



by Camilla McLaughlin

The Dance of Design Takes *Two to Tango*

To the uninitiated it might seem counterintuitive, but the best way to make any space—a room or an entire house—uniquely yours is by having an interior designer on board. “A good designer listens to a client and then extrapolates their personality and creates an environment where the client can be their best self,” says Susan Fredman, owner of Susan Fredman Design in Chicago. “We really think about the solution and the client and come up with options that fit their lifestyle.”

“We build on what clients tell us and then we take it to the next level of sophistication, luxury or design, to a level of expression that they would not be able to achieve on their own,” observes Kenne Shepherd, owner of Kenne Shepherd Interior Design Architecture in Manhattan.



"A good designer will take you beyond your wildest dream but still take you to what you are looking for," explains Tamara Tennant, owner of Tamara Tennant Interior Design in Fort Lauderdale, FL. "The most common misconception about working with a designer is that it is going to be expensive. Actually a good designer will save you time and money, because they can cut through hundreds of hours of time that it takes to research all that is available and they know scale, which is extremely important in how the project will ultimately look."

Central to a designer's vision for any space is function. Fredman underscores that benefit: "Good design creates a space that will function the way it should and then adds layers to make it beautiful. We have access to so many things. We narrow down the choices so people can pick the very best for themselves." The real challenge is discovering someone with whom you connect, someone who understands your vision or who will help you define your own style.

FINDING AND BEING FOUND—"Finding the right designer begins with a client's willingness to be found," says Steve Nobel, co-founder of the Luxury Home Alliance and author of "Aiming at Affluence: Marketing Interior Design to Luxury Clients." He says, "Most likely someone you know is in the know," so let family and friends know that you are looking for a designer. Other good sources of referrals are architects, realtors, even editors of local home or style magazines.

DO YOUR HOMEWORK—Once you've settled on several potential designers, do some research. Web sites are a good introduction, but it is important to remember that the rooms depicted reflect a client's style as much as they do the designer's. Be careful of "a one-trick pony," especially if every room looks the same, cautions Susanna Salk, author and design contributor to NBC's "Today Show." She adds, "Unless it's a signature look that you love. Sometimes a designer is so fabulous that you want them to come in and take over."



CLARIFYING THE VISION—Assemble a dream file of pictures of rooms, furniture, colors, accessories—“anything that catches your eye,” advises Salk, noting, “You might surprise yourself. Your style might be quite different than you assumed or it will confirm what you already know about yourself.” Equally helpful, say designers, are images of what you don’t like.

Take time to envision how you plan to live in that specific house or space. It might be quite different than other homes you’ve owned. Or, perhaps, you want to have a unique look for that property. Tennant frequently works with clients who own a number of homes. Often, she says, “they want to do a different style in each house.”

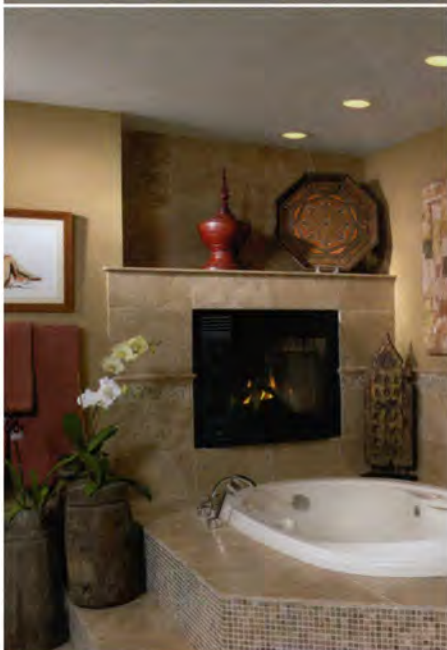


“Remember, time is money, and the value of the designer’s time is just as worthwhile as the client’s,” advises Nobel.

The American Society of Interior Designers offers the following tips:

- Understand that changes to your plan will add to the time and cost of a project.
- Consider carefully, and make notes before you call your designer.
- Stay flexible. Decide beforehand where you will make changes and where you will not.
- Trust your instincts. Don’t agree to a decision that doesn’t feel right, no matter how urgent.
- Avoid open-ended requests.

BEING A GOOD CLIENT



MAKING THE CONNECTION—Once the list of candidates has been narrowed down, interview each one. Most important is personal chemistry and connection. “You want to work with someone you feel comfortable with and who is listening to you. If you want your home or apartment to be an expression of who you are, it is extremely important to select a designer who will listen to you and who is capable of working in different styles,” observes Shepherd.

GET AND GIVE A DETAILED OVERVIEW—Expect a designer to ask good questions. “The better the questions, the wiser the designer, so, speak up, allow your inner self to be heard and understood. Designers are like consultants, they listen really well and then inspire their clients with imaginative solutions that are customized just for them,” Nobel observes. During the initial meeting, budget, fees and a timeline should be discussed.

PUT IT IN BLACK AND WHITE—Designers either work on a fee basis or by the hour. Either way, they should provide a written proposal describing the project in detail, including an explanation of what is or isn’t included, and an estimate of overall cost plus the time needed to complete the project. “A good designer can work with a reasonable budget and will be able to tell you approximately how much a project is going to cost and can offer you, if needed, low-, medium- and high-end choices,” Tennant says.

Don’t lose sight of the goal. Keep in mind, Nobel counsels, “When that initial vision is realized, you will simply love to come home.”