



Episode 34
How to Design a 5 star
Airbnb



**Maria: [00:00]**

Hi and welcome to Designer Discussions. Today we are going to be speaking with Gretchen Gray of Gretchen Gray Saves the Day on how to have a five star Airbnb property.

Intro: [00:10]

Welcome to the Designer Discussions podcast. Tune in each week where we discuss marketing, branding, PR and business advice for design professionals.

Maria: (00:39)

Hi, Gretchen. Hi. I'm so excited to have you on here today. I found you on TikTok and you have been showing kind of this, like, behind the scenes experience about what the person who is coming into and staying in these Airbnbs, like what it is that they're doing when they're in the houses and what it is that they're expecting when they're there. And I'm Super excited to talk to you about some of those things today. So I think my favorite story was the one where you were like, if you're coming into this great cabin, you're out in the woods, you're telling this wonderful story of checking in and you have this beautifully already preset up fireplace ready to go. It looks like it's just talking to you and saying, come, light me, turn the fire on, start this whole experience when you get here. But what happens is sometimes people don't open the flu. They fill the house up with embers and then they get mad about the so called dust that they're finding in these perfectly clean homes. So I think that was an excellent story to kind of start off with why it is. I think it's important to have someone come in and talk about designing Airbnb for interior designers.



Gretchen: (00:39)

Absolutely. That is the core of my whole goal here to show hosts and guests, everyone alike and cleaners because we are boots on the ground. We see the masses that are left behind. We know what it takes to clean up the messes. We also know what causes messages that are completely unintentional. Nobody's means to leave the damn foreclosed and sell the house to smoke. It happens a lot. Sometimes people they've opened skylights and I find a lot of windows open here in the frozen northeast. And it was confusing because I'm freezing as I'm trying to clean a house. But then I realized, oh, look, the damper wasn't open and they burned through half a quarter wood. You start to understand the problems and then the solution is simply showing. If you're there the morning of the check in, just open the damper. It's the simplest thing. And then they don't have the situation. And when you go back, you close the Denver again. After your close, wait until the next check in. I try to do an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure because I know what's going to happen. I can usually predict a situation. Some people are really expert at building fires, Lassar and dust is a killer. It's absolutely a joy kill for me to go into an Airbnb to find a dusty. But we can prevent most situations, but we cannot prevent a situation that happens at night. And then you during the day, like, come streaming in these places. It's an incredibly different situation in these houses. At night in the Catskills versus during the day. Light streaming in shows you every little flaw, every little hair. I'm guilty of missing things myself just because it's dark. It's dark at night at 05:00, which is not my time to most people.

Maria: (03:48)

And you also said that you have some people who think that the solution when you're having a guest in the house is to put notes up and little, like words and stickers and little directions on everything. And I really like your perspective on that. Can you tell us a little bit about that attempt at circumventing any issues?



Gretchen: (04:39)

I get it. I have been cleaning for a lot of control freaks and knee freaks, and it's great. I'm completely OCD. I like everything in its place. I like a clean surface, one bowl, one lamp. I'm good. We're good to go. But when you are renting your home out, nobody reads those notes. This is the only way that I can describe it. I have a dishwasher. That's one was pretty popular. You have to open the dishwasher. Oh, sorry. You have to open the refrigerator all the way to the dishwasher. All the way. And these are lovely, lovely people. They are dealing with a brand new dishwasher, which is great. It works great. But the header is just two or three inches taller because the buttons are on the top of the door. The header of the actual dishwasher door was taller than the previous one. And they didn't replace their fridge yet. The fridge was still working. I wouldn't have replaced it either. So they added a note. Great. My problem with Airbnb is that it has notes on every thing. Nobody reads them. Some people get over worried about breathing in a room if there's too many notes. Those are really great guys. And I wouldn't want anybody else to feel bad about that. But in particular, there was another one where there was a nice block that has blue tape. And I really hate tape notes because it looks messy, it looks rushed. It looks like you didn't take time to really think through what you need to know about and what you don't. So these nice blocks have take notes and say, please don't put them in the dishwasher. Well, everybody went crazy on the Internet because they said, well, they thought you meant the knife block. And I'm like, who put the knife block in the dishwasher? And I was laughing because what I knew the owner had put the tape across with his no, because she didn't want people to put her brand new knives in the dishwasher. I said, well, guess who's the only one that pushed them back after she finds them in the dishwasher? It's free. Just like every cup, every spoon, every Christmas dinner. We have one where there's a whole cabinet marked Christmas dinner. This one is particularly entertaining because she puts the notes on the top of the inside of the cabinet that's flush.

