

THE DESIGNER AND THE BUILDER

What the Designer Brings to the Table

When most people think about hiring an interior designer, they zero in on aesthetics: wall colors, window treatments, pillow patterns. But that's just scratching the surface of what a designer can add to a home.

Interior designers go beyond cosmetic concerns to ensure that a space feels harmonious through and through, from its floor plan and architectural envelope to the last nailhead, tassel and tuft. California has a certification process for interior designers.

A designer educates the homeowner while simplifying the process by helping the homeowner decide what they are really looking for.

Incorporating all of the different options into a design is a big challenge and coincides with all the layers of planning and scheduling. Because of the scheduling challenges, it is important to have a good relationship between the designer and the builder. A designer can have the vision to see where small changes can make a big difference all the while working closely with the builder bringing the vision to life physically.

A homeowner's plan is better deciphered through a designer's eyes because a designer can make adjustments and guide them to think through how the space will be used. Those lifestyle questions are key, and sitting down with the homeowner for the first time always reveals their current style.

How the Designer Alleviates the Builder's Workload

Designers can provide streamlined answers and client communication when surprises are uncovered or changes are desired.

Designers can also pick up on potential mistakes quickly, keeping the project moving when there is an issue. They can also serve as a liaison between the contractor and the homeowner.

The homeowner may think they know what they want, but it is the designer's task to put the options together and know what materials are available.

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Involving a Designer Can Actually be a Cost Savings

Involve the designer as early as possible in the building process. If you're remodeling or building from scratch, include the designer in the planning stages with your architect and contractor. This way, the pros involved will all be on the same page and can iron out any potential discrepancies — particularly those that involve the bones of a home, such as doorways, ceiling beams or interior columns. It's one thing to reorient a window on paper; it's another entirely to move it after installation.

The designer should above all protect the homeowner. The designer will prevent a mistake from happening from the outset by explaining to the client the consequences — good and bad — of this particular item or installation. A designer can point out that the item may be compromised by the rest of the design. The designer can also offer a superior solution and explain how it will attain the same goal for the client without sacrificing anything.

What an Interior Designer Does

A designer envisions, plans and outfits spaces in a way that makes them both beautiful and functional. He or she balances aesthetic considerations with structural planning to reflect the clients' lifestyle, set the desired mood, complement the home's architectural features, and ensure that less glamorous details (like electrical outlets and air vents) fit into the scheme. An interior designer also cultivates relationships with trusted artisans, vendors and others who execute the design.

When to Hire an Interior Designer

You may have a clear vision for your home, but an interior designer can help you bring it to life while making sure it satisfies nitty-gritty considerations such as space planning. A trained eye and a creative mind-set allow for devising solutions that you might never have imagined, and attention to the tiniest details will transform your space into a haven that looks polished and pulled together.

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Communication is Key

The only way everyone can ensure tight communication is simply to actually communicate. Show up to the job for regular check-ins. Although this will not eliminate every mistake, it can reduce them. A builder's job is to keep to the schedule and explain if and why there are changes. In the event there is some sort of field adjustment required, keep tight communication and cooperation between design and implementation. This aids in creating a solution, keeping the job on schedule and budget and managing the client's expectations. The designer and builder working as a team really benefits everyone. Having a weekly update call or in-person meeting will also reduce anxiety among all parties.

Bringing in Contractor Early on Project

Building your dream home is one of the most exciting things you'll ever do, but all that excitement comes with a lot of responsibility. Hiring the best general contractor for you and your project is an extremely important decision. That choice will determine the quality of craftsmanship and will minimize emotional stress and unexpected costs. Bringing in the right contractor early in the design process is one of the most important factors to staying on budget and on schedule during construction.

Checking Contractor References

Ask for a list of references. In private, discuss with previous clients their experiences working with the contractor.

Question to ask:

Did the contractor seem knowledgeable and resourceful?

Was it a pleasant working relationship?

Did they and the contractor communicate well?

Was the contractor fair and honest?

Was the project completed on schedule and within budget?

Were there extra costs or surprises? If there were delays or cost overruns,

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was it the contractor who caused them? If so, how did he deal with them?

How were problems handled? Did the client feel the contractor worked collaboratively to come up with mutually satisfactory resolutions to problems, or was the tone less supportive?

How was the workmanship, quality of craftsmanship?

How was he with follow-up after completion? Did he come back in a timely fashion?

A Bid is not the Whole Picture

Although on paper competitive bidding seems to be a foolproof way to get what you want at the lowest price, there are challenges with that approach in real life. If contractors were bidding on something they understood 100%, and there were no differences on how they delivered the finished product, then competitive bidding could be a good solution.

As part of the bidding process, I go over areas that contractors should spend a bit more time on right off the bat in a meeting, so they cover all the items that are required.

But just as the same meal turns out different when prepared by three different chefs, the same set of drawings is interpreted differently by different contractors.

Choosing the lowest bid on a job without considering other critical factors, such as experience, reputation and trustworthiness is not advisable. Choosing a contractor should never be based on bid prices alone. A whole host of other factors that your design team will help you with will allow you to pick the best contractor for your specific job.

Fixed-Price Contract

A fixed-price contract implies that the contractor will charge you X dollars at the end of the job. But most contracts have provisions stipulating that latent conditions (for example, things that are unseen, such as termites in existing walls or large underground impediments to excavation) will add to the price.

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Another potential issue with a fixed-price contract is that it tends to put homeowners across the table from their team member (the contractor), as quality decisions are often dictated not by the scope of the project but by the budget.

This means compromises are made in how certain elements are delivered, due to cost implications (such as removing walls finished like tile) or deleting elements altogether.

Time and Materials Contract (Cost Plus)

A time and materials contract is sometimes more favorable to a homeowner, as it can be viewed as more transparent. Simply put, your contractor buys materials and charges you an hourly rate to install them. But in the hands of an unethical contractor, you might find yourself on the wrong end of a hefty bill, as latent conditions also tend not to be covered.

In reality, most contractors will break up their bid into a part that is fixed (for the parts they have a good handle on) and a part that is not fixed. This makes your contingency even more critical. You should set your budget and then subtract 20% to arrive at your real construction budget. The contingency is not for “splurges,” but accommodates the usual price variations on a construction project.