

THE STORY BEHIND NICOLE DESIGNS

Interior design is the art and science of enhancing the interiors of a space to achieve a healthier and more aesthetically pleasing environment for the end user.

IT is a multifaceted profession that includes conceptual development, space planning, site inspections, programming, and research, communicating with the stakeholders of a project, construction management, and execution of the design.

"It is the interior designer's job to plan, research, coordinate, and manage these projects", says Nicola Holden, the first born child of a Zimbabwean mother and an English father.

Born and brought up in Harare where she lived until the age of 20. She then left Zimbabwe for the UK where she studied Manufacturing Engineering at the University of Birmingham before working as a Process Engineer at Ford Motor Company.

While at the vehicle company she said she became increasingly aware that she needed to do something more creative in life, hence, she moved into the interior design profession.

Her company Nicola Holden Designs is something that excites her very much and it will be celebrating its 10 year anniversary in July 2018.

Explaining how she became an interior designer she said: "When I was looking to move from engineering



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into interior design I wrote to a number of designers asking for their advice. I received only one reply and that said 'don't bother!' However this only made me more determined. Because of my engineering qualifications I had a large amount of transferable skills, such as project management, understanding and producing CAD drawings and ergonomics. I enrolled on several short courses at KLC School of Design to fill in the gaps in my knowledge, before starting my own business."

KLC is one of the UK's leading interior and garden design schools offering full-time, part-time, blended learning and open learning courses.

Nicola works mostly in residential interior design for high net worth private clients. Projects can be anything from the design of just one room, to a whole house renovation. She works with clients to ensure that their home reflects their business success and individual lifestyle, and represents their style and passions. Her aim is to create eclectic, unique spaces that ooze luxury without taking themselves too seriously!

Her numerous projects included private clients across London such as the complete refurbishment of a luxurious apartment in Covent Garden, a large four-bedroom house in Kew, and the major extension of a five-bedroom house in Hartford, Cheshire. She is also very excited to be working on her first project in Zimbabwe – an exclusive boutique resort and restaurant.

Work has also included a number of commercial design projects – Detour Coffee Shop in Shepherds Bush, Megaro Bar in Kings Cross, and several small office spaces including one of the offices at the Zimbabwe Embassy. She also worked with Swedish brand Hästens, creating a bedroom display in their Chelsea showroom around their most luxurious bed, which retailed for £67,000.

She thinks that a good interior designer has empathy for their clients. He or she has to be able to get into their clients' heads in a very short space of time in order to be able to understand what their vision for their space is. One needs to be very organised to manage budgets and project delivery timescales, often working with tens of suppliers, craftspeople and tradesmen, regularly based internationally, and all working to one end date.

She also reckons that an interior designer needs to be a problem solver, which she believes her engineering expertise comes to the fore. The job also requires one to be confidently creative – as leading clients on this journey often involves coaxing them out of their 'greige' (combination of gray and beige)

comfort zones. In the end witnessing their reactions when they see the finished project is worth all of the hard work required to get there.

Although she doesn't have a formal Interior Design qualification she knows what colours and textures work together to create a scheme is intuitive, and the rest is engineering.

"I do believe in continually striving to expand my knowledge in this industry, keeping abreast of new material and product developments, building regulations, etc. I am also a Registered Interior Designer of the British Institute of Interior Design, the pre-eminent professional organisation for interior designers in the UK."

In her observation Interior Design has been slow to be recognised as a profession, as a lot of people assume that it only involves choosing paint colours and plumping cushions, which she called Interior Decoration.

She explains that Interior Design involves looking at the space as a whole, and working out how it can be improved upon, and the greater impact that it has on lifestyle, human emotions, among other things. Her advice is that when choosing to work with an Interior Designer, it is important to choose someone who is professionally recognised in the industry.

To her the importance of the role of an interior designer in this global village is that the interior design done right has the power to affect the behaviour of an environment's inhabitants, with the aim of maximising the positive effects of this relationship. Through interior design psychology, the performance and efficiency of the space and the wellbeing of the individual are improved.

Also, her belief is that as an interior designer, she has the responsibility to source products ethically, drawing upon the timeless and traditional skills of global craftsmen and women, and choosing products based on an environmental consciousness. "Good design should always tell a story."

What inspired her to get into this business? "That's a long story, but once I started working at Ford Motor Company, and could afford to travel and see the world, I started discovering the beauty of architecture – in Barcelona and Italy, India and Japan. Slowly I became increasingly aware of my passion for design, and the need to have a career in the creative industry. Interior design seemed like the best place to start!"

Nicola notes that the interior design industry, particularly in London, is incredibly competitive. However, her work has been featured in numerous print and online property magazines

in the UK, and she has twice been awarded Best of Houzz for Client Satisfaction. In 2016 she was awarded Female Entrepreneur of the Year at the Zimbabwe Achievers Awards.

On the challenges she faces in her profession in general, she pointed out that it was Brexit. "The current challenge facing my profession is, of course, Brexit. Quite a lot of the products that I specify for my clients are not produced in the UK, and so it will be interesting to see what trade agreements are worked out going forward."

Another challenge is that the internet means that clients often think that they can buy the identical products a lot cheaper online. However, although one can generally get what they pay for, quality doesn't come without a price.

"Also, the glut of home improvement shows on TV means that clients expect projects to be completed for next to nothing and in very little time. What these programmes don't show is that the client doesn't need to cover the cost of the designer or the trades, and that there are vast teams of people working behind the scenes to make things happen."

What does she think are the most critical elements that clients look for in an interior designer?

"As an interior designer, particularly within the residential industry, I work with my clients on a very personal level. Therefore, the most important element is whether or not that personal relationship is there. Do you get on with each other? After that, it is a case of does the interior designer have a style that you like? And finally, are they professionally recognised within the interior design industry."

Nicola is based in London, but she however does not restrict herself to working here.

She went to Borrowdale Junior School, and then Arundel High School until O' Levels before enrolling for sixth form at ILSA College, whilst getting secretarial qualifications at the same time.

She points out that though she "physically left Zimbabwe in 1993, my heart never left!"

Back home in Zimbabwe she thinks that interior design is a relatively unrecognised profession. "I think that a lot of people feel that they can 'do it themselves'. And whilst this creates perfectly nice homes, they do often lack the 'wow' factor and that using an interior designer will bring to the table, as well as a consideration of the how well the space functions, and what affect it has on the emotional wellbeing of the individual."

