

# Designing Your Space

What is interior design?  
How do you work with an interior designer?  
How do you find an interior designer?



AMERICAN SOCIETY OF  
INTERIOR DESIGNERS

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# FINDING A DESIGNER

## How to Begin Your Search

Design by Gioi Tran, Allied member ASID, Applegate Tran Interiors. Photo by Anna Dal Photo.

As with any other professional, you will want to do some investigative work before contacting designers to discuss your project. A useful approach is to follow the three steps below.

### **DEFINE THE PROJECT**

Before you ever speak to a designer, take some time to think about what you want, what you need, what you can afford and what is most important to you. The designer you hire will be able to advise you on specifics, but to get the result you want, it is important to do your homework first. The time you spend will be well worth it.

Start by answering the following questions as completely and specifically as you can:

- Who is going to use the space?
- What activities will take place there?
- How long do you plan to occupy the space?
- What is your timeframe for completing your design project?
- How will you finance the project? What is your budget?
- What kind of look or feel do you want the space to have?
- If you are modifying an existing space, what do you currently like about the space? What do you most want to change? Why?
- What changes do you need to have and which would be nice to have?

Putting together an idea folder or scrapbook of your likes and dislikes, wishes and dreams is a great way to begin the design process. Look for pictures of rooms or styles that appeal to you, swatches of fabric, paint color cards, furniture catalogs or brochures, etc. These will stir your imagination and help the designer better understand your preferences and tastes. Include information and pictures of appliances, plumbing fixtures, lighting fixtures, cabinet and door hardware, and flooring materials as well, if these will be elements in your project.

### **INVESTIGATE LICENSING REQUIREMENTS**

Currently, 24 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico regulate interior design services. In most cases, an individual must have satisfied certain requirements for education, experience and examination to do business as an interior designer in that state.

Before researching the designers you may want to work with, be sure you know what regulations, if any, apply in your state. In many states, there is a board that monitors compliance with that state's requirements. Usually they will verify if an individual is registered, licensed or certified in your state. For a list of states with interior design laws, along with their boards, go to the ASID Web site at [www.asid.org](http://www.asid.org) or call ASID headquarters at (202) 546-3480.

### **DEVELOP A LIST OF SUITABLE DESIGNERS**

Once you have a basic concept of your project, it's time to search for designers whose work and credentials meet your needs. Ask people whose tastes and judgment you trust to suggest the names of designers you may want to interview.

The Internet is an excellent resource for this purpose, too. Many designers have Web sites that display samples of their work and describe their design philosophy and approach. Some commercial Web sites provide "directories" of designers, with or without pictures. Since they usually charge the designer a fee to be listed, they are not very comprehensive.

You can also consult the national or local referral services offered by professional organizations, like ASID, which match qualified members with your project type or location. They are an especially good source if you are looking for a designer with a particular expertise.

Home and lifestyle magazines and sections of newspapers are another good source of information about interior designers. Often these publications operate Web sites as well that include archives of past articles and images.

Not all designers have Web sites or get media coverage. The Yellow Pages and print advertising, while they usually do not provide much detail about a designer's work, may lead you to a talented designer you might otherwise have overlooked.



Design by Alison Whittaker, Allied member ASID, Alison Whittaker Design, Inc. Photo by Russell Abraham Photography.

# CHOOSING A DESIGNER

What to Know and What to Ask

The creative aspects of interior design can be exciting and fun, but never forget that it is also a business—and you are the one who will have to live with the finished project. Your satisfaction with an interior design project depends a great deal on the designer you select and how well you work with him or her. By following the guidelines below, you can help ensure a good working relationship and a successful outcome.

## **INTERVIEW SEVERAL DESIGNERS**

You should interview several designers—three or four at least. During each interview, explain clearly what your needs are and acquaint the designer with your project ideas. Show him or her your folder or scrapbook. Note whether the designer is attentively listening and asking questions that indicate an understanding of your needs and preferences. You will be working closely with the designer, perhaps for a number of months, so you want to select someone whom you feel has your interests at heart and will take your ideas and concerns seriously.

