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Kitchen Magic

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KING *of the* KITCHENS

Charlie Smallbone is a bespoke kitchen designer whose company, Smallbone of Devizes, specialises in creating kitchens that exude style and sophistication

If there's one person who knows about kitchen design, it's Charlie Smallbone. As a young graduate in the 1970s, Charlie began earning a bit of money by reconditioning pine dressers and selling them on for a profit.

He went on to open a shop in Devizes, which was a hit, selling the newly fashionable style of 'unfitted' kitchen.

Within just six years, Smallbone of Devizes had opened its first London showroom, and was soon leading the charge in the kitchen revolution, turning the hot, steamy domain of the beleaguered housewife into the beating heart of the family home.

To this day, Smallbone of Devizes is an iconic brand, synonymous with quality.

Having pushed the boundaries of kitchen design for over 40 years, Charlie's most recent venture has been to set up Ledbury Studio, born of his desire to harness the beauty of natural materials whilst creating practical kitchens that exude style and elegance.

Choosing a new kitchen can be overwhelming - the choices of styles and finishes are nigh on infinite. If you're dreaming of a kitchen that perfectly matches your style and needs, a bespoke kitchen designed just for you, working with a kitchen designer can be the answer - it can bring your vision to life and create a functional and beautiful space.

"The key element for people to consider is how worthwhile it is to work with a kitchen designer," says Charlie. "The problem is that people often underestimate the complexity of what designers do. They don't see the number of different strands that need to be pulled together to create a holistic approach to the kitchen and the assumption that it is a simple process can lead to costly mistakes. Employing a kitchen designer can help avoid those mistakes, saving time and money."

Here, Charlie rounds up his essential five steps to working successfully with a bespoke kitchen designer...

Choose the right designer

The first step is finding the right professional for your project. Take the time to research different designers to ensure they have the experience and expertise in creating custom kitchens. It is also important to meet with potential designers in person to discuss your ideas and see if you have a good rapport with them.

Chemistry is key in any relationship, and that includes the one you'll have with your designer. But, how do you really know if the designer sitting in front of you is the one for your project? Ask to see previous work. Looking at their portfolio allows you to see if their style matches your own. And if you're still in doubt, ask to speak to a previous client.

This will provide an invaluable glimpse into the creative process of your potential designer and their problem-solving abilities. ➔





Clearly communicate your vision

Once you have selected a designer, it is crucial to communicate your vision clearly. Start by gathering inspiration from magazines, websites and social media platforms, and create a mood board to showcase your ideas.

Share this with your designer to give them a better understanding of your aesthetic preferences. Remember, a picture is worth a thousand words. For example, in our Camden kitchen (pictured on page 12), the client showed us an image of a 1970s screen she'd found in an antiques shop and requested a version of it for her kitchen. Inspired by this, I created this screen of brushed and polished stainless steel that can be used to divide the room, as required.

Apart from aesthetics, it is important to think about how you'll be using your kitchen. Are you the ultimate host, needing a huge island for entertaining? Or perhaps you're a culinary whiz with a big family and need space for all your cooking essentials. By clearly communicating any practical requirements to your kitchen designer, they can whip up a design that's both stunning and perfect for your lifestyle.

Set your budget

Before starting your kitchen renovation project, it's important to have a heart-to-heart with your designer about the all-important budget. By laying out your financial expectations from the get-go, you and your designer can work together to create a plan that matches your wallet. This ensures you won't have to sacrifice your dream kitchen and helps your designer find the best quality



materials, appliances and finishes to fit within your budget. Without a clear budget in mind, it's easy to get swept up in flashy, pricey ideas that can come with big, surprising expenses later on. So, define your budget and ensure all costs stay within it.

Expect lots of questions

At the start of any kitchen design journey, a designer is like a detective with a million questions, trying to get inside your life to figure out how you live. Why? Because every home chef is unique and has different needs.

A good case in point is a project we did in Hackney, where the homeowners were such keen entertainers that they requested a bar area next to the dining table. Meanwhile, in our latest design, the clients asked not only for a drinks cabinet next to the table, but also a breakfast cupboard conveniently placed just behind the breakfast bar. By chatting about your cooking style,



entertaining preferences and daily routines, your designer can get the lowdown on how your kitchen should be designed.

Collaborate and provide feedback

Finally, working with a bespoke kitchen designer is a collaborative process. Your designer will present you with initial design concepts and it is important to provide feedback and ask questions. The design process may involve several iterations before reaching the final design, so be patient and provide constructive feedback to guide the design in the right direction. Your kitchen will probably be the biggest investment you make in your house, so it is worth going the extra mile to make sure it exceeds expectations.

Prices for a Ledbury Studio kitchen start at £70,000.

ledburystudio.com