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How to hire a Designer

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This guide has been prepared by **Spencer Howard Design + Construction Management** and is for information purposes only. Every property should be inspected by a qualified professional prior to starting the design process.

CONSUMER GUIDE: HOW TO HIRE A DESIGNER



WHERE TO START

Nothing is more exciting than creating a new home and nothing will affect the success of your project more than the right designer. The designer determines the style and function of a home as well as the emotional toll and financial costs involved in its construction. Finding your perfect match in a designer is not impossible and the following seven points can guide you along the way. Use these to help analyze the personality, design strategy, and communication skills of your candidates. Your goal is to find the right designer for your home, for your budget, and for you.

1. Finding a Designer

Like many other fields, word of mouth is the best way to look for a designer. Ask family, friends, and professional colleagues for referrals. Is there a particular home you admire? A knock on the door can yield an introduction to your project's potential designer. Professional organizations such as your city or country's local design institutions are also great sources to find designers. General contractors, interior design studios, and other trade-related personnel would also be able to furnish some referrals. Be sure to visit web sites of your candidates. Look at their previous work. Get a feel for what is their design style and language – is it about blending in the neighborhood, is it environmentally sound designs, or is it about making a big statement? Then, start a conversation. Make an appointment for a consultation. Meeting face to face will help you decide if it is a fit.

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WHAT TO ASK

2. A designer's biggest success and largest obstacle

How will the designer approach your project? Let them know the most important aspects of your project and ask how they will be incorporated into a process. If you are doing a home remodel or an addition, start with what aspects of your home you currently like and ask how they can be improved? Typically, a remodel should try and blend seamlessly with the rest of the home. Ask how will this be achieved? Even though the designer might have an attractive portfolio and good references you will still want to make sure their process and approach is right for you and your project.

3. Signature Style: Who's got it and do you want it?

It is common for a designer to be known by a certain style – Spanish colonial revival, ultra-modern, French country to name a few. Though most designers are able to adapt their signature style to what you want, think twice about hiring a designer with a neoclassical signature style to rehab your California craftsman style home. Have plenty of examples of the look you want; these can be found from catalogs, magazines or the Internet. Environmentally friendly, sustainable “green” designs and construction however can be applied to any style. Discuss the importance of these elements with your designer from the outset.

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WHAT TO ASK

4. Meet your project designer

Signing a contract with a designer representing a firm does not necessarily mean that person will be your project manager. Actually, outside of single-designer owned operations, this is common procedure. Be sure to meet the project manager before making any final decisions. Being able to communicate freely and openly with your project manager is vital to the success of your project. You should share a clear understanding of the project with your designer and feel completely comfortable.

6. The full-service design firm

Conceptual renderings and blueprints are not the only services design and planning firms provide. Ask about other services your candidate's firm offers. Ask about benefits of specific services to you and their corresponding costs. Ask your designer if there are any additional services offered and how they could be useful to you for your particular project. If a firm doesn't offer a requested service, they should be able to refer a firm that does.

Below is a glimpse into some additional services a typical design firm provides:

- Project Feasibility Studies
- Programming
- Master Planning
- Interior Design
- Landscape Design
- Historic Preservation
- Traditional and Computer Renderings

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HOW TO FIGURE OUT FEES

- 3 Dimensional, Fly Through, Computer Visualization
- Comprehensive Construction Documents
- LEED Coordination And Certification Assistance
- Detailed Cost Estimates
- Furniture, Furnishings & Equipment Specifications
- Construction Administration

7. Figuring out the fees

Typically, a designer's fee is calculated as a percentage of the project's entire cost (minus the designer's fee of course). Depending on the services provided by the designer, the rate could range from 5 to 20 percent. However, when you first start the design process for your project, it is difficult, if not impossible to accurately determine the final project cost. During this initial time period (before a good estimate of the final project cost is possible) the designer may charge an hourly fee or a retainer. The retainer or hourly fee will be credited towards the total design fee once it has been determined. Billing monthly is the industry standard. Also, ask when payment is expected and the preferred method of payment, i.e. check, credit card, etc. Keep in mind that the designer's fee applies to all the costs of your project. Examples of project costs are the construction budget as well as consultant fees such as environmental impact studies or structural engineering fees. The most important thing about fees is complete transparency. Insist upon it.

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HOW TO HIRE A CONTRACTOR

8. Hiring a contractor

An experienced designer should have a list of contractors they like to work with. Your designer should be able to help you choose the best contractor for your project. Always get multiple bids on the construction of your project – even if you already have a contractor. This is an industry standard and gives you better leverage at the bargaining table. Additionally, having a contractor during the design process ensures you will not be building more than you can afford. These tips are meant as a guide to choosing the best designer for your residential project. You will be working very closely with your designer on what may be one of the biggest investments of your life. Not only are a designer's answers to your questions important, but how they are answered speaks volumes, too. Did they take time for details to clear up any confusion? Did you feel comfortable with them? Did they conduct business in a transparent manner? Creating a new home is exciting but can get intimidating at times, however choosing the right team can make it an enjoyable process. That team always starts with choosing the right designer and we hope these tips will help you with that for your next project.