



IIDC-PAC, Merchandise Mart, P.O. Box 3647, Chicago, IL 60654

www.iidcpac.org

info@iidcpac.org

NICE ASSET

-Cindy Coleman

The term professional implies achieving a certain level of education, experience and qualification. Let's face it, we are all in a hurry, and we assume professional status by title: Doctor, Attorney, or Accountant. It's the peace-of-mind factor when you consider all that's at stake: money, time, reputation, and the fact that you'll have to live with the outcome of the engagement. Oddly, when it comes to hiring an interior designer, title alone won't cut it. You'll need to dig deeper to match a designer's qualifications with your expectations.

Aren't all interior designers the same? There's an old communication adage that says if it takes longer than a three-floor elevator ride to explain something, the *something* is poorly defined. Defining the profession of interior design falls into this category. That's because interior design is a hybrid profession whose responsibilities and authorities trace back to architecture, the fine and decorative arts, and even home economics. The title *interior designer*, until recently, was (and in some states still is) open to anyone willing and able to voice an aesthetic thought. Mixed together within this melting pot of *interior designers* are the interior decorators, interior designers and the architects, the do-it-yourselfers, the television celebrities, and those with advanced, professional degrees.

Fortunately for the public, this is beginning to change thanks to some concerned national and regional design associations who are pushing hard to secure licensing for interior designers, on a state-by-state basis. When in place, this move limits the use of the title *interior designer* to only those who meet the qualifying educational and professional standards. An important move, when you consider what's at risk.

What is at risk? At risk is an important asset: The places we inhabit. It doesn't matter whether it's your kitchen, your home, or your workplace, where you hangout, or shop; these places are all assets. In view of the amount of money that goes into the purchase or lease of a space, not to mention the cost of a build-out, it should perform, and it should provide a positive return on investment. To get this positive return, you need a qualified designer—someone who will go beyond making your asset simply look good—it has to work, too.

What does a professional interior designer do? The profession of interior design has its own body of knowledge that makes it unique, distinguishing it from its closest allies, interior decoration and architecture.

The central focus of a professional interior designer concerns the specific knowledge required for the design of space for habitation and human interaction. Making aesthetic choices; color, furniture and finish recommendations, are all part of the basic scope of service of a professional interior designer, but not its limitation. Embedded into the scope of work are considerations for protecting and enhancing the health, safety and welfare of the public.



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The work of a professional interior designer is accomplished through a phased process that centers on being an advocate for the client or owner. The process begins with research and understanding the goals a client or owner has for the project, the budget and schedule implications for the scope of work, and continues through the design phases where the goals are given form. Next, a professional interior designer prepares documents for interior construction and specification and, on behalf of the client or owner, supports the pricing process. The designer coordinates, on an ongoing basis, with all outside consultants and stakeholders, and monitors the interior construction phase of the project through project completion to ensure the work, costs, and schedule, on behalf of the owner or client are all on track.

If it sounds complicated, it's because the process is. That's why having a professional on board to advocate will ultimately pay-off. If it sounds expensive, it's not; just consider what's at risk.

Now that you know, how do you get started? Referrals are a great way to get started. Look around and ask around. Most design associations like the American Society of Interior Designers (ASID), www.asid.org, or the International Interior Design Association (IIDA), www.iida.org, can provide you with names of qualified professional interior designers working in your area whose work is aligned with your project scope and goals. General contractors may also be able to provide a list of names from their own project experiences. Spend time to meet and interview a few designers so that you feel confident about your selection.

Interior design firms range in size from sole-proprietorships to large firms. The size of the firm doesn't dictate what kind of service you will receive, nor does it influence the cost of service. In general, most professional interior designers offer a similar scope of service. What should drive your choice for hiring a designer or design firm is a compatibility of project complexity, aesthetic, and an ability to communicate comfortably. Next, consider your budget and your mutual schedules and verify that there's alignment.

Throughout it all, be prepared to stay involved; consider yourself part of the team. Clients often feel that they should leave aesthetic decisions to the experts. This is wrong. If you are part of the decision process, the end result will be a better fit for your original goals. The last thing you want to say at the end of the project is, "I had no idea it was going to look like this." After all, it's your asset. Make it work!—Cindy Coleman

Cindy Coleman is a partner in the Chicago-based design and communications firm Frankel + Coleman. She teaches at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and is a contributing editor for Interior Design magazine.