**Gretchen: (06:39)**

So you don't know until you open the cabinet anyway where anything goes. And nothing ever goes back where it's supposed to. And it's cleaner. It's always the cleaner. The systems back. So you're wasting your time if you're going to put notes all over the place. The important notes are please don't flush anything other than toilet paper. Dump the toilet and no intoxicated people in the pool. That's an important one because that's liability. No intoxicated people in the hot tub. Those are important because that's liability. And I think everybody has specific rules for that particular notation. You have to be very clear about that particular thing. But those are the only kinds. And they belong in the manual. Absolutely, they belong in the manual. And yes, half the time most people don't read the manual either, but at least you are covering your basis and you are doing your due diligence, which is, I believe, half of the game.

Maria: (07:44)

What are some design elements that people can work into their spaces to make a better property?

Gretchen: (07:50)

All right, so white walls. White walls are great if you actually paint them when everything's primed. I love Hills. I absolutely love skills. It's a great product, but it yellows with age. And because it is primer, it accepts every little swipe, every little fingerprint, every spot of jam, every peanut butter hand print. It holds on to it because it's primer, because that's job. So my wish for every person is just branch out a little bit. If you absolutely have to have white walls, at least make sure that you're going for the highest quality paint that you can afford with at least an eggshell finish, at least. I'm a big fan of semi Mama, but that's me. Mild Red pioneered lacquer walls, I want to say, in the 90s. And I was like, please bring them back, because from a cleaning standpoint, there is nothing easier to clean than a shiny surface. Also, though, on the flip side, I like shiny walls because they're easy to clean and they reflect a lot of light into your home. And if you're working on getting more light into your home, you actually want some more reflective surfaces. But shiny floors and things like that show a lot of dirt and dust.



Gretchen: (09:39)

So on the flip side, I like a little happy medium of a mix, you know, a little yoga and Yang and a little shiny and a little Bell and everybody's good. And I don't like so much white walls just because it's boring. And I recently flipped through a cottage style magazine, and I was sort of disappointed because I thought there was maybe five properties in it because I kind of skinned it. And then I went back and I counted and they said there's 14 actual different properties in here, but they all look almost exactly the same just because they're all white walls. But the property I'm in right now working on is Lexington Arts and Sciences, and we are creating a Gallery artist community. There's a huge Gallery across the way that we're restoring from the 1880s. This is the farmhouse from the 1880s. I sort of have to have white walls in this particular space. Great. We're going to rotate artwork. We have guests that are coming. There are artists coming to stay. That's fantastic. For the properties out of the back of this, we are going to get wild. I'm working on one called the Rabbit Bowl, which is going to be completely psychedelic and trippy because it was built in the 60s. Why not? Let's have fun with it. And it was an artist camp. We wanted to be an artist camp again. I want as much inspiration and freedom of expression as possible in this area. And thankfully, the owner

Maria: (10:44)

That also makes it very desirable to come visit because that's not something that we already have at home. We want to come and experience it.

**Gretchen: (10:39)**

Exactly. There's so much history, so much culture here. It's just been waiting the flood. And I want to say Irene took out a lot of properties, and Lexington is super tiny. We have a post office. That's all we have right now. And we are getting a general store, which is fantastic. But we are working on there's probably about five buildings in the 1880s on this side of the Little Steven Creek that need drastic restoration. But once we do, there's a hotel, there's an enormous Gallery with so much room for Studios for artists. It's unbelievable. It's an enormous project, but I'm hoping to bring the entire community and everyone who wants to come help us come play. It is so much fun to be able to learn lines, plaster work, wood restoration. We're taking massive beans and putting them in other spaces to utilize property resources that are just sitting around. It's incredible.

Maria: (12:14)

So as you're looking at how you're going to furnish these units and the textiles and the artwork that you're going to be putting into the space. So when you're weighing practicality and functionality and aesthetics, how are you choosing someone making some of those decisions?

