

Gerhard Linse

# The man behind the designs

## He's complex, talented, visionary, and clients love him

By Francie Healy



**“Excuse the mess,”** says renowned designer Gerhard Linse about his office and studio on Colonnade Road in Ottawa.

But the “mess”, if you can call it that, is vibrant and full of light.

There are his drawings. There are photographs of clients’ children. There are binders, and books, and magazines, and blocks of glass shimmering in the windows. There are awards for his

designs – dozens of them, standing like soldiers on top shelves.

He might think it’s a mess, but it’s a happy space. It looks like the kind of “mess” you could create in.

However, Gerhard says he can work anywhere – and has: on the hood of a car, at a kitchen table, on a scaffold 30 ft. off the ground, working out the details of a chimney cap with a mason.

His designs, whether renovations or brand-new buildings, are brilliant, unique, richly-detailed, and sought-after. Almost all his clients come to him by world-of-mouth. They hear about him. They see what he’s done.

He listens to them. He finds out about them. He digs to see who they are, what they want. And then he creates for them alone.

He says he’s always had “one foot in the construction side” of design. That strong technical background is an asset he’s proud of.

Gerhard has been involved in more than 300 renovations ranging from small- to large-scale, heritage restoration, conversions to other uses, recording studios, a fitness gym, and dental clinics.

Sometimes designs and design programs by themselves aren’t realistic, he explains. They are not fully thought out and usually not easily constructed at a reasonable price.

“When I’m designing, I visualize building it, and before the drawing is done I know it will work. That makes it easier for the people who are actually going to build it. It gives me an advantage. ‘I design; you build’ is not my attitude.”

He says his designs have a strong respect for proportion and light, and this probably comes from instinct and years of careful observation.

“Sometimes you can walk into a room and it just feels right,” he says. “You feel very comfortable there.” He explains it’s probably because of the light, the height of the ceiling in relation to the length and width of the space, the proportion, the form, and the shapes.

He believes light (or lack of it) is connected to most people’s psychology and well-being, where a dark or dull room can make you tired, depressed, unimaginative, uncreative and unproductive.

“Before I begin [a design],” he says, “I look very carefully at orientation, the light and where it comes from. And I always think about the view out the windows. Connecting to the outside environment is important.”

It’s not surprising that he likes lots of windows. He acknowledges that this can mean a slight compromise between aesthetics and function.

“But I think you have to balance well-being with optimal energy-efficiency,” he says.

When you talk to Gerhard Linse, you get the feeling that this is a complex man with a depth of creativity and wisdom not given to most people. He seems calm under what appears to be steady, busy, demanding work. He spends a lot of time with clients before he even begins their designs. The clients keep coming; he puts in long days, and yet he doesn’t look harried or stressed. In fact, he seems the picture of health.

And presumably he is. He is a runner who came sixth in his age group, running 21.2 km in the recent National Capital Half Marathon. He trains and exercises four or five times a week, all year round. He used to cycle and scuba-dive. He loves to walk and run around the canal.

He says it’s a “struggle” to stay healthy in the building industry – most especially for people who are in the construction end as well as design. He knows; he used to do it all. Now he concentrates specifically on design, but he remembers how grueling it was when he also did building, and it meant working 80 hours a week just to keep up with all the demands.

People in the business, he says, are always working to timelines, to weather, to keeping the projects on time, to making sure they’re cost-effective. They work early, before everyone else, and have long, long days. They can’t always pack an ideal lunch, and there’s little time for scheduled exercise.

That kind of lifestyle, and his doctor’s wagging finger at high cholesterol, motivated him to get serious about his health, to bring his life into balance, and he hasn’t looked back.

He keeps his mind healthy, too. He likes listening to music, although he confesses he can’t hold a note himself. When he was a child, his mother “made him” take violin lessons, and he didn’t like it. Ironically, it is violin music he returns to when he is drawing (by hand). At those times he

loves Classical music. He is often soothed and uplifted by the great tenor Luciano Pavarotti or Glenn Gould on the piano. He loves opera.

