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Designer 101: Tips to finding a pro to redo your home

Jeanine Matlow, Special to The Detroit News Published 5:29 p.m. ET Jan. 12, 2017 | Updated 3:15 p.m. ET Jan. 13, 2017



(Photo: Kate Benjamin Photography)

Just the thought of working with an interior designer can be intimidating for many people. Have you ever wondered what's involved? How much does it cost? And how do you get started?

We talked to area designers to help demystify the process.

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First, to find the best designer for your project and your personality, gather information from sources like ASID (The Society of Interior Designers), Michigan Design Center and Houzz (see sidebar) or even an online design service. You can also see if your favorite retail stores offer design services or recommendations, and ask others with successful outcomes for referrals.

Step by step

For Terry Ellis, owner of Room Service Interior Design at Michigan Design Center in Troy, the process begins with a visit to the site where she gets a feel for the space and the client's likes and dislikes while gathering information about color preferences, project budget and timelines.

"Inspiration photos from Houzz or Pinterest are great springboards for conversation. A picture is worth 1,000 words," she says. "I can decipher whether the style is contemporary, transitional or traditional from looking at the images they've shown me."

Next, she'll take photos and measurements and note existing paint colors and architectural features. Then it's back to the drawing board to create floor plans and furniture layouts, which usually include a few options as well as sketches if there's a new fireplace design or draperies. "It's as helpful to me as it is to the client," Ellis says.

Fabric swatches, wood chips and paint samples go in a presentation binder. "We put together a complete package of all of the furniture and finishes that go into the new room. It's a great way to see all of the elements together," she says.

If a client has a favorite chair that needs to be reupholstered or older artwork that could be reframed, she'll try to work it into the new plan.

Frequent site visits help to ensure everything is going according to plan with contractors, deliveries and other details. "Art and accessories are a very important part of the room," says Ellis, who may bring some for an overnight trial. "It's important to allow some budget for this phase."

The right strategy

Often, a house is done in phases, says Ellis, "It's helpful for us to discuss the overall plan so we can stage it accordingly."

Though hourly fees often depend on the project, Ellis says regional rates for interior designers typically go from about \$100 to \$250 per hour. While she requires a minimum 10-hour deposit, some designers require more and others are available for a one-time consultation.

Ellis wants her clients to have realistic expectations of the actual time frame and costs that are very different from what is shown on television.

One of her recent projects was a complete remodel of a Washington Township home for Cathy Lombardo. "This house fits her personality. She's young and energetic. She loves color and there's a little bohemian kind of feeling. It's a house she'll grow with," she says of her client, who she describes as someone who is "practical, but willing to explore."

Ellis has some advice for finding the right designer. "Houzz is a valuable tool for the consumer and the professional. It's a matchmaker. It's fantastic, not only for the photos, but the testimonials too," she says.

"Review all the data you can find and do personal interviews with a couple of designers to create a little bit of an intuitive fit and then sometimes you just have to take a leap of faith."

Happy together

That's what Lombardo did when hiring Ellis. "I didn't know what to expect, but to do it myself would have been overwhelming," she says. "I wanted to make it look cohesive. Having a professional really helped guide me through the whole thing."

Their teamwork was another bonus. "I could be involved as much or as little as I wanted to be and I wanted to be hands-on," says Lombardo. "Terry gave me that flexibility, so I went to contractor sites to look at tile and cabinetry."

When hiring a designer, Lombardo says you need someone you trust. "You have to be comfortable opening up to that person who can explain all the different options and help you work things out," she says. "You have to be able to be yourself and express yourself so you can come to the best solution together."

She credits Ellis for helping her reach the finish line, "She took the vision I had and helped refine it. I love going home to my house every day."

Retail oriented

Because interior design is such a visual business, it helps to visit local shops, such as Scott Shuptrine Interiors, which offers a complimentary one-hour consultation in your home or at one of their galleries. Their projects can be any scope and size, from a living room or bedroom to an entire home, and they can incorporate pieces from Art Van Furniture to help stretch the budget.

They'll take measurements and provide floor plan and furniture arrangements to best fit your space. Hourly fees are based on the scope of the project.

Consultation services are also available for an hourly fee to help select materials for a kitchen remodel or reconfigure the current furniture in a home.

Emily Cuzzo, an interior designer at their Royal Oak gallery who has been a presenter at Homestyle's Dish & Design, counts a ranch-style home among her current projects. "We're bringing the living room from its '90s version to a more transitional style," she says.

As Cuzzo explains, they can incorporate existing pieces into the overall scheme and work with any style or budget, "We can do your home from top to bottom including paint, artwork and flooring selections, along with furniture, down to all the accessories and window treatments."

In-store events and monthly classes like Residential Resolutions on Jan. 19 offer inspiration and introductions to designers.

Jeanine Matlow writes the Smart Solutions column in Homestyle. You can reach her at jeaninematlow@earthlink.net.

Finding a designer

■ Gorman's Home Furnishings & Interior Design offers complimentary design services. For information, go to gormans.com (<http://gormans.com>).

■ Fenton Home Furnishings also offers complimentary design services. Go to fentonhomefurnishings.com (<http://fentonhomefurnishings.com>) for locations and more information.

■ Laurel & Wolf, an online interior design service that connects clients with professional interior designers for a flat fee, offers a Classic Design Package that starts at \$149. Go to laurelandwolf.com (<http://laurelandwolf.com>).

■ For more information about Scott Shuptrine Interiors, go to scottshuptrine.com (<http://scottshuptrine.com>).

■To view the featured designers and design studios at Michigan Design Center, go to michigandesign.com (<http://michigandesign.com>).

■For the Michigan Chapter of ASID, go to asidmi.org (<http://asidmi.org>).

■To find a designer in your area and view inspirational photos, go to houzz.com (<http://houzz.com>).

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