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LET'S CREATE SOMETHING BEAUTIFUL

THE ARCHITECT'S ADVANTAGE

Great Homes Don't Happen by Accident

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Guidebook: Chapter 8

Chapter 8: The Partner in Design

If the architect writes the music, the builder and the interior designer are the ones who perform it. I have used that analogy with clients for years because it captures something that is otherwise difficult to explain, the way three distinct professional disciplines, each bringing a different kind of expertise to the same project, can produce something together that none of them could have created alone. A piece of music exists fully on the page. But it does not become what it is meant to be until skilled musicians bring it to life with their own knowledge, sensibility, and craft. A house works the same way.

My drawings establish the architecture, the structure, the spatial arrangement, the proportions, the relationship between interior and exterior, the bones and the skin of the building. The builder executes that vision with craftsmanship and seasoned knowledge. The interior designer takes everything that has been designed and brings it to a level of finish, coherence, and beauty that the drawings alone could not fully anticipate.

They are my partner. On any project where the full team is working well together, their talent is felt in every room to the smallest detail.

What Interior Designers Actually Do

Clients who have never worked with an interior designer sometimes assume the role is primarily decorative, that an interior designer is someone you call after the house is built to help choose furniture and paint colors. This is a significant underestimation of what a skilled interior designer contributes, and it leads clients to bring them in far too late to realize the full value of the collaboration.

The decisions an interior designer influences begin well before construction and extend through every finish selection in the house. Consider the kitchen alone. The style and construction of the cabinetry. The profile of the edge detail carved into the stone countertop, a detail that costs almost nothing but elevates the entire surface when it is chosen with intention. Whether the backsplash is the same stone as the counter, clean and continuous and easy to maintain, or a tile with grout lines that will collect grease and require constant attention. The hardware, its finish, its form, its relationship to the style of the cabinetry and the broader material palette of the house.

None of these decisions is trivial. Each one is visible every day for the life of the home. And there are hundreds of them, in the kitchen, in every bathroom, in every closet, in every room where a finish material meets another finish material and the junction between them needs to be resolved with care. An interior designer navigates that terrain with a depth of knowledge and a breadth of market access that would take most homeowners years to develop independently.

The shower is one of my favorite examples. The pattern in which tile is laid, the orientation, the grout joint width, the relationship between the field tile and any decorative accents, is a decision that most people do not consciously register when it is done correctly. They simply feel that the shower is beautiful, that it has a quality they cannot quite name. When it is done without

thought, that same absence of intention reads as plainly as a wrong note in a familiar melody. An interior designer hears those notes. They are trained to.

When to Bring Them In

I typically introduce the interior designer after the floor plans and three-dimensional model have been resolved and approved, but that is not a hard and fast rule. At that stage, the architectural decisions are settled, the spatial arrangement, the room sizes, the ceiling conditions, the structural elements, and the interior designer can engage with the project from a position of clarity rather than trying to influence decisions that have already been made and built upon.

That said, I value bringing them in earlier than the finish selection phase when the project warrants it. A great interior designer can contribute meaningfully to room design, to the configuration of cabinetry zones, to ceiling treatment decisions that sit at the boundary between architecture and interior design. When I have a relationship with a designer I trust, I will pull them into a conversation during design development to have another set of informed eyes on the work. Their perspective at that stage has, more than once, improved the design in ways I did not anticipate.

The earlier a client engages the interior designer, the more value that designer can deliver. A designer who joins the project at the finish selection phase is managing choices. A designer who joins during Design Development is helping to shape them. The difference in outcome is significant.

Where the Roles Meet

The boundary between architect and interior designer is not a line. It is a zone, a territory of shared interests and overlapping expertise where the best work happens when both parties operate collaboratively.

Some architects prefer to hand the interior work entirely to the designer once the construction documents are complete and consider their role fulfilled. I have never been able to work that way. I am a classical architect, and the integrity of architecture depends on the coherence of every decision from the structural to the decorative. A ceiling beam profile, a cabinet door style, a hardware finish, these are not independent choices. They are part of a continuous composition, and I want to remain in that conversation throughout the project to ensure that the interior decisions reinforce the architectural experience intent.

What this requires is a particular kind of relationship with the interior designer, one built on mutual respect, honest communication, and a shared understanding of the project's goals. The interior designers I work best with understand where my commitments lie and why. They know which decisions I will have strong opinions about and which ones I am genuinely delighted to hand to them entirely. We have learned, through working together on multiple projects, where our boundaries are and where our abilities can lift each other. That knowledge does not come immediately. It is built project by project, disagreement by disagreement, until two professionals find their rhythm working together. New relationships take longer to find that rhythm. I extend patience, because the payoff is worth it.

A Unified Front

There is a practical dimension to the architect-interior designer relationship that deserves to be named directly, because it protects the client in ways they may not realize.

When the architect and the interior designer are aligned, when they have communicated, when they understand each other's intentions, when they present a unified position to the client on matters of design, the client benefits from the combined weight of two professional opinions rather than the uncertainty of two professionals who appear to disagree. I described earlier how I will occasionally use the interior designer's agreement to help guide a client toward a good decision that they are resisting. That dynamic only works when the relationship between the two professionals is solid enough to make the alignment credible.

I had a project recently that illustrated the value of this clearly. The client was analytical by nature, an engineer's mind applied to every decision, and had a tendency to want to manage each member of the team separately rather than allow us to function as a unit. At one point, he decided that the structural beams in the great room should be substantially larger than what I had specified on the drawings. His instinct was that bigger meant more impressive.

The interior designer and I had worked together long enough to be completely attuned to each other's thinking on questions of scale and proportion. Without any coordination between us, we both arrived at the same position independently: the beams I had sized were correct for the room. Larger beams would overwhelm the space, compress the perceived ceiling height, and produce exactly the opposite of the grandeur the client was imagining.

When the interior designer stepped in and reinforced my position, calmly, knowledgeably, without a hint of the "us against you" dynamic that could poison these moments, the client heard it differently than he had heard it from me alone. Two professionals, different disciplines, same conclusion. The beams stayed as drawn. The room, when finished, was exactly what it was designed to be.

That is the partnership working exactly as they should.

What Clients Should Know

If you are planning to build a custom home and you have not yet thought about engaging an interior designer, I want to leave you with a simple encouragement: do it, and do it early. The investment in a skilled interior designer is not a luxury reserved for the largest projects or the most generous budgets. It is a professional service that delivers measurable value, in the quality of the finish decisions, in the coherence of the home's interior character, in the hundreds of small choices that accumulate into the feeling of a house that has been designed with complete attention rather than assembled from individually acceptable parts.

The architect writes the music. The interior designer refines and enhances it. The builder conducts the symphony. When all three are working together, in communication, toward the same vision, that is when a house becomes something that moves the people who live in it.

That is what we are all working toward. Every one of us, every time.