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PRAGMATIC VISIONARY

Balancing business acumen with creativity is key to this designer's practice

CO-FOUNDER OF O'BRIEN HARRIS, Laura O'Brien made the transition to kitchen design early in her career when she was recruited to open a flagship cabinetry showroom in the Chicago Merchandise Mart. In 2009, O'Brien, along with her European counterpart Peter Harris, founded the company that bears their names. The studio has three showrooms in Chicago and Grand Rapids and Petoskey, Mich.

How does your background influence the way you approach the design business?

Well, the way I approach the business of design is with a strong financial mindset. My dad was an accountant/CPA, and I was taught early on to be fiscally responsible. It is often the case that creative people focus their energy there, but I knew to be successful, you really need to make sure you are also running a strong business, or you will not have longevity.

My early career was spent in traditional environments, so my true aesthetic is still pretty traditional. I do get excited creating more modern rooms for clients, but my soul still gravitates toward traditional details and spaces that feel "collected."

What has been your biggest business challenge and how did you resolve it?

When I started out in 2009, I was very focused on having my own cabinet manufacturing facility. I wanted to make sure we could control the entire process of not only designing beautiful cabinetry but ensuring that the fit and finish at the end were exactly what we wanted. A design business is one thing, but the manufacturing business has been SOOO challenging. What we do is 100% custom made to order, yet we are doing it at a scale and with a production mindset. Creating standards in all our internal processes and having strong leadership in place are key. There have been bumps in the road, especially in the past couple of years with supply chain issues and increasing costs everywhere we turn. I do however love to see the finished



ABOVE In her work, Laura O'Brien focuses on both efficiency and aesthetics. Her design firm operates its own cabinet shop, producing bespoke products for its kitchen and bath projects.

Kitchen photo: Nathan Kirkman; Headshot: Katrina Wittkamp

product in the room with all the finishing touches – it makes all the daily challenges worth it.

What is the most important career lesson you've learned?

Honestly, I think it is learning to have patience through times of adversity. Look at your challenges and decide what lesson you are supposed to learn. Strive to seek out solutions and overcome the obstacles. With patience there always seems to be an answer, as long as you are actively looking for it.

What advice would you give someone who is thinking about entering the design business?

You have to be good and really good at selling yourself. Consumers and clients are very educated these days. Whatever aspect of design you are in, you need to be the expert, the trusted advisor. I'd also tell them that it takes time. Learn and work for the best people in your industry to gain as much practical experience as possible. Get the skills, build the team, and really strive for excellence!

Who are your design inspirations – and why?

I honestly love looking at what is going on in Europe and England in particular. I love the edited English aesthetic of DeVOL Kitchens. I could move into any of those rooms! They have a sense of calm that I just love. ●