

DOMICILES

The Designer's Touch

Why you need an interior designer and how to choose one.

BY JOE DEMATIO

"The only real freedom we have left is the home," opined the legendary Hollywood designer Billy Haines. "Only there can we express anything we want."

Haines may have worked during the Studio Era of old Hollywood, but what he expressed in the 1950s still holds true today. When you are at the point in your life where you've bought, remodeled, or built several domiciles, all of which were great but far from perfect, and you're ready to express exactly what you want in your home, you'll need to think beyond the all-in-one design/build firms and the retail showrooms you've relied on in the past. Now you are ready for the Holy Trinity: your own architect, builder, and, most important, your own interior designer.

A great interior designer (please don't call them decorators) is the glue that masterfully marries the desires of the client, the vision of the architect, and the on-the-ground reality of the construction process. People who build or remodel significant homes often fail to understand the importance of the designer, succumbing to the notion that an architect and builder alone can deliver a home suitable for the

pages of *Architectural Digest*. True, though the services of top design firms are not insubstantial in cost, the rewards include a smoother planning and build process; creative problem-solving; access to the best artisans, specialists, and suppliers; and, of course, a much greater likelihood that your home will be a spectacular expression of your own good taste.

Finding the right designer for your lifestyle and your project is fraught with uncertainties, but there are a few main avenues to pursue initially: recommendations from friends and colleagues whose homes you admire, as well as referrals from your builder, architect, or real estate agent. Designers routinely participate in local showcase homes and share their work on social media platforms such as Instagram and Houzz. You should also peruse Pinterest and home decor magazines, particularly ones that focus on the style you're seeking or the region in which you live.

But what, specifically, are you trying to discern when you look at glossy professional photos of a designer's work? Does the style or mood resonate with you? Can you relate to what you see, or is it impossible to imagine yourself

→ In this urban oasis, a pair of concrete columns were boxed and mirrored, a deft sleight of hand to visually expand the space and help the columns disappear. A bench-style sofa spans the columns. Full-length folded and stitched fabric panels operate on ceiling-mounted tracks, shoji-style, to mask the street view and softly filter light.





Matthew Milliman, Jose Manuel Alorda, courtesy The Wiseman Group

living in such an environment? After all, if a designer specializes in sleek modernism but you're a traditionalist, it's probably not a match. Is quality inherent in the work, or is it evident that quick-fix construction and fleetingly trendy designs were employed in the manner of a TV-show makeover?

Once you have a short list of designers in mind, it's time to meet them. Chemistry is key. A designer will come to know many intimate details of your life, "including where you store your underwear," says James Hunter, design director at The Wiseman Group, a venerable San Francisco firm that routinely tackles projects for Silicon Valley executives and venture capitalists. "The first meeting is crucial for both client and designer," Hunter continues. "My clients and I will be spending a lot of time together. They will be required to make a lot of decisions and spend a large sum of money," he notes bluntly. He also stresses that you have to be comfortable being in charge, building a rapport with the designer so that you're comfortable pushing back and asking questions.

There are indeed plenty of questions for you

to ask potential designers before you sign a contract or write your first check. It is, after all, a job interview. Among them:

- *Where shall we meet? Current home, project site, or design firm office?*
- *Is there an existing (or former) client I can speak with as a referral?*
- *Would I be able to see a home that you have completed for another client?*
- *Can you explain your billing practices and how transparent they are? Do you charge a fixed fee, bill for your time only (hourly), or bill for your time and add a designer fee to purchases (aka markup)?*
- *How is your firm structured? With whom will I meet on a regular basis? You, the design principal, or your senior design staff?*
- *How collaborative is the process? Will my voice be heard?*

Once all these questions are answered, and you're happy with the responses, a collaboration truly begins. "This is where things get interesting," explains Hunter. "Your designer will create a vision for your project, a furniture plan, and an initial budget." Working closely with the architect and contractor, you and your designer will make decisions on the form of the structure and how it will be built. Specialists in engineering, lighting, audiovisual, security systems, and landscape will be brought onto the project as needed. Further along, you will consider specific architectural details; materials for flooring, countertops, and walls; all fixtures and fittings, including plumbing and appliances; and window treatments, furniture, accessories, and art. Skilled designers orchestrate all of these disciplines to create cohesion and harmony.

"A great home becomes the perfect vessel in which to live your life," says Hunter. "It represents your place in the world and is a refuge for yourself, your family, and friends." But that doesn't just happen. It comes by collaborating with a designer to make a home that uniquely reflects your taste and supports your lifestyle. //

← Far left: Every space deserves a grand staircase. This one's oak slats are backlit with LED panels for dramatic effect. Contemporary art by Jeffrey Gibson anchors the landing. Left: A midcentury-modern kitchen is reborn with a large central island illuminated by four folded metal Serge Mouille ceiling pendants. In the family room, custom-designed leather ottomans provide room for everyone to put their feet up.