

When great design meets manufacturing excellence

From its origins in a barn on the edge of Dartmoor, Touch Design Group is now set to open the largest independent design studio and manufacturing workshop in the South West. But the team remain true to their artisan roots, as BELINDA DILLON finds out

Occupying a prime spot in the heart of Exeter's Marsh Barton industrial estate, the former glass factory is an imposing edifice from the outside and even more jaw-dropping inside - more than enough space to swing a light aircraft or 20, in fact.

And once Touch Design Group has finished the £1m re-fit, it'll be home to a multi-skilled crew of master craftsmen, cabinetmakers and architectural specialists - in short, the A-team of design and manufacturing, all under one roof.

From the road, passersby will be struck by a full-height glass façade, exposing the

stylish mezzanine studio above and the contemporary furniture and kitchen showroom below. Beyond that is an extensive samples library showcasing a mind-boggling range of hand-picked materials, some of which aren't available anywhere else in the UK - an invaluable resource for private clients, architects and interior designers wanting to tap into the latest developments and see working examples and full-scale samples of materials, fixtures and ironmongery.

Beyond the 'shop front' is the epic workshop space, which houses the company's state-of-the-art computer-controlled woodcutting equipment - known in the industry as CNC machines - as well as on-site veneering and spraying capabilities. Both elements will be linked by a full-width viewing platform, enabling clients to watch their products move from concept to reality, stage by stage.

"It's quite remarkable to think that 15 years ago Ed and I were making furniture in a barn in his back garden and now we've got the biggest design and manufacturing studio in Exeter," says David Crosby, co-founder of Touch Design Group with college friend Ed Tremlett. "We've come a long way."

A long way, indeed. David and Ed started working together after graduating from Leicester Polytechnic in product and



furniture design. After stints in London, they moved to Devon (Ed is originally from Kenn), each working on separate projects initially, as well as their own houses. Soon other jobs started to trickle in - designing and making walk-in wardrobes, kitchen cabinets, staircases - and soon they were buying specialist equipment, being commissioned to work on complete house re-fits, and needing bigger premises.

'Essentially, if you dream it, we can produce it'

"And that trend has continued," says David, looking around the vast space that is the new HQ for the ever-growing company.

Drawing on the knowledge and skill of the hugely talented team - the company has more than 150 years' worth of cabinetmaking expertise in the workshop alone - Touch Design Group is unique in its in-house mix of outstanding design, superior craftsmanship and the latest machine technologies. The result is that the team can conceive of and produce



TDG's design-team at work in the studio



One of TDG's stunning tailor made kitchens

strikingly original pieces for even the most difficult spaces, and their reputation for such has seen their project portfolio grow to include multimillion-pound coastal properties and luxury hotels.

"We're basically bridging the gap between the old world of craftsmanship and cabinetmaking, and very modern, design-led processes and materials, and saying that our clients can have both," says David. "Using customised software to run our woodworking machine means we can create all manner of complex 3D carving and curved designs. We've also just installed a specialist oven that enables us to produce curves in other materials, including Corian. We pride ourselves on being able to respond to whatever the client wants, in whatever material they want. It's a truly bespoke service."

Innovation and experimentation are key to their vision. Designs in their portfolio include an exquisite spiral staircase that demands to be stroked, such is the allure of its curves, and a complete library with a full-length carved frieze that gets my



A visualisation of the new studio and showroom

book-loving heart thumping. It's genuine artistry in wood.

"You won't hear phrases such as 'that can't be done' here," says David. "In fact, we're more likely to say, 'why not try this?' Such is our drive to push the boundaries of product and architectural design."

So, if I want a maple wood kitchen with leather doors and a concrete worktop, Touch Design Group can make it happen? "Well, we will always try to steer clients in the pursuit of excellent design," he says, with a smile, "but, essentially, if you dream it, we can produce it." ■
touchdesigngroup.com

Trend Focus

Of all rooms, the kitchen is where the latest materials and innovations find house-space first. TDG's kitchen specialist Richard Swift tells us what's in vogue...

Textured veneers and laminates

With the move away from a glossy aesthetic continuing, matt finishes are the ones to watch in 2015. Leading this design shift are textured veneers and laminates, which appeal to both the eye and the touch. Developed in Italy and Germany, these striking finishes can look sawn, scratched, brushed and sandblasted. Laminates are also being developed that combine texture and pattern to mimic natural veneers and processes. French company Oberflex (oberflex.com) offers an incredible array of laminates that resemble wood that's been gouged, clawed or hammered, or even weathered by the sea.

Cement

A number of Italian and German kitchen companies are now producing ranges that use thin layers of cement plaster to cover worktops, doors and side panels, in both smooth and textured finishes. Although grey continues to be a hot trend, the cement finish is also available in rich, earthy tones as well as vibrant pops of colour, including peacock blue and burnt orange (see oltremateria.it for the full range). It is also highly resistant to abrasion and liquids, as well as heat up to 120°. There are a number of eco varieties being developed.

Metal

Increasingly making their mark at the European kitchen design shows are metal-faced doors. Thin sheets (2-4mm thick) can be mounted onto aluminium frames to allow for hinges, or thin laminates pressed onto a core material of MDF or birch ply. Steel, aluminium, brass, copper and zinc can be used in their natural form or with applied finishes and textures for added drama. See casalesestyle.it

All materials mentioned here are available through Touch Design Group.