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## Working with an Interior Designer

*While a house's exterior helps to set the tone, it is the interior layout and design that make you feel 'it's good to be home'. Here, we highlight some of the county's favourite interior designers and outline our top tips for a successful collaboration.....*

We all aspire to beautiful interiors, but how many of us ever quite achieve our vision? This might have nothing to do with matters of taste. Some of us simply don't have as much time as we would like to devote to a project (whilst others of us wouldn't know where to begin!). Or some may set out inspired

but become lost halfway through or exceed the budget – and so give up 'just for now'.

Since interior design is probably the factor that most influences how comfortable we feel at home, half-finished projects are far from ideal! Rather than going it alone, the alternative is to enlist the help of a professional. Interior design services range from the architectural through to the purely decorative. At the former end of the scale, 'space planners' can provide invaluable advice on core design issues such as layout, flow and storage. At the other end of the scale, 'interior decorators' advise primarily on colours and fabrics, etc. The all-encompassing term 'interior designer' tends to cover many areas of this spectrum.

In this country, many of those who have worked with an interior designer have



done so because they have a love of fine design, or because they have fallen in love with the designer's past work which they might have seen in a magazine or at a friend's house. That is to say, it is as much a decision of the heart as of the head.

By contrast, if you were in America you would find that most home owners think differently. There, your interior designer is as essential as your architect. It is an attitude that is beginning to gain a foothold here in Britain, although it is still not mainstream.

One thing that holds some of us back is the feeling that our modest proposal is not worthy of an interior designer. But in fact many of those designers who are accustomed to stripping back a house to its bones and starting from scratch also offer smaller scale services.

Unless you have used a designer before, the fact that they can also help you save money is probably not the first thing that springs to mind. Those designers who have many years of experience have built up numerous contacts within the business. This means that on top

of knowing what they should be paying for materials, they may be able to negotiate supplier discounts on their clients' behalf.

In addition, a designer can stop you from making costly mistakes: use the skills of your designer to maximize the impact of your ideas. Sometimes, those of us who do embark on a job become distracted from what we originally had in mind: we try to incorporate items which don't fit the overall concept. Not only does this lessen the impact of the design but we've also not made the most of our budget. One of the most important and useful abilities of a professional interior designer is their ability to visualize the end result when planning a scheme.

One of the first jobs of a designer is to discuss the scope of the work required. Designers tend to offer their services in a range of stages. These might include concept design, detailed design, building project co-ordination and furnishing and it is often possible to choose from one stage to the next whether you would like to continue using the company's services.

The first stage, the concept design, includes sketch designs showing space planning and lighting as well as presentation boards illustrating ambience and samples. A piece of advice at this point would be to ensure that your designer gives you a breakdown of the estimated budget, which will give you an idea of how your money is being spent and help both parties to monitor the costs from the start.

Detailed designs and applications to the Local Authority Building Regulations and Planning consultations can follow once you have approved the brief. At this stage, the designer can hand over and you may choose to use your own contractors to carry out the work.

However, one of the characteristics of managing your own project is that it can be extremely stressful to co-ordinate the many different trades. Anyone who has taken on a large-scale refurbishment will be able to confirm this! Interior designers have invaluable experience in this area and some offer a full project management service. The other great benefit of this service is flexibility: if anyone needs to wait for a carpenter or





electrician to arrive (or not), it can be someone from your designer's team and not you.

Oxfordshire-based Guy Goodfellow set up his own company in 2002, having first trained as an architect before spending eight years at Sibyl Colefax & John Fowler, where he became the company's youngest ever Director. His experience enables him to find craftsmen not only in the UK but also throughout Europe, sourcing and creating hand-woven, printed and embroidered fabrics and bespoke pieces of furniture. His established network of specialist contractors ensures that his designs are executed to the highest standards.

