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Re: Nick Prescott of "Style Within"

When I first contacted Nick Prescott, I had been living in my 3 bedroomed terrace for about 20 years, and aside from some essential maintenance and minor redecoration, the house was essentially as it had been when I moved in. The problems with the house were not only that it was rather shabby and needed redecoration and/or refurbishment both inside and out, but that the internal layout downstairs did not work. Specifically, there was a rather cramped galley kitchen in a small ground floor extension, leading off a small breakfast room and adjacent to an almost unused second living room (with no access from the kitchen). This whole area clearly needed rearranging in some way but I had no really clear idea of exactly how.

After some consideration I realised that there was so much work that needed to be done to undo 20 years of neglect, that I would have to "get someone in", not only to redesign the ground floor layout, but also to project manage the remaining refurbishment. I found Nick through his excellently designed website.

In his initial free "Stage 1" consultation I explained my requirements to Nick. We decided to concentrate first on the ground floor redesign. He immediately made a number of suggestions as to how the existing layout might be changed, and indicated the level of structural change which would be required (i.e. which walls would need knocking down!). He also confirmed that my budget was sufficient for the task.

We proceeded to "Stage 2" (Design and Specification). Nick first spent considerable time and effort establishing my tastes (styles, colours etc.) before producing two main design options. We quickly agreed the preferred option. This was to remove a single wall between the kitchen and living room, thus creating a kitchen-diner, and to turn the existing breakfast room into a "den", complete with inbuilt IT facilities and home entertainment (internet radio, TV etc.). The other major features included much enlarged folding-sliding doors into the back garden, and a skylight in the kitchen roof thus much improving the light levels. He also suggested that installing a downstairs toilet under the stairs would be a good idea and I agreed.

The details of the preferred option were then worked on by Nick for many weeks during which further details (there were many) were hammered out. Nick brought round samples of everything – flooring, kitchen work surfaces and splashbacks, fabrics, paint and so on. He also provided pictures of lighting, furniture etc. which he must have spent hours researching and which provided far more variety than would be available just from high street suppliers.

Once the design was finalised, I decided to proceed with Stage 3 (Project Implementation). From here on, Nick took full control of managing every aspect of the project. He first engaged an architect and structural engineer to draw up and approve detailed plans of the proposed structural changes (not only removing an internal wall but also including a small extension and rearranging the positions and sizes of all the external doors and windows in the kitchen-diner).

Nick then produced a shortlist of a number of main building contractors (who would do the majority of the work). He obtained detailed quotes (now including all the other necessary refurbishments to the house) and negotiated considerable savings from the originals. His negotiating skills, both at this stage and later in the project, saved me several thousands of pounds which not only covered his original design fee but also a considerable part, if not all, of his project management fees.

After we had decided between us on the main contractor, Nick obtained quotes from all the other contractors and suppliers to cover all aspects of the project. He produced a detailed cost breakdown including a "risk" budget to cover any unforeseen difficulties. This allowed me to give the final go ahead for the project with a high degree of confidence that I would not run out of money half way through. As the project progressed, Nick regularly updated the cost breakdown taking account of any variations (due to additional work being requested) and to account for risks either realised or mitigated.

Although I had been warned by the main building contractors that “it might make a bit of a mess”, I was rather unprepared for the reality. Within a few days of starting it seemed to me that the whole house had been devastated and it reinforced my opinion that I could not have possibly undertaken the project management myself. Nick however had clearly “seen it all before”. He spent considerable time on site, at first overseeing the main structural work, and later ensuring that all details of his design were properly followed. He was always calm and self-assured in his discussions with the various contractors which was in turn also very reassuring for me.

Even though there was a main building contractor, there were several other suppliers to be organised and coordinated (for example the installers of the IT and sound system), but again Nick took care of it all. In short I could just stand back and let it all happen, being only required now and then to take the odd (non-technical) executive decision.

At various stages during the project “requirements creep” (on my part) appeared. For example I asked Nick if he was prepared to do some additional design work for parts of the rest of the house: in the end he chose (with my approval of course) the colour schemes, carpets and curtains for all the bedrooms, hall and landing, furniture for the main bedroom and even designed the stained glass windows for the porch doors, all without complaint. Perhaps the most awkward thing he had to deal with was my very late request to install a water softener. I gathered that the builders were none too pleased, but Nick thankfully took all the blame.

In the latter stages of the project, Nick paid meticulous attention to detail of the finish: for example carefully checking all delivered furniture and fittings and rigorously rejecting any that showed any blemish; ensuring all kitchen units were exactly aligned (it took four attempts with the cooker hood) and finally compiling and managing the inevitable “snagging list” and ensuring that all issues were satisfactorily resolved.

Now that the project is complete (and brought in under budget) I must say I am delighted with the result. My entire home has been completely transformed and is now the envy of all my friends and neighbours. Whilst the interior is very smart and stylish, it is very practical and functional and a fantastic place to live.

In particular, the new ground floor layout really works for me – it is light, airy and spacious, not least of all because of the superb triple folding-sliding doors which occupy as much of the rear dining room wall as the structure would allow.

The new sound system enables me to listen to music in any or all of the downstairs rooms. I can listen, at the touch of a button, not only to internet radio, but also to my entire CD collection which has been “ripped” in lossless format to a hard drive. The sound quality is superb, not only through my existing “high end” system in the living room, but also from the new, discreet, colour-matched wall mounted speakers in the kitchen-diner. This, together with the new IT network, has brought my home into the 21st century.

If I had to pick out a favourite feature (both of mine and most visitors) , however, it would be the new, wide-board, oak floor, which covers not only the kitchen-diner, but also runs throughout the hall and to my mind gives a real extra touch of class to the whole project.

Working with Nick on this project has been a pleasure. He is a man of firm opinions and convictions, and his tastes in furnishings and décor are clearly rather more radical than my own. This however only added value and I am grateful that he persuaded me on many occasions to be less conservative than would be my natural inclination. On the other hand he would always respect my wishes with a good grace if I could not be persuaded. His project management skills are excellent and he is extremely hard working, reliable and conscientious. I have no hesitation in recommending him.

Jeremy Smallwood 23rd October 2011