

Intelligent design

A GOOD INTERIOR DESIGNER CAN SAVE YOU MONEY IN THE LONG RUN, SAY WILL AND HUW

He stood there in a semi-trance-like state, eyes closed, arms stirring the air around him as he summoned up his vision. And then, like an overexcited child: "I've got it, I've got it. I'm seeing... (dramatic pause)... pebbledash. Everywhere. Walls. Ceiling. Pebbledash. Everywhere."

We're standing in a fully functioning Bengal Fried Chicken a few days after finally agreeing terms for the leasehold. The name is somewhat misleading; it's really a kebab shop in disguise and the air is thick with the not unpleasant smell of doner and garlic sauce.

"Erm... we just want to do a comfortable neighbourhood bar... I'm not sure a pebbledash cave is the answer..."

"But just think of the texture. So much texture. Hang on a minute... Yes. I'm seeing a glass bar as well. The contrast in the textures will be sublime."

That was our first experience of an interior designer and he succeeded in putting us off his whole profession for a very long time. We soon parted company and ended up tackling the greasy kebab shop on our own.

Although not totally painless, the result was roughly what we wanted. It certainly



wasn't a design classic, but it became a comfortable, neighbourhood bar – Redchurch.

When we did our second place we again brought in an interior designer to have a look. This time the brief was 'friendly Mexican bar and restaurant, but no stuffed donkey Mexicana nonsense'.

The designer's verdict had a familiar ring to it: "I'm seeing... (dramatic pause)... concrete. Everywhere. Concrete floor, concrete walls, concrete bar. Just think of the texture."

We gave up. Never use an interior designer. All they care about is 'texture' and lots of it. We did it on our own once and it kind of worked OK, we can do it

Hawksmoor: "The first chairs we bought had a habit of falling apart – not a good look when the spend per head is often £100-plus"

on our own again. All you have to do is pick a few paint colours and find a few bits of furniture. It's the easiest job in the world...

We soon realised there was a bit more to it than that. We got a bit of help from a friendly Tasmanian furniture dealer who had a shop just round the corner and who later 'starred' (if that's the right word) in a one-season ITV antiques quiz show alongside Carol Vorderman (a lovely woman, apparently). Between us we took on a failing French bistro and turned it into Green & Red; a run-down estate pub that we turned into the new, improved Marquess Tavern and a Turkish restaurant which became Hawksmoor.



Huw Gott and Will Beckett

Along the way, we made so many mistakes that it has made us realise how valuable a good interior designer can be. And at last we've found a few who are seriously good and they have restored our faith in the profession.

"We thought we were saving money by doing it ourselves, but in the long run it has cost us a great deal more than we saved. Our reclaimed wood tables at Green & Red fell apart within 12 months, and when we replaced them with slightly smaller ones we found that we could get an extra 12 covers in, which for a 60-cover restaurant is a big difference. And we've only just got the basement looking right (two years after we opened).

SCAVENGING FOR BARGAINS

We have saved some money. Huw's a bit of a cheapskate and is always on the lookout for bargains. He's had some successes (75 very solid and stylish £6 chairs for Green & Red) and some failures (chairs that had a habit of falling apart for Hawksmoor, not a good look in a restaurant where the spend per head is often £100-plus). His most audacious bargain, though, was a Hawksmoor cabinet that he found on the side of the road in a particularly insalubrious part of Hackney. Drive-by interior design.

Unless you're doing a very small, very simple project we would recommend you get a good interior designer involved as

"Doing it ourselves, we made so many mistakes that it has made us realise how valuable a good interior designer can be"



THREE OF THE BEST

STUDIOILSE

Led by legendary designer Ilse Crawford, a head of department at Design Academy Eindhoven, in the Netherlands. Its projects include Soho House New York, Cecconi's and the Grand Hotel Stockholm. We're lucky enough to be working with Studioilse on a new consultancy project. Seeing good designers at work has been a real eye-opener for us (we just wish we'd met some a few years ago...)

FORSTER INC

Named Best Interior Designers at 100% Design in 2007. Talking to Rachel Forster it's clear that as well as an eye for design the company has a commendable obsession with the unglamorous side of things – functionality, storage, usability, logistics. One of the designers has 15 years' experience at the coalface in the bar and restaurant industry so they know how important it is to get these things right. That's not to say that Forster's places don't look good – keep an eye out for two new openings next year, Soutener in London and Deaf & Dumb in Manchester, to see what we mean.

MAKILEE DESIGN

Responsible for designing a whole host of award-winning bars, including Clapham's Lost Society and Cardiff's Buffalo Bar, these guys are on the cutting edge of bar design. As well as the usual interior design and project management services, Makilee has developed a One Day Design Consultation.

It's ideal for people who want to use the services of an interior designer but don't have the budget to go the whole hog (their One Day service costs £1,000, much less than usual interior design fees). After spending a day on site talking in depth with the owner of the venue, Makilee then produces a design scheme that lists items of furniture, wallpaper, paint and fabric samples, where you can buy them and how they should be used.

Green & Red: Huw and Will kitted out the bar without the services of an interior designer but say the decision cost them more than they saved

early in the process as possible. And keep a close eye on what they're doing, look carefully at any drawings they produce and consider them from a practical point of view: is there enough storage? Are there enough waiter stations? Can floorstaff easily service the tables as they've arranged them?

It's unlikely that your designers will be experts at everything, so you might need to use some other specialists, such as an under-counter bar designer for the unglamorous functional bits behind the bar (sinks, ice wells, glass storage etc), a kitchen designer or a specialist lighting designer.

Above all, make sure your designer is a good one – watch out for danger signs such as an obsession with pebbledash or concrete. ■



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