

5 questions to ask an Interior Designer before you hire

Your relationship with your Interior Designer is an intimate one. We designers need to know a lot about you in order to be able to design your home to fit you perfectly. As part of the introduction process to new clients, I ask them A LOT of questions, surprisingly not about their home. Before we talk about the style of cabinets you want in your new kitchen or the colors you prefer in your dream master bedroom retreat, I want to know that we are going to work well together. How will we communicate? What if you and your spouse disagree; how do you handle it and what role will I play in seeking the resolution? Why do you want this project done? What will it mean to you when it is completed? What are your goals for your home? What makes you happy? These questions are just as important to me as your color and style preferences. They set the foundation for our process and relationship.

As a design client, you should also be asking questions of the interior designer that you choose for your project. Beyond samples of my work, I don't get a lot of questions from design clients. Granted, there is a lot of information available via my website and other resources like LinkedIn, Facebook, and Houzz. However, I think that most interior design clients simply don't know what they *should* be asking. Sometimes clients aren't even 100% sure what a designer does. You just know that you need help and an interior designer should somehow get you to your final dream destination. As you consider and interview interior designers, below are 5 questions that you should ask of them and some keys to look for in their answers.

Q1 How do you communicate your design ideas to help me understand them?

Why this is important: If you are hiring an interior designer, it is likely because you can't visualize a redesigned space and you are worried about moving forward without a plan. On the other hand, we as designers can visualize a space and know how the redesigned space will look. It is critically important that a good interior designer is able to fully communicate these design ideas to you in a way that you understand so you are comfortable with the redesigned space and plans before you spend money on the products or construction.

What to look for: What drawing system(s) does the design firm use? Are they using software or pen and paper? Are the drawings fully color rendered with an accurate display of the actual materials that they are proposing? Software programs such as Sketch-up, Chief Architect, and Minutes Matter are essential in communicating the design plans to clients. Ask for examples of drawings from previous projects.

In addition to the drawings, a well-run design firm will have a system of communicating all of the actual products with you. You should always see samples of fabrics, tiles, cabinetry, etc., in person and in the actual space. But how does the designer keep these organized and accessible to you? Some design firms use software to group product photos and specifications together, other firms collect this information in files that the clients keep. Find out what your designer will do and determine if that system is the best fit for you. Ask for a demo and/or demo access to any project management software.

Q2 Who else is on your team?

Why this is important: During the introduction and interview phase, you will likely be speaking exclusively with the Principal Designer of a firm. While interior designers certainly are talented, they don't work in a vacuum

and they aren't capable of bringing a design to life on their own. The larger design team will include team members inside and outside of the design firm. Internal members may include a scheduler/expediter, other designers, etc. External members may include installers, crafts people and contractors.

What to look for: Who are the other players in your design project? Who will be your primary design contact? Will it be someone other than the Principal Designer or the person with whom you are meeting? Have the external resources been vetted by the designer? How long have they worked together?

Q3 When there are problems on the job, how do you resolve them?

Why this is important: There are always problems on a job. *ALWAYS*. Backordered or discontinued products, freight damage, wrong item has shipped, wrong quantity has shipped, and unexpected issues during demolition or construction... the list of potential problems is long. Even the smallest design or decorating job will run into at least one issue. Be prepared in advance.

What to look for: Know how your designer prepares for and resolves these issues. It can make all the difference between a relatively smooth job, or a very bumpy job that runs over schedule.

Q4 How do you charge?

Why this is important: Interior Designers all charge a bit differently. Some charge by the hour, some include a mark-up on products, some charge a flat fee and often you will see a hybrid of 2 or more of the above. Unfortunately, it makes it very difficult to compare apples to apples. (Because Designers charge so differently, it is so important not to select your Interior Designer on price alone. Look for the right fit, these questions should really help you to get there!)

What to look for: Does your designer clearly articulate how you will be charged? Are you comfortable with this method? There are pros and cons to each system. For example, charging hourly is the most flexible method for changes in the project scope and easiest to get started on a project quickly. However, the fees are not capped and could go beyond what you were expecting. Flat-fees give you a fixed amount up front so you can budget accordingly. However, it requires more time up front to define the *exact* project scope before the project begins. If you want to add a little something to the project, it requires a change order to add a design fee.

