



“This is not design. This is laughable...”

Designer Cheryl Gurner, from Bathrooms International, who is one of our judges for the kbbreview Industry Awards this year, voices her disappointment with the design skills offered in many high-street bathroom showrooms

A ccepting that high-street bathroom showrooms are, in the majority of cases, required to produce an installed bathroom, complete with flooring, walling, towel rails, accessories, sanitary and brassware, for somewhere under £10,000, I have for many years expressed utter disbelief at the lack of any inspiration in the finished design.

I fail to understand why professional sales teams are purported to be able, nay trained, to offer a ‘design’ service, which in the majority of cases means the use of some computer software and a four-week ‘design course’, which is, to be honest, bordering on the laughable. Apologies to those of you out there who are designers and are employed for that reason.

This is NOT design. This is merely a random selection from the array of products in the showroom in question. And often I see mixes of product that do not work well together and where metal finishes vary from supplier to supplier. This is simply not acceptable. It’s just product placement and it does not have to be this way.

As part of the judging process for the kbbreview Awards this year, the panel was incredibly impressed with the standard of design and the results achieved by interior and architectural designers in creating bathrooms in the £10,000 and under category. In fact we were blown away.

This was the first year that so many entries were received from design practices. Their inclusion and the result of their work is a vindication of my feelings. Moreover I welcome their input. It serves our industry well.

The creative approach within a relatively tight budget, even using mid-market products such as B&Q tiles, resulted in some outstanding bathroom designs, all of which came in at under £9,000 fully fitted – and believe me the cost sheets were fully scrutinised.

The designs showed flare, used tactile finishes that appealed both to the eye and the hand and were unique and thoroughly thought-through to conform to demographic and/or the client brief.

On the other hand, at the first stage selection process, some of the entries from bathroom showrooms failed on many levels due to a glaring lack of design inspiration, process and ability. One bathroom looked the same as another. Nothing inspirational and, sadly, not a jot of thought outside of the box. This did not bode well.

A smaller budget does not mean that artistic licence has to fly out of the window. Nor does a current trend mean that every client should end up with the same bathroom.

We have a job to do and role to play. That job is to understand the product we sell, how it functions, its technical breakdown and the water systems that are required to get it working properly and meet client expectations. We must also be aware of what con-



try’s sales people really understand this. Or perhaps do understand what is really required, but do not advise the client correctly for fear that any increase in cost might frighten them away.

Showrooms are full of too many different options from too many suppliers. Why oh why doesn’t each showroom reduce the number of products and become a little different from their competitors, not to mention a degree more exclusive? There’s enough product choice available to allow each showroom to

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become a master of their choices rather than jacks of all trades, all vying for the same business.

We should create our business from good service and correct advice. We sell bathrooms not discounts. Interior design and decoration are two fields in one.

Designers of calibre have a natural eye and talent, just as an artist must have a natural ability to draw. In either case, this cannot be ‘taught’. That ability is then enhanced and ‘fine tuned’ with some form of degree or recognised qualification from reputable design colleges. Trust me, this is not obtainable after four weeks.

That said, experience counts for a lot and I find it an insult to the design industry when graduates straight out of college are put straight on the showroom floor in an advisory capacity.

Designers look at space and instinctively know how to create more from what is there or, alternatively, the illusion of space where no further expansion is possible. Never is this better illustrated than in the erroneous assertion that to create the feeling of space you must

Lighting is an art form and deflection of light, even a dark room, has to be cleverly achieved. The floor in a room is the first consideration and the creation of height must be achieved in small spaces and glorified in large ones.

The decoration deals with the finished aesthetics. Colour and texture – both visual and tactile – correct accessorising, placement of product in respect of the client’s wishes, are essential.

Designers work with fabric and colour all day long. Bathroom showrooms do not.

Designers attend all sorts of exhibitions to stay ahead of their game and to keep constantly aware of new trends that apply across the soft furnishing range. These include sanitaryware, kitchens, tiles and gifts, as well as dedicated interior design shows.

Bathroom people do not.

Let us not forget the most important aspect of the bathroom. The bathroom is part of a home and must work with the rest of it – particularly if it is en suite. Are we not suggesting that the bathroom showroom designer is also going to design the bedroom, joinery, etc? Is that not a little arrogant?

It is time the high street started to focus on being the most knowledgeable and reliable advocates for the industry and to consider offering a design service both from working hand in hand, with local interior designers who in most cases would be happy to negotiate a small design fee. After all, the likelihood is that they will be referred many clients, many of whom will, potentially, use their services for other areas of their home.

The job of the showroom is to let the designer know which products work together, advise them of the technical allowances that should be made, so together with the client they will achieve the desired result within the desired budget.

Designers understand that the bigger spend has to be the functional part of the project, but they have the ability to create a silk purse from a sow’s ear with the finishing touches.

Inexpensive ceramics and good use of paint techniques, mirrors and accessories can transform a room in a heartbeat.

This was so well demonstrated in the Nineties, when home ‘makeover’ programmes were all the rage.

Then, one of my closest design associates, Laurence Llewelyn Bowen, headed the Changing Rooms programme. No one better illustrated how, on the best of budgets, a room could become a palace.

The customer deserves this. This industry deserves this. The bathroom is one of the most important rooms in the home. It is no longer unusual to have homes with two or more bathrooms.

Bathrooms add enormous value. If we are to be taken as seriously as kitchens, we have to educate our developers to respect the value of the bathroom enough to increase the spend and the allocated