**“I need someone I can trust to help me plan my new home’s interior to match my new life.\*”**

# Sample scope of services

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## PROGRAMMING AND SPACE PLANNING

- » Interview to determine client needs, schedules and budgets.
  - » Establish functional and aesthetics goals.
  - » Inventory existing furnishings and other items to be reused.
  - » Provide space plans with furniture layouts.
  - » Assist in developing the project timeline.
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## INTERIOR DESIGN

- » Develop budgets on all interior finishes and furnishings, as well as budgets for interior improvements.
  - » Assist in material, finish and furnishings analysis, recommendations and specifications.
  - » Design all interior details.
  - » Provide sketches and/or presentation boards of all interior selections and furnishings.
  - » Review and coordinate furniture layouts with lighting and electrical plans.
  - » Coordinate fine art and decorative accessories.
  - » Coordinate interior plant selections and placement.
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## CONSTRUCTION DOCUMENTS

- » Demolition/new partition plans
  - » Telephone/electrical plans
  - » Reflected ceiling plans/lighting plans
  - » Wall and floor finish plans and schedules
  - » Interior details and design as required, including cabinets, millworks, etc.
  - » Furniture installation drawings
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## PROJECT ADMINISTRATION

- » Coordinate and review drawings with contractors.
  - » Maintain project schedules.
  - » Review all bids and pricing.
  - » Provide on-site inspections during construction.
  - » Provide assistance during move-in.
  - » Provide punch lists of all work to be completed.
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In addition, you should ask the designer for the following information:

- Details about his or her education, training, experience (especially experience with your type of project), professional affiliations and other credentials.
- Fee structure, what it covers, and any additional charges outside the estimate that could occur. [See sidebar on Scope of Services.]
- An estimate of how long the project will take and whether other commitments the designer has may affect the desired timetable. If the completion date is high on your “most important” list, be absolutely clear about your expectations.
- Discuss how you will stay in communication and with what frequency you can expect project progress reports and updates.

Keep in mind that different designers have different personalities, working styles and business methods. Don't be pressured into working with someone you are not comfortable with, regardless of reputation or recommendation.

## How do you know if you've found the right designer?

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There are no guarantees of course, but in general you want a designer with the following characteristics:

- » Accredited and, if applicable in your state, appropriately certified
- » Experienced in the type of project you are doing
- » Has demonstrated creativity, talent and resourcefulness
- » Attentive, responsive and communicates well
- » Has a record of reliability and good work habits

### **CHECK REFERENCES**

You should always ask to see the designer's portfolio and get the names of three or four recent references. (Make sure they are recent, preferably within the last year, depending on the type of project.) When talking with references, ask how satisfied they are with the completed project. How close did it come to their initial concept? Were there any surprises? Was the project completed by the date promised and within the budget agreed upon? Ask about the designer's work habits and style. Was he or she accessible, attentive and responsible? Did he or she pay appropriate attention to the details throughout the project?



# HIRING A DESIGNER

## What to Expect

Designers, like other professionals, are different from one another in their combinations of talents, skills, knowledge, experience, personalities, specialty areas and reputations. What and how they charge will vary accordingly. If you have any concerns, get bids or estimates from more than one designer so you can compare fees, costs and other expenses.

### **DISCUSS FEES AND BUDGET**

There is no such thing as a “typical” fee for an interior designer. Many factors, including those mentioned above, influence what a designer may charge for his or her services. Most residential designers use one of the following methods, or combine methods, to set their fees and may negotiate to suit a client’s particular needs:

- Fixed fee (or flat fee) – The designer identifies a specific sum to cover costs, exclusive of reimbursement for expenses. One total fee applies to the complete range of services, from conceptual development through layouts, specifications and final installation.
- Hourly fee – Compensation is based on actual time expended by the designer on a project or specific service.
- Cost plus – A designer purchases materials, furnishings and services (e.g., carpentry, drapery workrooms, picture framing, etc.) at cost and sells to the client at the designer’s cost plus a specified percentage agreed to with the client to compensate for the designer’s time and effort.

**“A designer can save you money by helping you avoid design errors, and the end result will be better than if you tried to do it yourself.\*”**

In addition to the fee structures outlined above, designers may require a retainer before beginning a design project. A retainer is an amount of money paid by the client to the designer and applied to the balance due at the termination of the project. The retainer is customarily paid upon signing the contractual agreement in advance of design services.

At one time, cost plus was the most widely used fee structure for residential designers. It is becoming more common now for designers to charge an hourly rate for design services, cost plus for products and services the designer is asked to purchase or a fixed fee for the entire project.

In addition to the designer's fees, there are other costs to consider. Only you can decide what a reasonable budget for your project is. If you have concerns about price, discuss them with the designer. Don't be shy about asking the designer to help you optimize your budget. But be realistic, too. You may need to scale back your project or consider having the work done in stages. If you are concerned about the quoted cost of furniture or furnishings, ask the designer to provide you with a list of options.

A final word about cost: How you choose to furnish your interior and how you work with your designer will have tremendous impact on the final cost of the project. Items such as antiques or custom-made furniture, and modifications that involve altering or moving load-bearing walls or beams will significantly increase the cost of your project, as will requesting changes mid-project or making excessive demands on the designer's time. The more research and planning you do before you start, the more you will be able to help keep costs down during the project.