It is often the case that designers are themselves able to supply fabrics, wallpaper, and even furniture too. Pan's Lodge Interior Design specialise in the refurbishment and interior design of period properties with a company portfolio which illustrates a broad range of commissions including renovation of an important Grade Two\* listed Georgian country residence designed by John Nash. Carmen Evans and her team design fixtures and fittings as one-off pieces which can be seen at her

studio. Among these are hand-carved oak panels, decorative plaster friezes with individually cast flowers, fruits and shells. She has also developed a small range of hand and machine embroidered fabrics.

Having an interior designer to oversee project management by no means implies that you are surrendering control. In some cases, a client will have established a brief which covers factors such as budget, time-scale and how the room will be used. However, you will get the most out of the experience if you can at least show your designer tearsheets from magazine of projects that you like.

Patti Money-Coutts of Overbury Interiors in Alton describes how she likes to work. "Meeting clients in their homes and seeing the architecture, style and ambiance if the house and its occupants is very important to us. During this time we will discuss what you would like to achieve, the look and feel, and the budget."

The best designers are driven by a passion to please their clients. But whilst they are professionals, they are

not mind-readers. They will want to know your ideas and opinions to inform their work. It is for this reason that most projects will include a pre-planned schedule of meetings. These are an opportunity for the designer to update you on progress and to seek your approval on decisions. The sort of decisions that you want your designer to run by you is something that will need to be established at the start.

Tricia Findlay of Lindford-based Tricia Carroll Designs states, "At our best, we should really listen to clients and help them achieve clarity of their requirements, aesthetically, functionally and financially. Once we have this we can add both our design and technical expertise - helping them realise their vision whilst steering them through the project, avoiding the various pitfalls and preventing costly mistakes. I don't believe a designer should ever impose their personal tastes on the client."

The most important factor in getting the best out of an interior designer is finding the right person to suit both you and your project. This requires some research, since there are so many designers to choose from-ranging from

## Patti Money-Coutts, Overbury Interiors

### On her style:

*“We do not represent one style or the work of one company, but stock a large and diverse range of the finest fabrics, wallpapers, furniture, lighting and decorative accessories in a wide choice of styles and budgets.”*

### On working with an interior designer:

*“In an ideal world, we would all create our perfect interiors. Unfortunately, life is not so simple and we are often under pressure from all directions to make quick decisions that will have implications for many years to come. Hiring an interior designer can often remove or at least minimize some of these pressures.”*

traditionalists to modernists - each with a unique approach.

A good place to start the search for a designer is the British Interior design Association (BIDA) website which includes a database of members. For many of the designers featured there, the database lists a website where you can preview their portfolios. Another option is to visit the site of your prospective designer's past projects, as many will have completed commercial work for local businesses such as hotels. Suzy Maas and Katie Moug of Lymington-based The Final Touch often prepare properties for the sales or rental market. They both strongly recommend asking your prospective designer for references.

A designer's signature style is usually apparent from a selection of projects, so if what you see is not to your taste then it is best to leave them off your shortlist! Once you have narrowed down the options, you can arrange a consultation (which may or may not be charged) with each interior designer. In some cases where a consultation is charged, the cost will be refunded if you choose to go ahead. If you are unsure of your choice, it is always worth speaking to more designers.

A slightly different approach would be to work with an in-house design team

at a company such as Wesley-Barell, which is perhaps best known for its range of handmade sofas and chairs. It also offers an interiors advisory service providing help with the selection of colours, fabrics and wallpapers or the drawing up of room plans.

Then there are also those who specialise in specific parts of a redesign project, such as space planning. Primarily, this means advising clients on what structural or positioning options will best suit their individual requirements. Clients in the early stages of setting up a new home can employ an adviser to assess the interior architecture of their property and re-work it by removing or moving walls if necessary. Since rooms such as master bedrooms or bathrooms often incorporate large items of built-in and freestanding furniture, it can be sensible to decide on the positioning of walls and furniture together.

Those who have found 'the one' will testify that using a good interior designer is a very worthwhile investment. Their skills often add considerably to the monetary worth of the property - but just as valuable is the impact that their talent and creativity can have on how much you enjoy your home. To discover more, we have been speaking to some of the area's foremost interior designers about their individual styles and other aspects of their work...