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## What makes a designer great? For starters, a sixth sense for style helps

BY KELVIN BROWNE, NATIONAL POST

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The historical Chester, N.S., home, which Philip Mitchell just sold, has an elusive perfection to it.  
Photograph by: Handout photo , Philip Mitchell Design

Instinct is the most important quality an interior designer brings to a project. I'm not discounting experience. Knowing how things should be made, and anticipating the issues a particular decision could generate, helps jobs run smoothly. The most important experience is gained from visiting great rooms, unique houses and, in general, looking at remarkable things that train your eye to appreciate beauty, both conventional and not. You don't learn this kind of thing in school.

When you walk into a room, you know if a designer has good instincts. Does the room - or entire house, for that matter - seem right? "Right" doesn't mean predictable or nice. The interior can be any style, minimal to baroque. Right doesn't mean everything matches or looks like a department store showroom. That's too easy. Right means the furniture is reconciled with the architecture, and something new and personal has been created.

I ruminated on this "instinct versus a conventional sense of school-inculcated design dos and don'ts" when I walked into Toronto-based designer Philip Mitchell's house in Chester, N.S. I thought, "This fellow's got a real instinct about how to organize a house." It was stylish, just the sort of place that ends up in magazines, and it did, but not in a facile way. It had personal charm: The scale of the furniture and house were empathetic, and there was a mix of old and new. (Philip and his partner have since sold the house and are building a new one a few blocks away.)

"I didn't go to design school very long," says Philip, when I ask him about how he got into the business. "While I was at Sheridan College, I started to work for Powell & Bonnell, then went full time there, left Sheridan and never went back. After that, I worked for Brian Gluckstein," he says. "I learned a tremendous amount there as well." Next, Philip went out on this own, and has been busy ever since.

Interestingly, although Philip works out of Toronto, he has a growing number of clients in Eastern Canada, which allows him to spend more time in Chester. "I have about 12 clients in the East; it's really growing," he says. He cites one intriguing project, a house in Chester on the ocean next to the yacht club. "The Cavendish House is the whole package - architectural restoration, some renovation and then a complete interior. It's a wonderful opportunity to bring an important house back to life," he says.

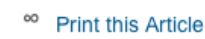
Philip clearly has an affinity for the Maritimes, which could be because he suits the place so well. His elegant but low-key manner fits with the East Coast sensibility, and he's also a bit quirky.

In terms of his approach, what designers does he identify with? "Michael Smith and Jeffrey Bilhuber come to mind. They both start with the architecture and the needs of the client and work from there."

What advice would he give someone starting his or her own business? Philip laughs, suggesting he doesn't want to sound like he has all the answers, but explains that, "I've always been focused on quality and have been lucky to find clients that want that, too, from architecture to furniture. Quality takes longer sometimes, but it's worth it. I listen to my clients and try to make sure we're doing what they need. We've had many clients for years. There's trust."

I said it takes confidence to have your own design business. Philip agrees: "You have to believe you have something good to bring to the table or it won't work."

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