of old streets that are really busy now. I see a lot of people tagging people they know that live in the suburb. And so [there’s] that personal connection and

seeing what your area used to look like as well.” Nostalgia is more than just identification, however. “I think part of it is that it’s a big, scary world at the moment in particular, and people like remembering back to a time where, whether it’s true or not, they perceive it as being simpler and easier.”

“I think it’s having that connection with the past and maybe even feeling a little bit like, ‘okay, we made it through some seriously hardcore stuff so hopefully, it will be okay.’” In uncertain times, the past can seem like a haven, linked to memories of home and hearth.

So, what’s next for The House Detective? “At the moment, I’m working with a TV producer to put together a TV series about what I do. So very early days, yet - but I won’t be horribly embarrassed if nothing does [happen]. I think if the TV thing doesn’t work out, I’d like to do a few more things on my YouTube channel where I’m talking to people because I know I prefer to watch someone talking rather than reading a big, long post.”

Marianne has also considered writing books – “but ones, like I was saying, that are interesting and tangible to

people and just tell some of the interesting, quirky stories that I've uncovered.”

House histories will still be at the core of what Marianne Taylor does, however, no matter what the path

ahead. After all, it's her dream job. “I remember, when I left Queensland Rail, I wrote a list of what my perfect job would look like. And pretty much it's funny because when I look back, [The House Detective] ticks every box.”