

Refined By Design transformed a drab and dated '60s kitchen into this sophisticated, timeless space. The custom cabinetry was designed with simple, classic, clean lines, and every shelf and drawer was meticulously planned so the client could utilize every inch of space. Also, a custom-designed, integrated dining bench helps anchor the welcoming warm feel of the room.





Interior Designers
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Toronto's do-it-yourselfers risk extra costs and poor design when they plan without professionals. One woman is their solution.

Interview by Rita Smith

"Trust" and "respect" should be the first words that come to mind when you think about construction and renovation. For interior designer **Heather Hodgson**, these words are the foundation of any successful project. Without trust and respect—for clients, tradespeople, and suppliers—any project may be on the road to failure. *Canadian Builders Quarterly* caught up with Heather to ask how she's found success. She spoke with us from **Refined By Design's** office in Toronto.



Refined By Design At a Glance

Location

Toronto, ON

Founded

2009

Specialty

Interior design and home renovations

Scope of Work

Canada and the United States

CBQ: Was it always your goal to succeed as an interior designer?

Heather Hodgson: I was always an "artsy" kind of person, if that's what you mean. In high school, a guidance counsellor suggested a few art-oriented career programs for me, and one of them was interior design. It sounded perfect. I studied at Ryerson University and then went straight to work as an intern.

Has it turned out to be the career you imagined when you were in high school?

It is not as glamorous as I imagined in high school. As an "artsy," I was surprised at how much construction, math, physics, and technical information I needed to know, as

well as the creative side. I am a very organized and detail-oriented person. These traits turned out to be just as important as the artistic aspects of design.

For 15 years, your business has been built almost exclusively on referrals. Why do people recommend you so highly?

First and foremost, I listen. I listen to clients when they are telling me what they want; I listen to tradespeople when they tell me what can and cannot be done. I ask my trades for their ideas—they are enthused to be part of the vision. They love it, and clients love it too.

In the past, working for other firms, I was dismayed at how often the client's wishes or



This page: A small kitchen and dining room (above) were combined to create a rustic, contemporary entertainment kitchen (top). The client's love of the outdoors is seen in the stone-fireplace-style hood fan. The project also features Shaker-style custom cabinets and quartz countertops.

lifestyle were disregarded. In my own business, I endeavour not to push my personal preferences or my “signature” on a project, but rather have the final design be a collaborative effort between me and my client. The design, after all, must be tailored to say to something unique about the client—not about me.

What is the biggest threat to success on the project?

Negativity! There are some trades- and salespeople who treat their job as if it is a hassle to overcome. I try to avoid working with those people. They generally are not the type of people who put forth their best effort or show pride in their work.

I have built invaluable relationships with my trades. We get excited about working on a new project. We work as a team. When you listen to each other and treat each other with trust and respect, the most amazing outcomes are possible.

My trades and I often brainstorm ideas that create spectacular design solutions or simply solve a problem. Pride in your job is what I want to work toward, and a lack of enthusiasm or responsibility can make that impossible.

What changes have you noticed since you started?

The explosion of “do it yourself” TV shows has led people to believe they can do anything themselves. They attempt projects without the training, ingenuity, or the tools to get the best job done.

People undertake these projects believing they don't need a designer—then are surprised to find at the end of the job that there are mistakes, that things don't work well. As designers, we work to make sure that the job is done correctly in the most cost-effective manner. It's not just about knowing where to shop. I act as an experienced liaison between my trades and my clients.

I fear that the “do it yourself” attitude has also led to a loss of respect for experienced tradespeople. There is a reason they are called professionals! Repairing a poor design in the long run can cost more than doing it right the first time.

Have your marketing methods changed over the years?

Not really—it's still mostly word of mouth. One change I have made is to stop calling my initial meetings with potential clients “consultations.” That sounds like something you should charge for, and I'm never ready to do that at the first meeting. Now I call them “meet and greets.” There, I am introduced to the project, and the client is introduced to me and my process. Hopefully we make a great fit and together create an elegant, inviting space that is a reflection of my client's desired style. **CBQ**