

TV DESIGN MYTHS

BY CAREN S. MARTIN
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“Mom, no! Don’t look!” The panicked words met me as I crossed our cabin on a rainy July day. “What are you watching?” I asked my son as I peered around to see what was on the television. “Mom, please, you’ll just get upset!”

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The “designers” on the program he was watching had just painted the carpeting in the living room they were “designing.” Previously, they had painted the sofa to match the walls!

The world of design programming was new to me until last year when we got cable television. I had heard of the genre’s horrors from others, but had never seen it myself. As an interior designer for more than 20 years, I found it inconceivable to see how my profession was being portrayed. Most interior designers will lament the fact that the public—and even their parents—aren’t sure what they do. But what designers do is not what the public sees on television.

If you watch design programs on the Discovery Channel, HGTV, BBC America, or TLC, you had better be doing so for entertainment! Yes, it is possible to pick up a creative idea or a source for a product that interests you. However, for the most part, what you see is not what you will get—or for that matter, what you probably want.

The good news is that, for the most part, the approach, timelines, costs, attitudes, ethics, and outcomes represented on television design shows are not reality. I watched many hours of *Designers’ Challenge*, *Trading Spaces*, *Design on a Dime*, *The Christopher Lowell Show*, *Surprise by Design*, *Sensible Chic*, *Designer Guys*, *Smart Design*, *Design Rules*, and *Designing for the Sexes* to come up with the following list of myths and realities. Believe me, it was a painful task!

Myth #1: The goal of the design process is to “surprise” the client.

This describes the premise for 95 percent of the design programming that you will see, when in reality the client should be an integral, ongoing participant in the design process. If the final design is a surprise, you hired the wrong designer, and you will regret it. When a couple on an episode of *Trading Spaces* returned to their home to find the walls of their master bedroom had been covered with turkey feathers and adorned with burning candles, the husband exclaimed, “My cats are going to have a heyday

with these feathers!” Not to mention the potential fire hazard. A professional interior designer would know about your cats and design accordingly. Moreover, the client should be in charge of the timetable, the budget, and the outcome, not the designer. Interior designers should serve as guides and facilitators of your project and engage you in the creative process.

I wonder how a woman reacted after the *Surprise by Design* crew left her home, and she was alone with her husband of 22 years. He had just assisted the designers in sawing apart the walnut sleigh bed they had had for most of their marriage to construct a bench from the footboard. Watch for them on *Divorce Court* next year.

Myth # 2: Quality and speed are synonymous.

The premise that a primary room in your home can be designed, demolished, rebuilt, furnished, and decorated in two workdays is a fantasy. It takes a lot of time to create a design concept that supports the clients’ needs; document how it will be constructed; specify materials, finishes, and furnishings; select contractors and suppliers; build and furnish the space, and resolve any issues. It may look good at a distance, but the shelving that was constructed for a couple by the *Surprise by Design* team from $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch plywood and screwed together at right angles will not last; in fact, it was splitting as it was being assembled. Even teens in high school shop class know better!

Aesthetics and function should go hand-in-hand in a space created by a professional interior designer. The *Design on a Dime* interior designer wasn’t concerned about installing floor-to-ceiling draperies that covered the ventilation units in a southern California apartment. It might get a bit toasty in August.

A professional interior designer understands and can communicate initial costs, ongoing maintenance, and longevity issues of all building and furnishings materials and finishes. How the space looks the first week after completion is irrelevant; it needs to meet your expectations for aesthetics and

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function as long as required.


It also is important to realize that some design and decoration "treatments" can devalue your home or furnishings. A husband on *Trading Spaces* was left speechless when he saw the couple's solid wood bedroom furniture had been refinished with spray silver enamel. A professional interior designer always clarifies aesthetic tradeoffs so that you can make an educated decision of what you want to sacrifice for a particular design statement.

Myth #3: Anyone can be an interior designer.

Qualifications are important for any profession, and interior design is no exception. In the United States, 24 states and jurisdictions, including Minnesota, certify or license interior designers. Rebecca Cole, host of *Surprise by Design* claims, "If you can do the gestures, you can design a room." Sorry, Rebecca, but that's far from true.

Professional interior designers are qualified by education, experience, and a qualifying examination. They typically hold at least a bachelor's degree, spend a minimum of two years under the direct supervision of an interior designer or architect, and pass an international board examination. The exam includes written and drawing segments that cover building and life safety codes, ethics, and business practices, as well as the principles of design, programming, space planning, code compliance, construction documents and the like.

