

IMAGE INTERIORS

A black desk with a chair and a floor lamp against a white wall. The desk is a dark, possibly black, wood or metal with a curved top and a small glass or light fixture on the front. The chair is a simple, modern design with a black seat and backrest and light-colored wooden legs. The floor lamp is tall and black with three adjustable shades. The background is a plain white wall.

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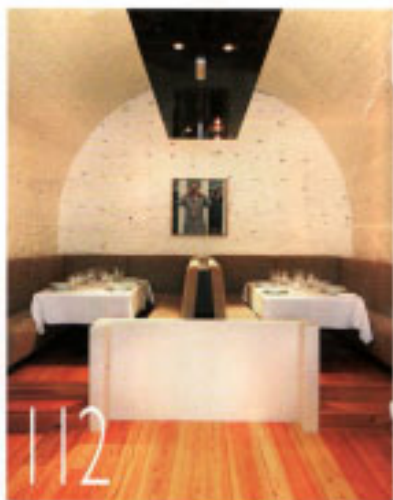
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Design democrat

Design doesn't just have to look good, says the highly influential Ilse Crawford, it must also be smelt, heard and felt.

PHOTOGRAPHY LISA COHEN WORDS BEN WEBB





PREVIOUS PAGE TOP LEFT Crawford's eclectic combination of old and new design in The Old Bell, Berkshires. TOP RIGHT Her Danish design heritage is apparent in the choice of simple lines and natural woods. BOTTOM LEFT Guest rooms are airy and comfortable. BOTTOM RIGHT Design icon Ika Crawford. THIS PAGE LEFT The comfy high-backed settles are covered with West coast blankets and shipped off with saddle leather leathers. The Eero chairs are from Hugh Hyslop, once the chair-making centre of England. ABOVE Loose cheeses are served with homemade scallion bread on hand-crafted buffalox powder plates. OPPOSITE PAGE She has tried to recreate the atmosphere of the traditional inn

In the dark design years BC, the design aficionados in black polo-necks discriminated their words of wisdom in hushed tones to a galiblic audience. But then came Crawford. Else Crawford, The democratic design saviour who gave the power of design to the people.

Okay, like all gospels, this tale may be over the top, but there is enough truth in it to give us an understanding of the esteem in which this unpretentious, determined and passionate designer is held. *Harper's Bazaar*, no less, recently acclaimed her as one of Britain's most influential women: "She has a knack for defining the way we want to live."

It gets better. Not only has she encouraged us to make our own design decisions, but she has helped guide us in a direction that is based on livability rather than just arch good looks. "Design," she says, "is not just visual. It should be smelt, heard and felt."

She started her design life early – as soon as she could understand the words of her mother, who came from the design hotspot of Denmark. Exposed to design at such an early age, an interest in interiors was natural. "I'm not reverential about it," she says. "I don't see it as an end in itself. It's not about scoring points. It's more about shaping human experience."

Perhaps more than anything it is this skill in bringing life – the more souchy-feely parts of human life – into the design sphere that has led to her being upheld as a design guru, a marmite she wears easily. "That's for other people to say," she says a little wearily. "I just love design. I like going to work and doing it as well as I can."

Crawford came to prominence as a highly successful and influential launch editor of *Elle Decoration* in 1989 and her message was clear. "I wanted to take design to a wider audience."

Design is a process of enhancing life. Like cooking. When the cooking process is turned into some rhapsodized art from which the eating becomes secondary, it fails miserably. The proof of the pudding, as they say, is in the eating. And *Elle Decoration* provided a wonderful opportunity to examine why some designs work and others do not.

"Working on the magazine, I visited a vast number of houses," she recalls. "Many of them looked great and felt horrible, and many looked horrible but felt great. I was fascinated by that."

The launch of her design company, Studio16, followed, but leaving the magazine was not so traumatic. The vision for the magazine was replaced by the vision for her next design project. A good team is a good team and budgets are budgets. And she was soon the designer of choice for Soho House and Babington House supreme, Nick Jones. The UK's high-rollers, lavvies and design commentators loved how she updated the old-style club aesthetic with edgy modernist classics.

Interiors were the start. Now Studio16 works on anything from the Grand Hotel Stockholm to a nothings take on the angle-poise lamp. One of her latest projects is to breathe life into a collection of tired country inns in the UK. The Old Bell, Berkshire, is the first target. There are no preconceived ideas. Forget repetition and the etraai engendered by all those formalic chains that turn the spice of life into a drab, catch-all gank. "I'm fascinated by context," she says. "The particular story of a place. Its location and the way it has been used."



ABOVE: The Olde Bell has a 16th-century Tudor barn for big parties, a Matt House for medium gatherings and dining rooms for a dozen or more. ABOVE RIGHT: Guest reside in the comfortable and honeyed bedrooms filled with handmade blankets and locally made rush rugs. RIGHT: Crawford has combined a pleasing mix of comfort and style.



It is already easy to imagine the inn, which dates back centuries, filled with men holding tankards and horses whinnying outside. If there is a formula to what she does, it is to avoid formulae. So she did not buy up a job lot of old horse brasses and dusty books and defunct farming tools. She started from the heart. "The first thing I do is just work around and try to understand the context. From that I get a seed of an idea."

As in Ireland, many of the UK's pubs have had their character ripped out in the misguided belief that new is good, that clean lines and light-colored woods will get us splurging on cider on ice. Crawford's idea is to reinvent and celebrate the traditional English inn. Not a hotel, where the rooms dominate, but an inn, where the bar and restaurant are the heartbeat of the place. The Olde Bell has a 16th-century Tudor barn for big parties, a main house for medium gatherings and a dining room for a dozen or more.

It can be brave to go back to the future, but Crawford decided to reinvent the coaching inn. The key elements are: the building (nooks and crannies and open fires), food (local pies and cheeses and sofa bread and hearty puddings), English country materials (reed matting, Ercol chairs from High Wycombe, once the chair-making capital of England, and pewter plates), and curvy lodgings (homely and classy rooms) with handmade blankets.

It makes perfect sense. Why ship in minimalist chrome sofas from achingly cool Italian designers to enhance a pub stretching back to 1135, when you can use the craftsmen from good old High Wycombe?

"Materials are vital in creating an atmosphere," she says. "You always feel good in a wood-framed house with lime-plaster walls. And the great thing is that timber-framed houses are ecologically sound, too."

They don't be surprised if the Olde Bell prefers a little comfort and homeliness to that austere sense of design perfection beloved by many in the trade. Crawford adds: "Building and objects can be awkward like people. I'm touched by old people. It is the lack of perfection – the chink – that is the endearing thing."

But don't mistake a lack of perfection for a lack of perfectionism. "I hate carelessness," she says. Her own StudioIsle team members – including up-and-coming Irish designer, Jonathan Legge – are chosen for their passion and commitment. Crawford is also head of the Man and Wellbeing department at the Design Academy Eindhoven in the Netherlands, where they are researching the interplay between architecture, anthropology, neurology and lots more. "I'm fascinated by the link between the left and right side of the brain," she says.

There are many layers to design. If you are stuck on the visual you miss out on so much of the human experience. She believes the humanisation of design is a cause for optimism, as we create new living and work spaces that take into account the emotions. "Design is emotion and practicality," she says. "It is more poetic and not just about nicking boxes."

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