



 BUSINESS PROFILE

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ALL-ENCOMPASSING DESIGN

Woodbridge firm designs interiors to improve homeowners' lifestyles

BY TRACEY ARIAL

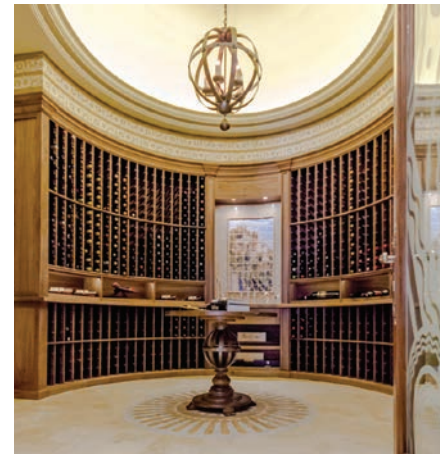
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AN INTERIOR DESIGNER with 27 years of experience says her ability to use colour, lighting and texture to create beautiful luxurious spaces is secondary to making sure they meet user needs. "Clients have to understand that designers have a key role," says Josie Abate, the owner

of Ambience Design Group, a five-person firm based just north of Toronto. "We view every project as a whole. We can propose materials, customized elements and information at every level so that there's a synergy between the client, the designer, the contractor, the architect and sometimes the subcontractors."

Abate's leadership philosophy appeals to the many local homeowners her firm attracts. With the typical project surpassing 10,000 square feet, her clients have neither the time nor the inclination to deal with misunderstandings.

Abate has also worked with commercial retailers in downtown Toronto and cottage owners up north. Whatever the project, her team focuses on identifying and communicating a united vision with everyone involved.



They recently worked on a project in which one of the owners couldn't visualize plans using samples and swatches. To enable that owner to contribute to decisions about furnishings, hand-made cabinets and colour, Abate's team drew renderings for almost every room in the house. The many accurately coloured, scaled drawings made the project real for the client. In the end, however, the extra work ensured the owners got the home they wanted and a keepsake book of the construction process too. Elevation drawings helped her to persuade another client to increase his hotel lobby renovation budget to upgrade materials.

Occasionally, Abate has been brought into a project too late, such as the time a client had to redo part of his roofing to make room

for recessed lighting. "Normally when we're planning lighting, we work with the contractor to take into consideration the structure, the studs...there could be also the HVAC," says Abate. "We take pictures so we know where everything is before the drywall goes up."

Abate integrates wellness elements into each space: green walls, artwork reminiscent of nature, natural lighting and proper ventilation. She also adds features that make spaces fully accessible; all of the elements work together to improve living. "Store fronts now need ramps. Bathrooms have to be big enough to accommodate turn-around space for wheelchairs. These changes are obligatory in public spaces, but with an aging population, we're trying to encourage homeowners

to also design their homes with accessibility in mind," she says. "Installing grab bars, door handles instead of knobs, modifying the height of light switches and counters ... good design works for everyone. A mom who's travelling with a stroller should be able to open a door. Everyone should be able to use a washroom with ease."

Abate and her team are so passionate about sharing their design expertise, they've created several pamphlets and videos that can be downloaded from the firm's website (www.ambience.ca). Guides and videos about renovating, style, green renovation and branding are available for free. Do-it-yourself design kits for couples, new homeowners and health enthusiasts will be available for a fee early next year. ☛