

Episode 231

How to design an interior for a modern home – with Gabrielle Blackman

The show notes: www.houseplanninghelp.com/231

Gabrielle: I trained as an artist and I love doing that but I also really like working with people. So, I realised I wanted to do something a bit more collaborative, hands on and busy. So, I got into interior design.

I worked for an amazing woman called Mary Fox Linton who's one of the original minimalist interior designers, and she trained me. So, I was a design junior for her. Then I went into doing yacht design, so I had a great, fun few years designing super yachts, the interiors of super yachts, which was amazing. It went from there really.

I've just been lucky enough to work for some of the most incredible designers in the business. So, then it just made sense for me really to make my own company, and I absolutely love my job. Every day is a good day in interior design.

Ben: Can we go through the process? Is it the same for every piece of interior design?

Gabrielle: Yes. There is a process that I have developed and that I follow for every job. So, no matter how big or small, you've just got to start with the basics.

And for me, it always starts around space planning and layout.

Ben: What do you mean by that?

Gabrielle: So, where is your furniture going to go? How are you going to use the room? You need to get to know your clients, get to know their lives and work out where they are. Do they have young children? Do they have dogs? Are they really busy? Do they work from home? How are they going to use each room?

You really need to get into the heads of your clients because what may seem obvious to them might not be obvious to you.

Ben: Where is the line between the architecture and interior design? Are they two different things? Are they one?

Gabrielle: They should always be one, but this is where a lot of conflict arises on site. Because the use of the house and the practicality of the house can sometimes come into conflict with architecture.

So, an architect might want a floor-to-ceiling piece of beautiful glass, so you're celebrating the space of the room and all of this wonderful natural light, and then I come in and say, 'but where are we going to put the furniture? How are we going to store stuff?'

There's always a bit of give and take, but it's a really healthy, robust relationship because out of that often arguing and stress comes the right house for the client. So, I love working with architects. It's always really exciting, but there's sometimes some shouting involved. But we get something amazing at the end of the day because it's two skills that slightly butt heads, but you create something beautiful.

Ben: I stopped you in the middle of your process. You were talking about the spaces first of all.

Gabrielle: Yes. So, the basis of any good interior design has to start with the layout. So, the furniture layout and the way the space is going to be used and the flow of the space. Which makes it sound more complicated than it is. It's really just about how are people going to move around this house and what do they need to keep in each room.

From then, you layer up your electrical and lighting plan, the plumbing, the heating – but that all needs to flow from your layout. Because otherwise, people put in radiators in places where you wanted to put a sofa.

You need to be the boss of the layout and you need to start that and get in absolutely from day one with that, and all the other trades need to follow you. Otherwise, you end up in a really annoying situation where a client doesn't have the right electrical plan, or they have a radiator where they want to have a telly. Just crazy stuff can happen if you don't start with those basics.

Ben: When you came on board with our project, it was quite interesting to me that first of all, you immediately said that you liked what we had going. This was one of the intriguing things to me, that we spoke to a number of interior designers and it was clear that most of them hadn't even looked at the plans first of all. And then you made a suggestion about, I don't know, one of the layouts, the very first

thing before we'd even hired you, and you said, 'I'd move this to there.' And we thought, 'we haven't given you the up-to-date sheet,' because that's what we'd just done. That's when we knew you were in tune.

Do you sometimes find that, that you're in tune with your clients as well, or that can help cement the relationship? Because we've been chatting to you for, it must be, a year or so now.

Gabrielle: It's really important because you've got to be in tune with your clients. You've got to like them, and you've got to feel you understand them a little bit. Because you're creating the most important space imaginable for them and you need to be able to understand their way of thinking and really enjoy the job. Because it's a tough process and there are times when it's going to be frustrating.

It's a bit like designing a dress for somebody or cutting someone's hair. You need to have good communication and you need to enjoy getting to know those clients and want to deliver something fabulous for them.

