

DEMYSTIFYING THE PROCESS OF WORKING WITH AN INTERIOR DESIGNER

So, you've decided to hire an interior designer. Congratulations! If this is your first time working with a designer, you might have some questions: How do they charge? What do they charge? Are they making money off of the things they're selling me? What, when you get right down to it, does a designer actually do? You may have noticed that your straightforward internet search for a comprehensive answer to any of these questions didn't give you a straightforward answer. I'm here to help you figure out why!

Let's answer that last question first. The scope of services that an interior designer can offer is vast. It can be as small as arranging the art in a composition on a wall or as large as overseeing the construction of a new home with daily architectural consultations and comprehensive communication with contractors. It can be as specific as finding the perfect fabric for the pillows on a master bed or as grand as helping a client hunt for their next property.

Generally, there are two ways a designer will charge for their services: by the hour or by the project. For those finite missions, a designer will often choose to charge an hourly rate, which typically ranges between \$50 and \$300 per hour. The advantage to the hourly rate is that it allows you to receive specific assistance in small, digestible chunks. Alternately, a designer might assess the unique set of requirements for a project and provide a comprehensive design-labor proposal. This method of charging for service allows you to feel comfortable at the outset knowing what you will spend in design labor, with a clear understanding of what will be accomplished.

This is why the question of how much it costs to hire an interior designer is not always answered simply. It is generally assumed that a client will approach a designer with a budget in mind. If you haven't already ironed out



the budget for your project, the designer (in conjunction with a contractor if construction is involved) can help you determine an appropriate budget based on the scope of the project and your design expectations. When you tell your designer your budget, make sure you indicate whether or not you are including his or her fee as part of that budget! Designers will

expect to be paid for their work and also to be given a separate budget to work within.

As to whether a designer is making money off of the things they are selling you, the short answer is yes! I'll tell you why that isn't a bad thing. The fact that a designer is making a margin on your purchases does not mean



that you are being taken advantage of or that you are paying over retail. Most interior designers are able to negotiate a trade discount based on their relationship and buying history with a vendor, and some will pass along a portion of those savings to their clients. Most will need to keep a portion to justify the time the firm spends in specifying and following a particular order all the way from the workshop to the project and, ultimately, for being responsible for the end result. This is a great service for you! It ensures the designer can afford to go to bat for you should something come in incorrectly, have a defect, or be lost or damaged in transit. Designers work with the vendors they know they can rely on to deliver pieces that meet their client's expectations, both in terms of quality and design. This is why most interior designers have policies that require a client to purchase the selections they make through their firms. By the time the list of specifications gets in your hands, there have almost certainly been myriad emails back and forth, finish samples or memos sent, and freight quotes negotiated. Your purchase through your designer helps to offset the cost of this exchange of time and to support the relationships they have with these vendors that ultimately result in you getting the outcome you desire.

It's important to understand that there is a distinction between the design-labor fee you pay to obtain design direction and a specific recommendation of goods for a project and the margin your designer might make on the items you decide to purchase through them. They are separate services, but both are necessary for the completion of the design work. Think of these services as phase one and phase two. The first allows the overall design to be created, and the second allows that design to be coordinated and implemented. This is a point that can cause confusion, so I think it's important to clarify. Imagine, if you will, that you have commissioned a composer to write you a symphony. The initial design fees you pay are like the commission that you would pay the composer to write the symphony. The margin a designer might make on the goods that you purchase can be compared to the fee you would then

pay the composer to conduct the orchestra. I like to be transparent with my clients in this regard because understanding how these distinct revenue streams support the completion of their project helps them to understand each of the services that is being provided and the value that they are receiving from both.

Your investment in an interior designer is only worth it if you trust them! I've watched nervous clients sabotage their projects over and over by obsessing over individual bits, pulling threads that unravel the tapestry. My best advice to a person using a designer for the first time is to trust the professional you've hired. Having an interior designer at your side opens a world of opportunities. They can introduce to a project their trusted arsenal—everything from materials to tradespeople—which can assure not only the most beautiful result, but also garner the highest net value for your efforts!

Until next time, here's to creating your own Noble Spaces! ■

Tammy Randall Wood, ASID, is the founder and principal of Interior Archaeology. She has designed an extensive array of projects coast to coast -- from seaside cottages on Martha's Vineyard, metropolitan penthouses and formal Beltway manors to cultivated West Coast compounds. Her firm brings a fresh approach to tailored interiors.

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