Gretchen: (12:22)

I would like to focus on what particular group is going to be using a space. So in a family focused space, I'm not going to be having giant nudes on the walls, things like that. Or I have a painting of my art school days that I would never put in their beauty because I know from personal experience, friends go, well, that's kind of morbid. I'm like, what are you talking about? She's in blue. Why would I want her hanging in my earplugs? Also, fine art is a little bit problematic because if it's too costly and you're charging 200 and \$300 a night for your stays, you are going to be able to offset the cost of damages. So for my purposes, in normal family friendly Airbnb, I would like to see. I like a lot of abstract art because it's not challenging and you can find anything that goes with your design, aesthetic abstract. Big fan of that. Big fan of big art because you don't need a lot of little Twinkie things and it's cluttery. And as a good cleaner, I want less to clean around, not more because 2000 sqft takes me 6 hours because it's clean, room clean from top to bottom and that's the way it should be.



Gretchen: (13:39)

And I certainly don't expect it to be cleaned room clean after a guest meet. I do have one guest that leaves it so clean I don't even need to be there. But that is you and Barbie feet. And the reason for those cleaning fees is plain and simple. We are taking it back to as pristine as we can possibly do after a guest stay. Same goes for the artwork. If you've got fingerprints on glass or on windows or whichever, the cleaner then has to spend some extra time cleaning that up and let's just clean up our fingerprints. I don't know what it is, but people love to make kissing prints on windows and on artwork. You have to be very careful. So the other point in my artwork situation is put as much as you can behind glass and if it is something like an oil painting or something that's possibly a little bit more precious, try not to put it somewhere where someone's going to constantly rub up against it, knock it off the wall. A lot of people have shelves and I hit my head myself on them and I take them off, put something flat. So my best advice is to first of all spend time in that room and really look at it, really look at it and then spend time. Let's say it's a bedroom. Make sure that if you walk somewhere with your head down and then stick your head up, you're not going to knock something off the wall. I had a client figurines knocked off the shelf and they were chipped. He wasn't upset about it. They weren't necessarily precious. But that might not be the case later on. So just be mindful that guests are not used to your space. They're not used to walking through that space at night in the dark. So I always also try to make sure that in addition to not having things that are going to impede your progress through a room at night in the dark, there's nothing that you're going to knock off the walls in the dark and then you have lights that you can turn off at every bed. That is huge for me because I go into rooms and I'm like, they have to get out of bed and then they're not familiar with the room. So then they have to walk back to the bed in the dark or sink the light on, which isn't wrestle.

Jason: (16:18)

I have a question. I actually have some colleagues that have rental homes and they're contemplating if they want to get into Airbnb. So what would be your advice if they are to switch over to that and what are some steps they should know to take for that?



Gretchen: (16:39)

That's actually a perfect question because that's what I want the focus of the web series to be. If built to rent or long term rentals are the future versus short term rentals or midterm rentals, we'd have to look at how we set up a home with an eye towards renting. So my first step, make sure that your foundation, your basic services, your basic needs are covered. I love decorating, but we have to start with the roof has to be good, the plumbing has to be good. You can't have drafty windows and things like that, because your return on your investment is going to be way lower than it would be. If you're following proper maintenance and making sure that all of those plumbing and things like that that could potentially go wrong and will go wrong when a guest is staying there don't affect your reviews and your return on investment. Again, it's much more cost effective to ensure that you're piped. If you're in frozen weather like I am, make sure that your pipes are wrapped with heat cable and turned on by November before having to call a plumber because everything was frozen and all your guests have been given refunds. That is another good thing. Water filters, because then water filtration is important because most guests are not used to well water, which is the thing up here. Water filtration will also keep your fixtures from being stained. It's so easy and exciting to decorate, but you have to look at your basic foundations and your basic structures and your basic services first, and then you can have fun with the decorating, which just means make it easy to clean. Midtones are great extremes. Black and white is extremely difficult to maintain. Also, it looks old. I often suggest keep wood wherever possible because there's not much you can do to it to make it look necessarily dirty. Your cleaner is going to have a lot easier time maintaining that five step clean without having to constantly clean flat white paste, which is a micro or white floor, which I have to bleach because they just don't stay away. So you're thinking about each and every surface and how it is going to be used, because it will be used. Pay attention to that. So if you want your ceilings lighter, great. Most people don't do anything to the ceiling.