Ben: What extra does an interior designer add? Because I've visited loads and loads of projects and sometimes you walk in and you just think, 'you've just brought all your own furniture and put it in here. You haven't thought much about the space. It could be a fantastic building.' So, what are you bringing? What will it feel like afterwards?

Gabrielle: A good interior designer should be able to interpret their clients' personality and stamp it on a building.

From getting to know you, Kay and your family, I wanted this to immediately feel like your house when you moved in, and for you guys to look natural and feel comfortable in it. I didn't want it to feel like a show-home that had nothing to do with your family. And we spent a long time getting to know each other and working out how you would like to live. That's why it's been great collaborating with you because you're also both very vocal. You know what you want really. So, it was an easy job for me.

It should feel full of personality, it should be incredibly practical, and it should look amazing. All the details that might be overlooked by an exhausted client who are under a barrage of decision making every day and having to deal with contractors, an interior designer should be able to come in fresh and fight for those extra details that makes it so lovely.

Ben: It never felt like anyone was stamping on anyone else's feet. It was quite nice because the key hires on this project, I felt, have all brought value. I guess that's another concern that you might have. Too many consultants spoil the broth. But not in my experience of this project. Admittedly, we've only got a handful of people, but I thought that was quite interesting.

Gabrielle: Yes. The build team have been amazing, the architects have been really good. It's been a really nice project actually. We all really respected each other's opinions and there's been the right level of communication.

The other thing is, you don't want too much communication, so everyone goes completely mad, but it's been really fun actually, and I'm really proud of it.

Ben: Mood boards. They came in at some point. Is that the next step or have I missed out something?

Gabrielle: Yes. So, once you've got your layout nailed and you've got your electrical plans, plumbing layout, you've sorted all the practicalities and how this house is going to work as a machine for people to live in, you then need to think, how do you want it to look.

The next layer is adding the mood boards. So, we're talking about paints, finishes, colour and everything. But that is something that people think is all I do, but actually, it's just one tiny layer. Because if you don't get the other bits right, it doesn't matter what colour you paint it. If you've created a rubbish, impractical room, it's going to look rubbish.

Ben: We did ours on Pinterest. Always Pinterest for you?

Gabrielle: I do use Pinterest a lot because for clients that are engaged and tech-savvy, like you and Kay, it's a quick way of communicating. Because people can respond to a picture like that. They know in their gut what's right for them.

It's a good way of organising. So, each room can have its own board and it's a good way of thinking, 'oh, what was that thing we were looking at last month?' It's quite a good record of the project developing.

Ben: Does that help us in the specification too? I left a lot of that to you and Kay.

Gabrielle: What I do is I create a mood board – it's actually more of a concept board because there's more information on there than you'd

imagine. It's not just airy-fairy pictures. There are real things on there. Then that is linked to the Pinterest boards, which is linked to the actual product.

So, for clients like you who are happy to do their own purchasing and would rather do that, it just means you think, 'okay, that's the lamp in Emily's bedroom. Click, we're going to buy it.' And it's a simple process and it's all there.

The other layer of doing interior design project is you need a big specification sheet – the Spreadsheet of Doom needs to be created.

Ben: I don't think I ever touched it once. I might have looked at it but ...

Gabrielle: That's excellent delegation, Ben. I'm really proud of you.

Ben: She's the organiser. She can do that.

Now, if I did one of these – I know this is your skill – but concept boards, mood boards – maybe someone can't afford to hire an interior designer – is this just you've got to have artistic flair? Can you give us anything else if we're trying to do it ourselves?

Gabrielle: Totally do it yourself. It's so brilliant. Pinterest is amazing. I would say if you want to make your own mood board, start on something like Pinterest, find an image that you love, that makes you just think, 'yes, that's what I mean.' Get that inspirational image and then have a look at it.

That is the amazing thing about the internet. You could Google 'modern rustic kitchen herringbone floor', whatever you're interested in, and start working out why you love it so much.