### **REQUEST A COST ESTIMATE**

Before you sign any agreements or make any payments, ask the designers you are most inclined to work with to provide a cost estimate in writing. This is not a contract and is not binding on you or the designer.

The cost estimate should specify the scope of work and the type of fee structure the designer uses. (Bear in mind that the designer is not responsible for the costs of other professional services.) If the designer charges extra for other services—such as reviewing plans or attending meetings with an architect or contractor—these should be listed as well, both by type and rate.

### **FINALIZE ALL AGREEMENTS IN WRITING**

Once you have selected a designer you want to work with, ask him or her to provide you with a letter of agreement or contract for the project. Do not make any oral agreements, pay the designer any money, or authorize any work to be done on the project, including giving the designer permission to begin looking for furnishings or researching styles or patterns, until you have an agreement endorsed by both parties.



Design by Marcia Miller, ASID, and Steven Stein, ASID, Miller Stein Interior Design. Photo by David O. Marlow.

# HIRING A DESIGNER

## What to Expect

### **COMMUNICATE WITH THE DESIGNER AND MAINTAIN RECORDS**

Working with an interior designer involves some give and take. You will share ideas, and the designer will contribute insights and advice based on his or her talents, skills and experience. You will have many details to consider and many decisions to make. Your concept may grow and change as you undergo this process.

**“I have definite ideas about what I like and do not like, but I do not have the ability to put it all together into a cohesive plan. I would hope that a designer would be able to help achieve the look and feel I want for my home.\*”**

The key to a successful project outcome is good communication. The more direct and specific you are, the easier it will be for the designer to successfully meet your needs and expectations. Never hesitate to ask questions about any aspect of the project. Keep notes of your discussions with the designer, and confirm any and all instructions, decisions or changes before they are acted on. If you agree to make changes to the contract, always make sure to put them in writing and have them signed and dated by both parties. Maintain a folder with copies of all plans and contracts, receipts, invoices and other documents.

## **WORK WITH YOUR DESIGNER**

Take your responsibilities as a client seriously. If you are going to be very busy or on travel during this process, consider delaying the project until later or getting someone to manage it for you. Remember, if you delegate the decision making to the designer, you are agreeing to live with those decisions.

To avoid disappointment or unwelcome surprises, follow these guidelines.

- Minimize changes to your plan. Each part of the design will affect the whole. Changes or special requests can require any number of adjustments that will add time and expenses to your project.
- Consider carefully and make notes before you call your designer. Repeated calls are inefficient, expensive and can slow down progress.
- Stay flexible. Decide beforehand where you are willing to compromise and where you are not.
- Trust your gut. Do not agree to a decision that does not “feel” right to you, no matter how urgent it may seem to be. Take time to request more information, do some research or just reflect.
- Avoid open-ended requests. Tell the designer up front what you are willing to pay in total for a particular item or service.

## **KNOW YOUR RIGHTS**

If you follow the guidelines above, you are unlikely to encounter problems with your designer. However, in the event a problem arises, there are agencies that can help. If your state has interior design regulations, you can contact the board or agency that monitors compliance. If your state currently does not regulate interior design, contact the department of consumer affairs or consumer protection.

All members of ASID agree to abide by the Society's *Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct*. If you believe an ASID member has behaved unethically, please contact the ethics coordinator in the government and public affairs department at ASID headquarters via e-mail at [gpa@asid.org](mailto:gpa@asid.org) or by phone at (202) 546-3480.



# ASID

## The Professional Difference

ASID interior designers have the education, training and expertise to manage all the details of your project. They know the importance of listening to your ideas and understanding your needs. From consultation to planning to the finishing touches, they can help you every step of the way, augmenting your choices and adding value to your budget.

The oldest and largest professional organization for interior designers, ASID has some 20,000 interior design practitioner members, located in all 50 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico and supported by a national network of local chapters.

All ASID interior designer members must meet basic educational and professional qualifications and agree to abide by the Society's Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct. Many have passed a professional qualifying examination administered by the National Council for Interior Design Qualification. In addition to its many publications, ASID offers members continuing education opportunities. This means that ASID designers receive the most current information on appropriate materials, technology, building codes, government regulations, health and safety standards, design psychology, and product performance.

To locate a qualified ASID designer to help you with your project, visit the ASID Referral Service (Find a Designer) on the Web at [www.asid.org](http://www.asid.org) or call ASID headquarters at (202) 546-3480.



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