Q5 How will you manage my budget?

Why this is important: You have a certain amount to invest in your interior design, remodel or decorating project. It's part of your designer's job to maximize that budget in line with your wants and needs. How do they keep track of the funds? Will they offer you choices at different price levels?

What to look for: How will they track the budget? Is it done in a software program, an excel spreadsheet or in their head? Again, this is an area where there may be many different answers; you should look for the designer that makes you most comfortable with their answer and their systems.

How does Beautiful Habitat answer these questions? Read On.

Q1 How do you communicate your design ideas to help me understand them?

Beautiful Habitat uses different drawing programs based on the specific needs of the project. Drawings may be done in SketchUp, Minutes Matter or 20-20 Designs. SketchUp is a 3D program and preferred for remodeling projects, including kitchen or bath designs, space planning and furniture layout. Minutes Matter is the best program for designing window treatments and furniture pieces or arranging artwork groupings.

Beautiful Habitat uses a program called Studio Webware to manage and communicate design projects. Clients have access to a "Client Portal". All products and project drawings are loaded to the portal, where clients can access them anytime, add comments, "like" or "dislike" choices, view the budget, see all proposals and invoices, as well as pay invoices online. In addition, for larger projects, Beautiful Habitat creates a client binder which allows clients to keep hard copies of all drawings, product spec sheets and samples of fabrics, paint chips and other finishes. This is a tactile business and it's important to touch and see the actual samples. The binders are also great for contractor meetings and confirmation of details at job sites.

Q2 Who else is on your team?

Tennille Wood is the Principal Interior Designer and Project Manager at Beautiful Habitat. She is supported by Jennifer Ognibene, an Associate Designer and with help in administration, accounting and expediting. As the Principal Designer, all design decisions, recommendations and products are run through Tennille before being presented to the Client. Tennille is also the primary, direct contact for all clients and communication.

The Beautiful Habitat team is rounded out by some of the region's top contractors, installers, craftspeople, drapery workers, cabinetry makers, and other specialists. We also have a strong relationship with showrooms and manufacturer representatives who help us to get the best service on products that are ordered.

Q3 When there are problems on the job, how do you resolve them?

After over a decade in the industry, we know that every job faces an unexpected challenge along the way. We've developed systems to handle some of the more common problems. This knowledge and experience helps us prepare to handle the other problems as they arise.

Tennille Wood is easy-going by nature, which helps in the management of design project issues. "If I don't panic, it helps you not to panic." In addition she says "When a problem is brought to me, I will produce at least 1 solution before presenting the problem to you. You've hired us to design and implement this project so you can focus on the things you enjoy. We'll ensure that problems are handled with minimal disruption to you."

Q4 How do you charge?

Our fees depend on the type of project, scope of work involved, level of service you request, and the location of the project, if outside of the Denver metro area. Our services are calculated on a flat fee basis, which represents a reasonable assessment of the time, materials and resources it will take to professionally execute your job on time and on budget. This requires us to spend a lot more time up front, getting to know you,

understand your pains, and the problems with your space. Then we can create a fee appropriate to achieve your goals.

Q5 How will you manage my budget?

Before we begin work, we ask a lot of questions about your investment amount. Not only the specific dollar amount you have to invest, but also your comfort levels within that amount. For example, if you have \$25,000 to invest, are you comfortable with spending \$10,000 on one piece? Would it make you nervous to have a piece that expensive? We discuss several of these comfort levels before any work begins. We look at your scope of work and investment amount. If those are out of alignment, we discuss what CAN be achieved within your desired budget.

Beautiful Habitat uses a program called Studio Webware to track and communicate design projects. Studio Webware includes budgeting tools allowing us to allocate budget amounts to the total project and each individual piece within a project. Our clients can access and track this budget through their Client Portal at any time. If you choose to splurge on one piece, we will discuss adjustments to other pieces to bring the budget back in line.