That's all a mood board is. I use one really fabulous inspirational image and then I pull out those key elements. So, you want a picture of the flooring, the loose furniture, the sofa, the lighting, whatever you've got, and then that's it. That's a mood board.

Ben: Is there a slight technique to reading it as well? You're never having just the floor. There's always something else going on in those pictures.

Gabrielle: I think it's important to note what you're talking about. That's why I tend to use one inspirational image that has a lot going on, and the other images on the mood board are all just a picture of the floor and a table and a lamp. Because otherwise, it's too confusing and people will get distracted by one detail they don't like.

You need one big inspirational image that's the feel of the room, and the rest of the things on the concept boards are all actual real items that you're going to put into that room.

Ben: Are you linking the rooms? Because if you walk through the house and you're doing a hundred different things, that would just be a bit weird.

Gabrielle: Definitely. The whole house should have a united feel. That's why I generally run the same flooring throughout each floor. It should feel seamless.

But I also think in a new build like this, where you have a sitting room that's open plan and then you've got the snug which is separate and we want it to have a different feel, we've had a dramatic change of wall colour in here because I really wanted those spaces to have a very different mood. So, this feels really cosy and cocooning and it's all about being together, and the open plan space is much more about natural light.

Talking to you guys about the way you like to live and how much the natural environment is important to you and the whole eco side of things, I love that idea of night and day and having a room that's all about natural light and the circadian rhythms and feeling awake and involved in family time there, and then when you're in this room, it really is about winding down and having space for the evening.

Ben: One of the interesting things – we tried to design this house with the idea of using all the space every day, and in this particular room, it's a TV room and we've put a second TV in the house, very low down. So, we haven't actually used it. It's going to be quite exciting. I think it's on our Christmas list from somebody to at least get a basic TV in here, so we can start finishing the day in here. But I think it's looking great.

Cost wise, I suppose that's something that we should mention. You're doing all of this. Are you living in a fantasy world until you've just got that Excel sheet to add it all up?

Gabrielle: Well, yes, you've got to set your budget and you've got to start working out what you want to prioritise. With any build, it's really important to do that as soon as possible. The key items never to compromise on are your floors, your doors, the bones of the house.

That's the thing. If you're really worried about your budget and think, 'where can we cut back?' don't cut back there. I'd rather you had simpler furnishings that you can build up over time. But I would

really advise, a beautiful floor you'll never regret, but putting down a cheap floor in a panic you really will regret. I'd rather you had no furniture for a year and a good floor.

Ben: And it does look fantastic, when we collected the keys to this house. That's something else I'd advise. People just enjoy walking around it with no furniture. I suppose that says something about your interior design, that it looked fabulous before there was anything in there.

Gabrielle: Exactly. And we chose a floor with that in mind because the way you guys live, you've got young kids, we wanted space in here. So, I wanted the negative space, the space with no furniture in, to feel really beautiful as well. That's why we went for this herringbone because it's just stunning and it looks amazing.

There's a lot of clean space in this house which again is very much driven by your taste, that you don't want a lot of clutter. So, the floor is the star.

Ben: What comes next in this process? Is there a little bit of a gap? We got everything costed up, we went to tender, and then Mark the builder from Mars Builders set off and there's not a massive amount that goes on. So, when are we next getting on the phone with you?

Gabrielle: The thing is, the next thing that happens is plans and mood boards meet real life, and there's always a lot of phone calls involved. So, the best laid plans – everything changes. It's about being flexible and not freaking out, at that stage, when whatever we thought was going to be perfect needs to be tweaked. So, there's always a lot of back and forth between a contractor and the designer to make sure we can stick to the plan as much as possible.

Ben: When we were ordering some of the things, it was a little bit strange because you've got it all on the mood board, but I noticed that too, that a lot of things, you just expect them to be online and available for a long time. So, what do you do when you're trying to source these items and they just vanish overnight? You just have to do them once and then do them again when you get a bit closer?