Gretchen: (19:39)

If you don't want your ceilings lighter, great. It warms up a room. And that's where I think the designer comes in. Really importantly, because homeowners don't always and host don't always know how you can handle the space for maximum efficiency and still have a gorgeous space for people to live in. And that's the key. We're not just looking at it on a page in the magazine, we're living in it. So make it easier for everyone. And again, that return on investment is higher.

Maria: (19:53)

What are some things that if you can afford or plan to automate them early on in the game that designers should be making sure in place before taking something from just a normal house to an Airbnb automate. So, like smart home features. Is that what, like the front door locks? The thermostats the house.

Gretchen: (20:16)

Perfect. Okay. Yes. All right. So automation in the home is a godsend for cleaners and guests and hosts for two to three reasons. Smart locks are genius because every third or fourth home that I go into in the winter, there are no gutters up above their little thin lock and it's frozen. And I did a joke where I said I took some fireball shooter fireball and I boarded on the lock because that's all I had to fill out my lock. It works. But the next guest doesn't necessarily have alcohol with them and they're not necessarily going to figure out things for it on that lock to bot. So smart locks are genius. The more automated your lock can be and people lose keys and that code can be changed whenever you need. Absolutely. Love goes. The smart home for the Internet is actually fantastic as well. We all know when the little lights are blinking or they're not blinking. We all know how to fix that. The next the programmable. Thermostat I like that for the aspect that you know what temperature your building is at without being in your building, which is super important again here in the Northeast or anywhere that we freeze because frozen pipes, they creep up out of nowhere.

**Gretchen: (21:39)**

And there's a couple of things that you can do to prevent disasters. One of them is tempt sticks. If you have your nest, your Nest programmable unit is usually somewhere in your living space. If you have a crawl space, you most do a crawl space for a basement where the temperature is significantly lower. You want to put these temp sticks that then send you alerts to your email or your phone, whichever in the space where the pipes are, because you're going to be able to catch a lot faster. You find out that your temperature is dropping to that 20 degrees or 30 degrees where it counts. Once it reaches the living space at that temperature, disaster is probably already struck.

Maria: (22:53)

That washing machine. Do you know how those Dang front loaders are stinky when they're kept close? Is it better to plan for, like top loaders or front loaders? What do you find about the washing

Gretchen: (23:16)

I actually prefer front loaders. The only thing that I do make sure that I keep the door open whenever possible to keep the mildew from building up on the seal. But I do take bleach and swipe it around the seal and swipe around the inside of the seal. I'm a big fan of bleach. It kills the mildew. And I like crime scene clean smell. I like the smell of weeds. I actually remember the temperature there. So people who are running a vacation rental remotely will use the nest to maintain their temperature. And in northeastern areas, they like to set it low. When there are no guests there, they're saving on heating costs. Here's the problem. You are creating a smaller window of opportunity for when things do go wrong. So if you keep your temp at 60 or 65 unilaterally, you don't have to worry about pipe freezing, washing machines. The Inlet, the cold water Inlet will freeze and break in these washing machines. 50 is just not and it's not comfortable for your cleaner. And I have to say, for the cleaners, we are cold. Oh, your house plants are cold. I have so many frozen house plants and what's the point.

**Gretchen: (24:39)**

You're just freezing your plants. And most of them are tropical, by the way, so they really don't like those reasonable winters. I'm hoping to do a series with a plumber. So we discussed wrapping your cables with pipe heater, keeping temper sticks everywhere so you have a chance at checking. You usually have a person on location that is able to come and check the house and get things going. A hair dryer is brilliant for thawing your frozen pipes. Who knew? And most of us have hairdryers in the Airbnb and then keeping your temperature up. Just keep it at least at 60 so that you aren't worried about anything freezing without you being able to get a chance to stop it before disaster really will strike over. No fun. I got to tell you.

Mirjam: (25:13)

Funny, because both Maria and Jason are in Texas, so they can't really relate. But I'm in Wisconsin, so I know exactly what you're talking you know exactly.

