



Kitchen King

‘For me, my favourite project is the next one. There is no feeling better for me than an empty page.’

– Friedmann Weinhardt, founder, Design First Interiors

By Don Wall

Master Ottawa designer Friedemann Weinhardt might be considered the Wayne Gretzky of kitchen design.

A creative free spirit and recipient of more than 100 awards from such organizations as the Ontario Home Builders Association, the Greater Ottawa Home Builders Association and the National Bath and Kitchen Association, Weinhardt does not operate from a fixed template when he undertakes his projects. For the 58-year-old German-born former draftsman, every kitchen is an empty canvas, awaiting inspiration.

He first felt moved by creative impulses in his early 20s and began designing furniture and selling his creations at the Stittsville, Ont.

flea market. His early work was motivated by necessity. “I needed furniture, so that’s how that started, I needed a bed,” he chuckles.

And his drafting background gave him particular skills he needed. “I had experience as a draftsman so I knew how to draw, technical drawing.”

He got into kitchen design while on the road as a territory manager for an appliance distributor and apprenticed at Van Leeuwen Boomkamp in Kanata. And, for 28 years he’s been turning rooms, kitchens primarily, into works of art out of his own studio, Design First Interiors.

Weinhardt draws inspiration from the people he works with. “Sometimes there is some inspiration from the space but there is always inspiration from the feeling I get from the cli-

ents, or from the personal effects that I see around, their taste in things ... There is always something from people’s things that speaks to me and gives me an indication of who they are so I can fit it into the design so it responds to them.”

But the designs must also be functional. “If they are not going to work, it doesn’t matter how beautiful it is,” he says.

A few years back, a competition judge, Linda Nolan of Ottawa’s Linda Nolan Interiors, inspecting a Weinhardt project that involved consolidating two penthouse apartments, was impressed by the designer’s vision and determination to achieve it. In order to create the kitchen he envisioned, he went so far as hire a crane to lift a huge slab of granite up the side of the building and lower it into the condo through the skylight. “When I saw it, I thought he had gone to another level,” Nolan told a reporter.

Weinhardt’s innate creativity gives him an advantage in producing kitchen designs that go to that next level. But he also benefits from good business sense, often arising from past career experiences, including knowledge of a working kitchen gleaned from his experience as a short-order cook.

He also keeps his business small enough that he can immerse himself in every project.

“We outsource everything except for the design, the design and the engineering is done in house, and that is where the control of things is. We spend an inordinate amount of time engineering the projects. We know how things are going to fit together, we have excellent design assistants, very good at drawing, and my eye will scrutinize the drawing to make sure that all the details are taken care of. And I am quite careful, so I like to double-, triple-check and make sure there are not a lot of surprises during the build part of the project.”

One of the bonuses from his competition successes is the ability to be selective in his clientele, often working with big budgets and big spaces that enable him to aim high. “We do a limited number of projects – we are not trying to get every job that comes around the block. We are kind of at the high end of the marketplace, which limits the number of jobs we are going to have access to anyway.”

Top left: two Design First projects illustrate how kitchens are becoming the lifestyle centre of the home; Friedemann Weinhardt with a typical bushel of awards, these won at the 2012 Ontario Home Builders Association Awards of Distinction dinner. Top right: this small project from Design First won National Kitchen and Bath Association awards for best of show kitchen and best small kitchen in 2013. Says Weinhardt, ‘It is a great example how even modest homes can benefit from good design.’ (Design First photos)



3 Trends in Kitchen Renovations for 2014

Multi-award-winning kitchen-design specialist Friedemann Weinhardt identifies three trends that homeowners, looking to renovate their kitchens, are fashioning.

Kitchens as Lifestyle Centre

“Twenty-five years ago the kitchen business was driven by cabinets, cupboards, places to put stuff, that’s what it was all about. It was a commodity industry, and it still is to some extent, but for the most part now it is a lifestyle industry. People enjoy entertaining, they like the open concept, it’s not a room that’s separated any more from the eating area, so an open-concept design is probably the most prevalent trend that we see.”

Appliances Aplenty

“Equipment manufacturers have really come out with an unbelievable selection of products that you can build into the kitchen. You have storage for food and drinks, but there are also built-in coffee machines, wine fridges and speed ovens, which are a combination microwave and oven, and also steam ovens ... Clients are enjoying putting them into their kitchens so that they can have a wider range of functionality.

“Milk steamers are a function you can have in built-in coffee machines from Miele. Miele has an unbelievable selection of products from coffee machines to cooking and cleaning to dishwashers, it goes on and on, it is incredible.

“(To accommodate them all) “is very technically challenging, but I enjoy that a lot.”

Personalized Kitchens

“The third trend that I could mention is that people really want highly personalized spaces, so they want the design to respond to them. (The challenge for renovators is) to find out who people are and deliver a design that is innovative and is personally responsive to them.”