Gabrielle: Yes. It's incredibly frustrating because again, a project can unexpectedly take longer than you think, or things go out of season and out of stock, and you just need to keep re-specifying and it takes a long time. Silly, crazy things that you think would be easy take longer than you think.

Interior design is not a straight line. You've got to keep changing, keep tweaking, keep adjusting to real life and reality. It's constantly evolving.

Ben: We're sitting and staring at a couple of built-in units. Luckily, you just took it on yourself to tell us, 'why not have some bespoke stuff?' And this was genius because Mark and his team, very gifted at carpentry, and we've got this all around the house in various key locations. It's just given everything a lift. Can you talk through some of those, and actually, if you've got a good carpenter, how simple they are?

Gabrielle: That's the thing. Working with fantastic trades will make a house. What I love about bespoke joinery is it will never go out of fashion. If you do some really beautifully made but simple built-in shelves and cupboards, you need that storage anyway. Every family needs more storage than you can ever imagine, and cupboards are just the source of all happiness, so that's great. And having them beautifully made, it just means you'll never be bored of them.

Ben: But it's not complicated, anything that you've created here. There's a little bit of symmetry going on. Tell us about the back hall, boot room area details. Because again, it's a very simple idea that has just come out so well and we get loads of compliments on that.

Gabrielle: I absolutely love that space. I love making neglected back-of-house spaces feel really luxurious and interesting. I think that space, having the tongue-and-groove detailing that we specified – so, we made it wider and a simple v-groove rather than a more traditional cottagey feel because I want this house to feel rustic but also contemporary. So, we lifted the detail, we made it very crisp and very simple, and because Mark is such an amazing joiner, everything lines up. It looks really effortless, it looks really beautiful and it's just an amazing space.

There's a lot of doors in that little hall. That's why we made everything in line with the tongue-and-groove panelling because we wanted those doors to visually disappear, but also for that space to still feel interesting and loved.

It is one of our favourite spaces in the house now. It's great.

Ben: Do you have a little bit of a repertoire? It would be intriguing for me to go and check out a few of the projects that you've worked on. I guess that's a silly thing to say because you've got all the DIY SOS stuff. So, I must have looked at multiple different – but are there

certain things that keep coming back or are you just constantly wanting to try new things?

Gabrielle: I'm always inspired by my clients and my clients are all different. That's why it's such a fun, wonderful job, that when you think you've tried everything, then you meet a client who's got some crazy idea or has a completely different style of house.

Working with you guys on this house, which is a modern house, with your tastes, but I'm also doing beautiful Georgian houses with old master paintings in them. So, every client is completely different. Again, the dress making analogy, it's like making a beautiful dress for someone. You've just got to look at them, who they are and what they'll feel comfortable with.

No project is ever the same but the principles of working with fantastic trades, having good communication and getting those basics of layout and lighting right are the same with whatever project you do.

Ben: One of the strangest things of moving in, is that you forget a lot of stuff. It's just a home. But for one reason or another, when we got on the hotline to you, some of the most stressful things are little things like choosing the plug sockets, and light switches et cetera. Why is that and what support do you offer?

Gabrielle: Building a house or doing anything to your house is really stressful. You've had your nest upset, you're spending loads of money, you're working with people you've never worked with before – it's really, really stressful. Working with an interior designer should help because you've got someone in your corner. You've got someone in your corner who's experienced, and they are your agent on-site. They should be fighting for you one-hundred percent and can take a step back because they're not emotionally overwrought and exhausted by the experience, like every client gets. They can say, 'no, let's fight for that.'

Ben: You can get this wrong though. I remember my mum saying, when we said that we'd hired an interior designer, 'you've got to be careful. We hired one once and it was an absolute waste of money.' I would not say the same about you at all. You brought so much value here. So, how do you get that right?

Gabrielle: Thank you, Ben. That's so sweet.

You've just got to find the right person for you. It's just like finding a hairdresser. Just go with someone you feel you can communicate with and understands you.