But his musical tastes are wide and eclectic. He also enjoys Latin (Brazilian) music and old Patsy Cline recordings. He has a large collection of early records of everything from Leonard Cohen to The Beatles.

Gerhard is empathetic towards his clients, who range from their late 20s to early 60s, with the majority in their 40s. There are so many requests for his designs that he actually chooses what projects he will take on.

“And they’re not all multi-million dollar homes or homes in the country,” he says. “They just have to interest me.”

He tries to help clients look at their project from the point of view of marketing later on. He tells them it’s important to make their house easy to sell, even if they don’t think they want to at the time – unless they give him specific instructions to the contrary.

He says some clients go to him with vague ideas or with none at all. Some are exquisitely organized “with binders, clippings and photos”, and he likes that. It helps him at the outset to see what they’re thinking and dreaming.

“I spend a lot of time getting to know people and understanding their expectations,” he says. If they’re a couple, he wants to be sure they’re “on the same page” about what they want. Couples often go to him with two different lists of wishes. In time, he helps weave the different lists into a compromise.

Sometimes clients will go to him without a budget. Gerhard first has to figure out how to match their ideas with the amount they want to spend. “I try to help them stay within that,” he says.

A keen cook, Gerhard likes to design kitchens. He asks his clients how they like to cook – and who does most of the cooking. If he’s designing a bedroom, he asks about the kind of clothes they have. Who has the most? Which clothes do they hang up, and which do they fold? How would they like to organize and store their jewelry?

His clients get to rely on him to make their house perform in the most beautiful and functional way. Sometimes they’ll call him first before they buy a piece of furniture. What does he think? Will it work in their new space? It’s perhaps no wonder that some clients become lifelong friends.

It could be that some talent is inherited and some is learned. Gerhard seems to have come by it doubly: from a creative mother who does exceptionally fine handwork, and a skilled father, past president of the Ottawa Home Builders’ Association.

His talent and skill were further nurtured by his education at Ryerson in Toronto and – perhaps even more – by his travels and work experience around the world.

“I was independent,” he says. “I was raised that way.”

He grew up in Ottawa and began working for himself when he was 18. The money allowed him to buy a car...and to travel.

“Travel really enlightened me,” he says. “It opened my eyes.”

This wasn't high-life travel. It was the kind of travelling you do when you're young: knapsack on back, going third class, hitchhiking. He went to Europe, Africa, the Middle East, Southeast Asia, Australia.

He saw poverty as he had never seen it before. He remembers his arrival in Bombay from Mombasa.

“There was this wave of humanity,” he says. “I got a cab, and there were wall-to-wall cars everywhere. The cabbie stopped at a stoplight, and there were 20 little pairs of begging hands reaching through the window of the car. A little girl was holding a baby. The baby looked nearly dead... and I thought *I* was roughing it!”

Those memories and experiences have stayed with him, haunted him. He gives to the homeless, to the Ottawa Mission, to people on the street.

He is aware of the sad irony of those donations.

“But we in the industry,” he says, “probably should align ourselves more often to charities like that.”

Gerhard was one of six designers who donated one of his designs (to completion) to Bruce House, an Ottawa AIDS hospice. He has done other charitable work as well, but shies away from talking about it.

His travels also introduced him to great beauty – for instance, the Taj Mahal.

“As a student of architecture from a construction family, you really look at how buildings are put together,” he says. “You find yourself rubbing your hand along the wall just to absorb the texture and the story.” His wife often smiles at him because of this. He loves the feeling of new materials, sculpture, new constructions.

“I've always done that,” he says. “Museums and Art Galleries are horrible for me, with their ‘Please don't touch’ signs everywhere.”

He's quick to add: “People who are in this business enjoy the same kind of things. I'm not unique.”

But that's where he's wrong. He is clearly unique, and the uniqueness shines in his exceptional

designs.