

Choosing an Interior Designer

Advice on finding a professional who can help you achieve a design scheme that's right for your home

What are the advantages of working with an interior designer?

By perusing magazines, catalogs and Web sites, homeowners can easily find furnishings they like and can purchase on their own. However, there are several benefits to consulting an interior designer before you decide what to buy. Working with a designer can help you avoid the costly mistakes of ordering furnishings in the wrong size or scale and misjudging color combinations in paints and fabrics. A designer can also assist you in purchasing furnishings in "trade-only" showrooms that carry top furniture and fabric lines. An interior designer's work should strike a balance between art and science. Designers are trained to create precise and exacting furniture plans that make the most efficient use of available space and promote traffic flow from one room to another. On the aesthetic side, designers are trained to select combinations of colors and patterns to achieve a desired mood. A good designer will help you choose furnishings, colors and patterns so your finished space projects the right proportions and scale. A designer may also suggest unexpected combinations that can transform an ordinary room into a unique and innovative space.

What do I need to do before speaking to prospective designers?

Knowing what you want out of your space will help you find the right person to design it. The American Society of Interior Designers (ASID) recommends that homeowners define the goals of a project

before interviewing designers.

Homeowners should think about which rooms will be included in the work and how these rooms will be used. Consider the time frame, the budget and the overall style you want to project. A scrapbook stuffed with photos depicting your personal likes and dislikes will help you get organized. Collect magazine articles, furniture catalogs, paint-color cards and fabric swatches, all of which will help your designer take off in the right direction.

What's the best way to find a designer?

Start your research by asking friends and family members for recommendations (if you like their homes), poring over shelter magazines that publish designers' work and visiting designer show houses in your area. Visit designers' Web sites and view their online portfolios. ASID also helps match clients and designers on its site, www.asid.org.

What qualifications should I look for?

A designer may have a number of credentials that show how much he or she has to offer. If a designer is licensed, you know that he or she has a certain amount of education and experience and has passed a licensing examination. You can also check for affiliations with organizations such as ASID and the International Interior Design Association (www.iida.org), which both require members to take rigorous national qualifying exams.

How do you narrow down the field?

Once you have a few contenders, it is time to narrow down the list. The best way is to meet the designers on your short list face to face, taking the time to get to know each one and to review their portfolios. Look for a designer who is an excellent listener and communicator and who will work to understand your likes and dislikes and articulate them in a finished plan. The designer should be someone with whom you feel comfortable in expressing your ideas—not someone who will impose their preferences on you.

When does the money question come in?

Prior to making a decision, ask for a cost estimate from the most promising candidates. It should include a fee structure outlining how the designer works. Designers may charge a flat fee, an hourly fee or a commission based on what they purchase for the project.

How do you protect yourself (and your wallet)?

Do not launch into the project without first finalizing an agreement in writing. Have a contract in place that defines the scope and budget before making any sort of payments or oral agreements, or even authorizing any work by your designer. Later, if you would like to make changes, make sure that they are signed and dated. That way both you and your designer can be certain you agree on how to make your project the best it can be.

—Karen Stysley