

# How a designer thinks

Interior designer Robin McGarry says a beautiful room requires smart space planning, good lighting, artwork ... and a dose of intuition



**W**HAT DO INTERIOR DESIGNERS know that we don't? How is it they can walk into a room, instantly know what's wrong ... and fix it? How do they find that perfect piece of furniture, or the color, fabric or accessory that pulls a room together? Is it training, a good eye—or both—that makes them so good at what they do?

Robin McGarry, ASID, of Weston, has been designing residential and commercial interiors for 30 years, and in that time she has developed an uncommonly practiced eye and sophisticated style (not to mention business sense) that eludes most of us.

We asked her to share some of her insights into the design process:

**Q. Where do you find inspiration?**

**A.** Everywhere!

Wherever I go, I observe design ... at restaurants, retail stores, in movies and on TV shows. I almost always have my camera with me, and I find myself taking pictures a lot. My husband and I went to Italy a year -and-a-half ago and we stayed in some really nice places. When we came back, I found that most of the pictures I had taken were of cabinets, window treatments, bathroom tiles and doors!

**Q. What elements do you consider most important to the success of a room?**

**A.** I think lighting is critical to a beautiful space—whether it's special lamps or the

**top:** Art is a fabulous focal point.

**left:** Simple lines, a mix of old and new—plus great lighting—can transform a plain space into something special.







general illumination of the room. One major thing I also find is that people usually do not allow enough room in their budget for nice artwork. Incorporating a mixture of some original paintings, maybe even something that a friend did, can really make a significant difference to the success of a room and how much a person loves being in that room. You can furnish a space with the most expensive furniture there is, but if you don't have nice lighting and artwork, the room will be a failure.

**Q. What's the most important first step when working with a new client?**

**A.** Number one is to be honest from the first meeting regarding the expense of creating a beautiful and successful space. Once the budget is approved, we present room-by-room design options. I always recommend designing a house in phases

and never doing the whole house at one time. We pick rooms that are a priority and do them first, just to see how the process goes, and to make sure that the client is comfortable working with me and seeing the results of what we do.

**Q. How do you convey your ideas to a client while retaining his or her personality?**

**A.** When people hire a professional designer, it's usually because they are financially and psychologically ready for a major change. They want a new image, they need to refresh their life and their home, and they don't know how to do it. This job does take a certain amount of insight in terms of reading people. After meeting them and speaking with them, you learn to read between the lines. You can miss the boat if you don't. When we

Balance, scale and beautiful accessories figure prominently in this space. But first, it was important for the designer and client to establish a budget.

get to presenting our ideas, we don't just give clients one choice. We usually present a minimum of three schemes for each room, which gives them an opportunity to choose what they like best.

**Q. How does a designer develop the "right style" for a room?**

**A.** I don't like any room to be predictable, like it came out of a catalog. I try to achieve an unpredictable room that is complementary to the home but also fits the client's personality. That's where experience comes in. You may not know why a space feels right—it could be the mixture of colors, the style or the fabrics—but you can usually tell when it does.

**Q. Are there any specific questions you ask your client in order to establish direction for a project?**

**A.** Yes: How is the space to be used? What are the priorities for its use? If a client doesn't know what they need, I make some suggestions.

For example, a computer can really determine the function of a space. Lately, I've been designing a lot of bedrooms for teenagers, and one thing that's really popular is a large day bed or chaise longue, where they can sit and work on a laptop, rather than sitting in bed. It's something a client may not think of. On the other hand, if a client has younger children, they will sometimes prefer to place their computer in a sort of homework area that they can monitor.

**Q. What is the most important thing you've learned from 30 years of designing people's homes?**

**A.** It's a fact that in order to be a successful designer, you must also be a good business manager. When people are struggling in the interior design field, it's usually because they tend to focus on the artistic part of it and ignore the business aspect. Interior design isn't just about creating a beautiful space—it's also about managing a project financially.

I also believe it is very important to oversee your sources—from your subcontractors, installers and finishers to your workroom. Sure, a designer can create a concept and throw it into someone's lap and say "do it," but if they don't care enough to stay on top of it, it probably won't turn out the way they envisioned it. Good designers have to be sure they are working with skilled and reliable people at all times. □

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