When looking for a professional interior designer, consider qualifications in combination with experience. Ask if the interior designer is an NCIDQ certificate holder, meaning that he or she has passed the National Council for Interior Design Qualification examination. An ASID (American Society of Interior Designers) or IIDA (International Interior Design Association) designation after the name means that the interior designer is

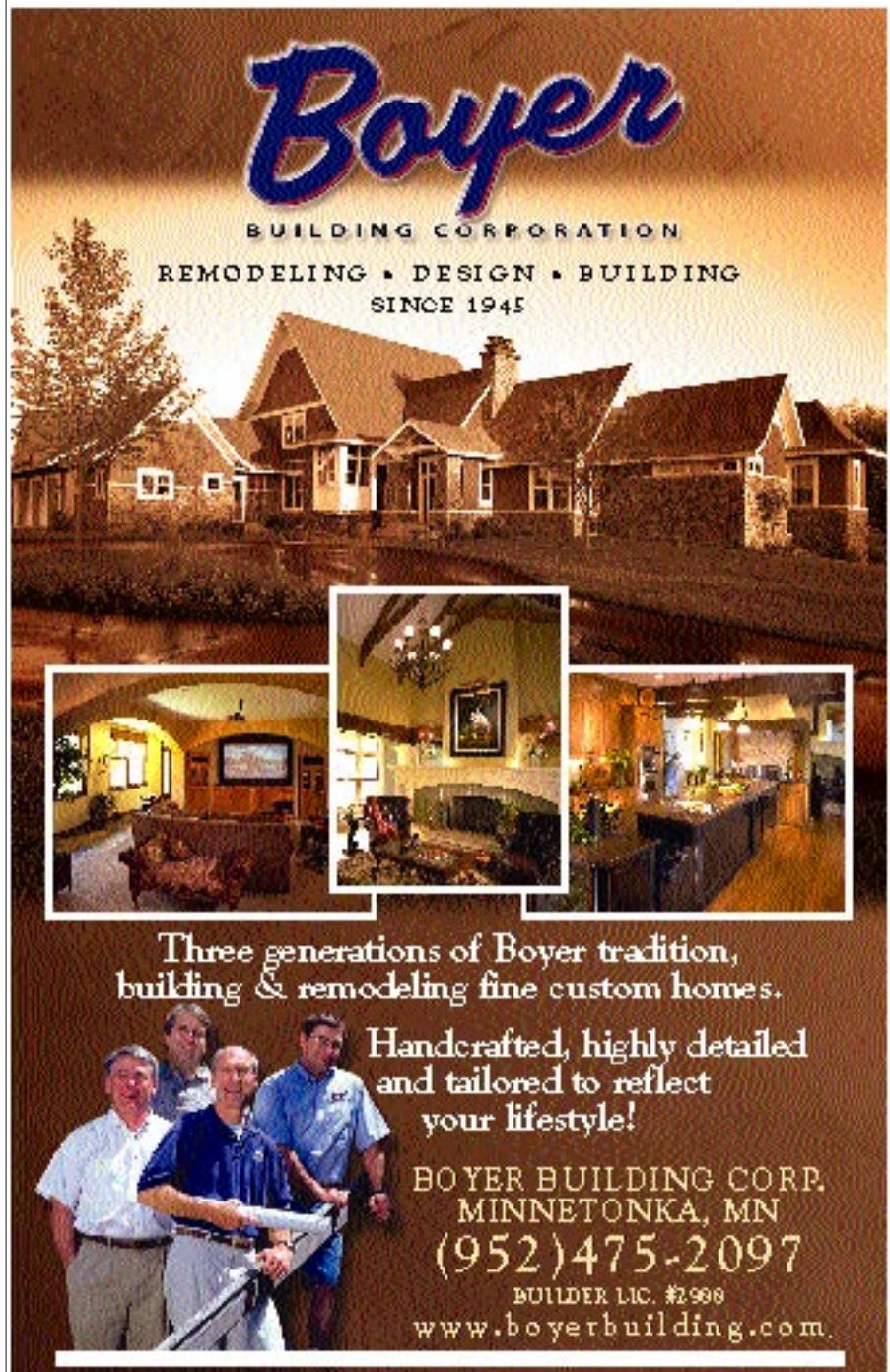


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classified as a professional member of that organization, a good indication that he or she is qualified. If the focus of your project is the kitchen or bathroom, consider hiring someone who has been certified by the National Kitchen and Bath Association as a CKD (Certified Kitchen Designer), CBD (Certified Bathroom Designer), or CMKBD (Certified Master Kitchen and Bathroom Designer). However, professional organization memberships, such as ASID, IIDA, and NKBA, do not necessarily mean that the designer has passed the certification examinations; you have to ask.

