

ABOUT DESIGN FIRST

Articles

Steve Irwin, Impact Staff Writer

Friedemann Weinhardt has always been a creative person. He's a born designer who holds a strong sense of what kind of design looks best for a particular home.

Through Design First Kitchens, the home renovation company he opened up in 1986, Weinhardt has combined his creative mind-set with years of experience in kitchen sales and design, as well as his experience with serving the public into a satisfying and successful venture.

Weinhardt says the name says it all -- that design should be the first consideration in any home renovation, something he says differs from client to client. "The name came from the concept that everything of value begins with a design first. It doesn't matter if it's a bicycle, a car or a kitchen. It all starts with a good design," he says.

The concept has been key in the marketing strategy for Design First Kitchens. Weinhardt says much of the company's business comes from word of mouth, through past clients that have appreciated the commitment to excellence. Design First's reputation for quality has also been enhanced by being a perennial recipient of housing awards for its kitchen and bathroom settings. Weinhardt says it's nice to get recognition from the industry, particularly because he doesn't possess a lot of professional training in design. But while he feels he he can do whatever he feels is right through the designs of he and his staff, he doesn't compromise on the quality of the product. "I have turned away work," he says, "If someone wanted me to do something that I thought was bad design, I wouldn't do it. Integrity is important. If my designs get compromised just for money... there's no way that I can do shoddy workmanship because someone insists it. My own reputation is well-respected in Ottawa, and I don't want to change that. In the long-run , that's important."

A prime motivation for starting the business, Weinhardt says, was the renovation industry's main focus selling cabinetry. "Cabinetry is just a small part of kitchen renovation, and there wasn't a whole lot of people putting the whole thing together," Weinhardt says. "What I set out to do was to accept the responsibility for the entire project, which meant not only doing the cabinetry design, but selecting the appliances, the finishes, the lighting design and the project management. We developed a very specific method for clients in our renovation process to do that. It results in very satisfied clients because they hand over the responsibility to one person." A key factor of success in the last ten years, Weinhardt says, has come in choosing suppliers very carefully. To me, a supplier is almost more important than a customer. Some of Design First's main suppliers are renowned for quality in the kitchen renovation, including names like Beckerman, Thermador, Miele and Gaggenau. Subzero, who do integrative work involving built-in

appliances, and Franke & Blanco, involved with plumbing work including sinks and faucets, also have a strong relationship with Design First Kitchens.

Weinhardt admits it's a challenging industry, and challenging as well to run a business in often shaky economic times. But he considers himself fortunate to be able to make a good living at something he truly enjoys. "Over the last ten years, there's been times when I've wondered whether it's all been worth it, or if the pressure and the strain and drive is enough to keep me going. But, generally speaking, I'm a very optimistic person. Take care of things, and things will take care of you."

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