Jason: (25:16)

Well, we did just have snow here a couple of weeks ago, and a year ago we had a snow. We actually had snow. So we do know a little about it.

Mirjam: (25:44)

No, I know, but if we put it in prep.

Gretchen: (25:48)

I went to school in Dallas at the University of Dallas, and the year I was there, we had snow for Thanksgiving and we wrote lunchtrade flooding.

Mirjam: (25:59)

I actually have a question for you, Gretchen Bent, in terms of design, like for me, the critical moment with an Airbnb is the moment you walk through the door. Right. And it's basically right then and there that you decide whether or not you like it. It helps if there are some nice treats that they put out for you, but it's like when you're looking at a space and functionality is really important. But what about when you come in? What kinds of tricks do you have for people to make it welcoming.



Gretchen: (26:39)

A lot of people walk into a space and it's not necessarily like a foyer. A normal home has a foyer and you have your beautiful face on your Center Hall table and you don't live like that. So one particular place that I take care of you're walking into the laundry room. So in this particular case, they just recently got a new washer and dryer. Fantastic. They were great, but the floor is really kind of grungy looking. I can only clean it so much. It has some paint drips and things like that, but that's easy to fix. Just color match some more paint drips and get rid of your paint. If you can't scrape them up, just color match it and cover them up that way. But then they have an old laundry tub right next to it as well, and some kind of grungy bifold doors on that closet. The most I can do without suggesting a little bit of restoration or a little renovation is make sure it is completely as sparkling clean as I can possibly make it, because a clean space. Not only does it look good, but it also smells good. If it smells like everybody's hot gear. And there's snow gear, which is kind of a weird smell. Their ski gear, that's the biggest thing. So for this one particular space, my suggestion is take care of the paint drips on the floor, paint the walls, just paint the wall. All you have to do is paint the walls anything other than white because it's going to stand up to Mudrooms. Entryways get the most use, they get the wear and tear, and your cleaner is already busy making sure every other surface is absolutely clean. It's easier if we don't have to wash down every single wall in the house. It's just not feasible. We would love to, but it doesn't work. So pick a mid tone, happy color anything and clean it at least an eggshell finish so that you are making life easier for yourself, your cleaner and your guests. Because it is important. That first impression is very important. All the shoppers in the world don't make up for a messy home.

Maria: (28:50)

Can we talk just a little bit about how you explain that in kitchen cabinets, it's best to fill up the whole entire shelf with plates and dishes so that the house looks extremely organized. But then you can also locate items. And would that apply if you were to do open shelves instead? Can you give us some feedback on that? I thought that was super interesting.



Gretchen: (29:39)

As a cleaner, my job is not only to ensure that everything is perfectly clean when I leave. I am also responsible for ensuring that things aren't broken misplaced sitting out in the yard somewhere. So the simplest way that you can do that is get rid of clutter and mismatch things. I love mismatch China and things at home but you know what? It makes it so hard on your cleaner. Yes, I have an almost photographic memory, but if I'm in 20 houses, I'm probably going to miss if something's missing or broken. But for ease of everybody and your guests, again, it shows as cleaner and more organized. If you have all the same bugs and they're sitting in their space. Shelf organizers aren't expensive and they are easy to clean, which is, again, such a boom for your cleaners and your guests, because again, they might not put it back in the right spot. But at least if they have some semblance of they're walking into a space that was orderly and clean, they seem to have more respect for the space, which for me is important when setting up a vacation rental, because I've noticed it doesn't have to be perfect. But if you've shown that I have clients that iron their sheets and not only is it easy for me to then make their sheets and nobody else does it. These two ladies who are lovely love you guys, but it's another step. And they leave a bottle of wine and there's flowers in the one home. The guests who come in there never complain about chips, paint. They never complain about, I don't know, a frayed rug. They enjoy the home as a family home. They're staying in a family home, and they feel like a guest of a family, which I feel like is what we're looking for in a vacation rental. If you want somebody to come stay in your home, you want them to feel welcome. You want them to feel like they're part of the family, part of the village, part of the experience, because that is what leads your guests with a fantastic experience.