And just because a designer has experience designing hotels or offices doesn't mean they are qualified to design your home. Ask for a portfolio and references.

Myth #4: Good design is trendy and cool.

Good design can be trendy and cool; however, design is considered good if it satisfies the clients' lifestyle needs, and is based on the elements and principles of design. If you are not trendy and cool yourself, why should your space look that way? Why is a room painted Pepto-Bismol pink, filled with porcelain pigs, gingham and plaid fabrics, and a Labrador retriever motif appropriate for a woman in her mid-20s? The hostess of *Smart Design* felt that "making a room into a preppy palace" was appropriate, because it is "really in." But it is hard to imagine how this cluttered room of generic props will create a sense of home for its unsuspecting owner.

Likewise, beware of designers who have a signature style. For example, all of the spaces they design are beige and include window seats. Each client is unique, and the design solution should be indicative of the client's needs and style, not the designer's. Also, remember that "good taste" describes how you evaluate your meal; it is not a qualification for being a professional interior designer.

Myth #5: Designing your space will be super expensive or super cheap.

Neither is typically true. Remember,

the client is responsible for setting the budget, so be sure to establish one at the start. In an episode of *Designers' Challenge*, the clients were won over by a design that probably cost three times the initial \$50,000 budget. Bait-and-switch tactics are inappropriate and unethical. Professional interior designers provide a contract that spells out fees, timeline, and the scope of their work on the project. The professional interior designer will be able to design something that is aesthetically pleasing, functional, and durable, no matter the budget. The \$167,550 "inspiration" bedroom presented on *Sensible Chic*, complete with a \$43,000 pair of lamps, is not typical. Programs like these leave you with the belief that interior designers are extravagant and that their clients are all related to Donald Trump. That's not so. On the other hand, some of the cheap design solutions used in these shows are hardly good alternatives. For example, using a piece of painted canvas on the floor in place of a carpet, as they did on *Smart Design*, creates a tripping hazard that will become dirty quickly.

Myth #6: Interior designers are zany, flamboyant airheads.

Most interior designers are creative businesspeople. They know the impact the spaces they design will make on their clients and others, and that they have a responsibility to protect the health, safety, and welfare of the public. You'll never catch them dressing in scrubs and proclaiming, "I am the design doctor," like the host of *The Christopher Lowell Show*. Yes, most interior designers are extremely adept at visualizing three-dimensional space and less skilled in math, but that's what calculators are for! Just don't be disappointed if your interior designer doesn't come to your home in a lime jumpsuit and begin every sentence with "I want" or "I envision." *You* should be the impetus for every design—and the beginning of most sentences.

It's Not All Bad

I have to admit that I have seen several popular design shows that are basically

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factual in their presentation of interior design professionals—or maybe I just caught them on a good day. Though the *Designer Guys* look like a couple of Ralph Lauren models bumming around, most of their program shows how interior designers consider who the client is, the feeling the room should create, functional concerns, and budget. Still, they surprise the client—the ultimate professional no-no. But leave it up to the British to produce *Design Rules*, which focuses on educating the public about good design for the interior. Not only does the program use terms correctly and show cohesive examples, it also interviews scholars about their research regarding the topic of the particular show.

The Real Thing

If you watch design programming looking for design help instead of amusement, you have other options. Hiring a qualified professional interior designer is a better alternative. Finding the right interior designer is not rocket science, but it is imperative that you learn as much as you can about someone who will have a great influence on your life and your money. Identify a qualified interior designer through the ASID (www.asid.org), the IIDA (www.iida.org), or a qualified kitchen or bathroom designer through the NKBA (www.nkba.org). You can also contact the Minnesota Board of Architecture, Engineering, Land Surveying, Landscape Architecture, Geoscience, and Interior Design for a list of Certified Interior Designers (CID) on the Web (www.aelslagid.state.mn.us) or by phone (651-296-2388). Also, information about the NCIDQ examination can be obtained from www.ncidq.org. ■

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