



Q&A

Elaine Skinner is the founder of **Camellia Interiors**, an interior design practice she established in Cornwall in 2003. The business now has two showrooms in Rock and Truro, and employs a team of 16 full-time and contractual staff. Camellia is one of the only British Institute of Interior Design (BIID) qualified and accredited practices in Cornwall, and specialises in creating luxury and contemporary interiors for a wide range of properties.



How did you start out in interior design?

My mother was an interior designer and my father was a developer, so I grew up immersed in it. I did a degree and a masters in design and about 20 years ago was invited to come down to Cornwall to teach at Falmouth University. I was working in London at the time and immediately fell in love with Cornwall. I'd been brought up in Dorset so knew the coast, but Cornwall had everything I liked about Dorset, without the bits I didn't. I landed a job with a design practice as a result of the university work and never looked back. When children came along, I decided I wanted to work for myself and set up my own company. That was 19 years ago.

What's the secret of your success?

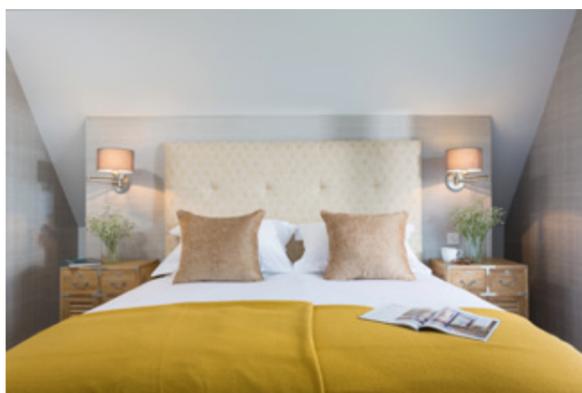
It comes down to two things: process and a confidence to question the brief. I've always believed that a lot of designers are capable of designing properties and giving a client what they want. What is different with us is *how* we do it. We pride ourselves on being fastidious managers of the process. Our design work is probably 5% of our time; the rest of it is the paperwork. We're extremely tight and nothing is left to chance. We use good people and allow them to charge correctly, then they know they've got to deliver. Many of our clients are time-poor and often have a finite amount of time here to relax. They don't want the inconvenience of delayed jobs or unforeseen issues. When they arrive, they want everything to be 150%, and we get that. So we battle on their behalf and do not allow tradespeople to say "sorry, I'm two weeks behind". It's all about paperwork and ensuring you have trusted suppliers. Secondly, we'll question the brief if we don't think it's right, and invariably win business as a result. Clients hire you for your insight, expertise and experience, not purely as 'yes' people.

Would you say the bulk of your clients are holiday homeowners?

No. Our clients cross the full spectrum - those who use us for their own homes and those who use us for holiday accommodation. We have two showrooms - Truro and Rock - and a Camellia client is as much the customer who'll come in to buy a tin of paint and have a cup of coffee, as the owner who commissions us to manage a full spec project. Many designers dismiss the smaller jobs, but that paint customer eventually does up a room, and then a house and has come to us throughout.

What are you currently working on?

We are at various stages of different jobs. At any one time, we would probably have about 20 soft furnishing jobs on, from someone wanting to replace a set of curtains to someone else who's bought a house and needs window



treatments in every room. At the moment, we probably have five furniture jobs, where a client's bought a second home, where they already have window treatments, it's freshly decorated but they need furniture for the whole house. Then we have our full-sized projects, where we're doing everything. We have one currently in Polzeath, another in Newlyn, one in Truro and one in St Mawes. It's normal to have about four projects of that size running at different stages at any one time.

How big is Camellia Interiors?

We have showrooms in Rock and Truro because we made a conscious decision about five years ago to split the north coast and central Cornwall. We plan for a third showroom in the next couple of years to form our Bermuda triangle!

In Truro there are six of us, and in Rock there are two of us, and then behind the scenes we've got a team of eight contractors that work full time for us. We need to expand and contract because of the nature of the business, so that's why we also offer the paint and smaller purchases. It provides the staff with security and allows us to retain talented people.

Do you have a set style?

No. I feel very strongly that you need to bring an open book to a project. As an example, we recently had a client in Mawgan Porth who bought a property overlooking the water for the plot - to knock it down and rebuild. They came to us and said, "Right, we've got a tricky brief. We are pro-sustainability, all our furniture is British, sustainable or re-cycled and is also very modern. We've bought this old bungalow that we intend to knock down and create an eco beach house, but we want to use it in the meantime."

They had three young children and didn't want to wait three years, so we needed to make the house work

for them straight away, whilst also working with them and their architect, on the phases of knocking it down. Their question was "how can we do that without too much interruption to our holiday, while ensuring that everything you put in now, also works in the new house? And can you do it in eight weeks, so we can use it for Easter?"

We pulled it off and they loved the interior design so much that they decided they wouldn't knock it down after all. The architect was livid with us! But this is a classic example of how you need to approach a job with no set idea and no intention of putting a stamp on it.

Where do you get your inspiration?

In looking. I think that's one of the key qualities of a designer. Whether it's product design, furniture design, interior design or any artform, you have to be aware of what you're seeing all the time. Looking around constantly gives you an eye for what works and, more importantly, what doesn't. You have to know what's wrong in order to get it right. Sensing everything all the time, of course, can be to your detriment because it can make you a real headcase! All my family laugh at me when we go on a skiing holiday or to a hotel, as I'll physically move the furniture. I do it because I know it shouldn't be there; it should be over here. They get it immediately when I've moved it, and it has an instant effect on making the space relaxing and more harmonious for everyone. Everyone benefits, but I'll often get cries of "just leave it alone Elaine".

What's your dream job?

I love it when a client comes to you with a challenging property and really wants to push the boundaries, to do something that truly fits their personality.

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