Maria: (28:50)

And so one of the things was people like the open shelves, that kind of aesthetic right, whenever they look at the things that we see on TV or we watch on TV shows. But I just can't see that that would work. From what I've heard, you talk about how people use houses and all that. Livability wise, when you're talking about having guests in a property.



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**Gretchen: (31:39)**

If you use a very bare minimum of items on the open shelves, it can work. Again, you have to really edit your possession, which sometimes it's not a great thing. But if it's a small vacation rental, I can see it working. From my cleaning point of view, I don't like the lack of cleanliness aspects, but at the same time, I'm not going to let it sit there dirty. So just be mindful of if you're going to have a lot of open shelving set it up so that your cleaner is going to clean from top to bottom. So if there's open rafters and they're constantly swiping cob webs, which are made daily, by the way, by the spiders, they don't take a break. They never take vacation. They never go anywhere. They build them daily. So if you're constantly putting Cowboys into your dishes, that's not fun. Also, you stick your cups, drink side down on a sketchy shelf. I'm not a fan of that either. So for vacation rentals, I absolutely prefer a closed cover that has and not even mesh. I'm a big fan of things behind glass. I can't help, but I would like everything to be in Museum cases if I could. I have a ton of kissy prints and fingerprints to clean up, but that will be my vacation rental. My dream vacation rentals.

Maria: (33:50)

Like if there's any textiles to stay away from.

Gretchen: (33:37)

Oh, yes, absolutely. Pet friendly pet and children friendly vacation rentals. You're going to want as close as tight of leads on something as possible, because dog nails, cat nails. Not many people travel with their cats. There are some will pull your fibers. And that's a nightmare because you don't want your gorgeous let's say you've got a Sony blanket. You don't want that trash by someone's dog unwitting. Also natural fur. I've seen dogs go and pull apart a sheep skin pillow because it's an animal. So I'm not a fan of microfiber or polyester in any sense, because I do have animals and I don't like that they hold on to the hair. But especially navigation rental pieces. You are bending over backwards trying to make sure that everything is lint free and hair free. But the microfiber creates static, which is annoying when you're trying to put a duvet cover on it's statically clinging to the duvet cover and you can't just shake it out, which you could with a cotton one, polyester blankets. With microfiber blankets, they hold on to absolutely everything, which is again, a nightmare because your cleaner is trying to make sure that absolutely everything is hair and lint free.

**Gretchen: (35:39)**

It's a losing battle. It really is. You end up putting sheets on damp because that's the only way you can pull them out of the dryer. I use five dryer sheets and they still come up static and full of hair. So if you've got six loads of laundry and you can't get that. Oh yes, microfiber tiles. I have a nightmare. I have a nightmare house. I have a nightmare nightmare house where they have these awful, awful microfibers house that hold on to each and every hair and fiber that comes in contact with them. When the hunters come to stay, there are covered in wood chips and they don't wash out. They don't come out. We've had to replace these tiles twice. Now, I have personally picked bodily hair off of these tiles and I got to tell you, you can't pay me enough in the world to do this. My property manager had at least a bleach, and that's one thing. They are always smelling like bleach, because if there's going to be something left on that tile and I can't do anything about it, I better smell that beach. But these halls. My property manager has a policy that we cut off Tags and these tiles. I intentionally leave the Tags on because I want people to know never ever to buy them. And funny story, we had guests who said that they found these tiles so comfortable that they went out and ordered them for their phone and I said I called. No, there is no way nobody wants to build themselves down dry with a dirty towel, especially when it's actually been washed and dry. They don't come off. It doesn't come off. So please, natural fibres.

Jason: (36:50)

This has been an amazing talk and we appreciate your time. Gretchen, if our audience wants to get in contact with you, how do they do?

**Gretchen: (37:39)**

So I am Gretchen Gray shaved today on TikTok, Instagram and YouTube and then I have Gretchengray 67 at@gmail.com

Jason: (37:50)

So we hope to see you all next week on designer discussions.

Outro: (37:30)

We hope you enjoyed this episode of designer discussions. What was your takeaway care to share your thoughts and tag Jason, Maria and Mirjam on social media. You can find them on all platforms@designerdiscussions.com. Don't forget to like subscribe and leave a review or comment for this episode from wherever you are listening.



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