



REDECORATING? A PROFESSIONAL COULD SAVE YOU MONEY

Edie Swire of Larchmont, N.Y., lives in a "beautiful funky house that also has some homely spots." That's why she considered an interior decorator.

Like many homeowners, however, Swire was reluctant to hire a professional. "I was shy about it because I didn't have a fortune to spend and because I didn't want my house to look like a showroom," she says.

Swire conferred with Barbara Held of Motif Designs in Larchmont, and the two have been happily working together for a year.

Today, the notion of turning to an interior designer is not an idea that is restricted to the wealthy. The num-

Interior designers aren't just for the rich and famous anymore. Hiring one can often be an economy move.

ber of working women who have less time and more disposable income to spend on their homes has contributed to the upsurge in the use of interior decorators.

For the Swires the dining room was a problem. The walls were made of 1920s pine—not Edie Swire's idea of elegance. Her husband liked the pan-

'Egos can get in the way of a strong-willed homemaker and an opinionated decorator. To avoid a clash, look through the decorator's portfolio for a variety of styles.'

eling, though, so Swire and Held looked for other ways to add warmth and charm to the room.

Swire had been thinking she would have to discard some of her furniture, including a set of rather stark, contemporary dining room chairs. Held suggested instead that the chairs be covered in an English chintz fabric Swire liked, and that a skirt be added to each to soften the lines. Result: The expense of new chairs was spared and the selected fabric was also used for balloon shades to cover dining room windows that also needed a fresh look.

Future plans call for a wall tapestry and new floor coverings.

Swire is more than satisfied. Decoration costs were held within budget and "Barbara (Held) was very understanding of how important that is," the suburban New York homemaker says.

More importantly, she adds, "Our relationship works because Barbara has asked me a lot of questions and she listens very well. Her skill and talent are one thing, but the key is her ability to understand people and their desires."

An interior designer can be an excellent partner in creating the home you want. A talented and qualified designer is an interpreter of taste, a skilled buyer of home furnishings, and someone trained to look at space differently, to best use the objects at hand.

"There's such a great variety of design services available today that homeowners at many economic levels can find help in making their homes nicer places," says Held.

If a homeowner wants to hire a designer on an hourly basis, rates usually start at \$35 an hour and range up to \$125. The norm is \$58.

To make the most of an hour-long

meeting, take notes. Good questions to ask include: How could the furniture be rearranged to make the living room look bigger? What can be done to improve the lighting downstairs? How can the dining room be updated without a major investment?

Many designers charge according to a combination of hourly rates, flat design fees, and "cost plus." The cost refers to the price of the new furnishings. A typical charge may be cost plus 30 percent, but rates can range as high as costs plus 100 percent. Be sure you know before beginning how much a designer is going to charge and on what basis.

Many people prefer to do their own home decorating, but a designer's input can provide a fresh perspective. Reassurance is an important commodity, too. In the throes of redecorating, a homeowner can find it hard to imagine how a critical piece of furniture will look in the home. That's where the experienced eye of a trained decorator can be invaluable.

"Furniture looks a lot different in a large showroom than it does in a living room," says M.J. Kamin, president of the Illinois chapter, American Society of Interior Designers (ASID). "Floor plans, sketches, and renderings help people imagine how objects will work in a room."

Many stores don't carry full lines of a manufacturer's brands. Designers, who make a point of staying abreast of such things, may be able to steer a homeowner to exactly the piece of furniture she or he wants. Designers can also help a homeowner negotiate the purchase of custom-made furnishings.

Purchased correctly, custom-made goods should cost about what ready-made—but not quite right—goods cost at retail, Kamin says.

If a major home remodeling project is under consideration, be sure the interior decorator you consult has had experience in working with all kinds of contractors. Ask for a list of the plumbing, painting, and electrical contractors with whom the decorator usually works. Be sure he or she understands safety precautions (fabric flammability, for example) and local building codes.

Interview several decorators before choosing one. The relationship between decorator and client is a professional one, but is also very personal at times. Intangibles and

personalities are involved, so listening to your instincts is a good idea only up to a point.

"Ask a designer many specific questions," advises ASID president Janet Schirn. Some good ones:

- If the designer worked in a furniture store, what was her position? Salesclerk? Store designer? Furnishings consultant?

- Does the designer have a constant bank balance? Some don't, expecting instead to pay subcontractors such as wallpaperers and upholsterers from funds paid in advance to the decorator by the client.

- Can you talk to past clients who will discuss the decorator's work?

- Is all the work in a decorator's portfolio his or her own? Disreputable ones may claim some that isn't.

Make sure, too, that the decorator understands your specific needs. A good decorator should ask questions about the client's preference in color and furniture styles. How often do you entertain and in what style? Are there children or pets in the home?

Rate of payment and payment schedules should be clarified in advance in a contract between client and designer. "Designers are paid up front for materials," says Paul Plotnick, a Skokie, Ill., lawyer who deals with decorators and clients regularly. "For labor, the designer should be given a percentage of the total payment at the start of the job and the rest upon completion." Plotnick recommends a specific description of what's to be done in each room, including a drawing of how it will look; a deadline for completion of the job; and, a "hold harmless" clause stipulating the homeowner can't be held liable if the interior designer doesn't pay sub-contractors. If the designer has a standard contract, have your lawyer review it, Plotnick suggests.

A lot of effort goes into a successful relationship between homeowner and designer. "To be honest," says Peggy Dracoules, a California designer, "every client should expect some problems. But give the designer a chance to make things right."

Working as a team, you and your interior designer should end up with a beautiful house—or apartment—you'll be happy to call your home.

Betsy Storm writes about consumer affairs, new products, and financial matters from her home in Wilmette, Ill.