The fee structure should be done in such a way that you feel comfortable with it and it's not an open chequebook because that's really stressful. So, I think chunks of work that are defined, so you as the client are not feeling like, 'oh, I've agreed to have this crazy woman in my life forever, to charge me loads of money.' It needs to be budgeted for like every other part of the build.

Ben: It's worth pointing out that this is the first time today that we've actually met you in the flesh. So, you've had a real grip on things even though emails, photos, all of that sort of stuff – you feel like you know what's going on?

Gabrielle: Yes, and I know this house. I could draw it in my sleep. I'm obsessed and completely know every bit of this house. Even though weirdly I haven't been here before, which is really unusual – that is unusual. It's just the way our schedules have worked for this project, which is crazy.

Ben: I don't think it really matters.

Gabrielle: It's worked somehow.

Ben: What about the things that we've been doing today? We have started on the finishing touches. How does that work or is it just moving things around? How did you prep us up before today?

Gabrielle: Well, this is the funnest bit, but also the most stressful bit. Because if you think of a build as like running a marathon, you're at the end of the marathon. Everyone's really tired. And the house needs to be dressed and you need a bit of help and reinforcement. So, I was going to be here today, by hook or by crook, to get this house styled and dressed.

What we wanted to do was use all of your existing things, get them all out, and work out what we were missing. And actually, we're not missing that much. It looks absolutely gorgeous. But we just need a few more pieces to finish it off.

But it's always a great thing just to clear the decks and get out all your old – because there may be things you've forgotten about that actually look wonderful and you look at them with a fresh eye. I think we're just missing a few little bits and bobs and then it will be completely finished.

Ben: Just finally then, a couple of things. I know if I had been doing the interior, I would have hit moments where things were going drastically wrong. What can you do if again, you're tackling this

yourself and you just think something's not right here? Can you still fix it or is it repainting again?

Gabrielle: I think you can always fix it. And I think if it feels wrong, I think listen to that little voice and listen to yourself. Because something that might be really in fashion or that you're being slightly pressured to do because it's easier for the build, if in your heart you think, 'it just doesn't feel like me,' sleep on it but just stick to your guns. It's your home and that's a really important thing.

It's your space and don't be afraid to make the unpopular decision. Interior designers do it every day. That's why everyone hates us.

Ben: And finally, any tips? Anything useful either from just your experience over the years? Anything jump out at you about getting great interiors for self-build in particular?

Gabrielle: I think the most important tip is to measure everything.

Ben: That's a good one. It sounds so silly but that is a really good one. A classic example was the sofas that have just arrived, we measured one dimension because we were just thinking about it in the, say, width, not thinking depth.

Gabrielle: Yes. Measure everything. Be confident in your tastes because it is your home and you know what you like. You are the expert on you.

Ben: Can you start creating a mood board almost before you build a house? There's a lot of time that you have. The trouble is, once you get into the thick of it, time vanishes. So, can you be doing that as a little project before you have a house?

Gabrielle: Absolutely. I think before you even meet your first builder, get your mood boards done, get your layouts done. Even if it's just sketches in your head.

I think the biggest mistake people do is they don't do enough prep. So, they're asking builders to quote for something that they don't know what they're quoting for. So, they've missed out the fact that you actually want glazed doors and herringbone floors and a suspended fireplace or something. You need to write all that stuff down. Then you'll have a chance of actually getting an accurate quote. I always write my own quotes for builders. I write it all out, so everyone knows exactly what they're doing.

But all that creative thinking needs to happen before, and then you'll be able to achieve it. Because it's too late by the time it's been built.



You know what it's like. The build beast runs away with you and then it's too late.

Ben: And that's a good place to leave it. Gabby, thank you, not only for having a chat with me today but thank you for everything that you've brought to the house.

Gabrielle: It's been an absolute pleasure and I'm so proud of you guys. It's a really lovely home. Well done.