



Episode 9

Client behavior that can doom your design project from the beginning





Maria: [00:00]

Designers goals are to get a design project completed and photographs so that they can build their portfolios so that they can get published and they can get more clients from those projects. But unfortunately, most designers are faced with the fact that not all projects get complete. There are a few factors that are the reasoning for why those projects do not get complete, and we want to talk about that today. I find a lot of designers like to make excuses for their clients, or they like to think that that they can fix or push their way through phases of a project, even when it's doomed from the start. So what we want to talk about today is what are some of the things that really are going to sort of incapacitate your ability to complete a project and possibly deteriorate or take away from your opportunity to have the project photographed and how as an interior designer, making sacrifices and adding more time on and maybe not billing for it for sacrificing a budget just to get a project completed may not be your best solution.

Intro: [00:05]

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

Jason: [01:18]

We're going to be talking today about what are some of the issues that happens when you're working on the design project. We're going to hear a lot from Maria today, and I'm going to chime in from my own experience on architecture side, Maria talking to us by what are some of those issues or dilemmas that you see on a project? What would you say that you've seen in the past?



Maria: [01:41]

Well, it's really interesting. I find a lot of times that the designer and the design business tries to accommodate and make a project work for their business for the future potential of photography and marketing. And they take on a lot of sacrifices and do some things that actually are to the detriment of them, even when the people that they're working with are in an unhealthy relationship and that they have bad goals or the way that they're driven it is not good. And so for me, one of the things that I found is that one of the best signs that you can have is that a client has successfully worked with a designer in the past. Maybe they're from some other town and they're new to your area, or they've had an opportunity to work with a designer in the past. Sometimes this is like one of the best things that you can hear from a client because then you know, if they had a good working relationship with their landscape architect, their architect, their interior designer, that they have successfully completed a project in the past that they are able to work together and do the next project moving forward. I have, however, found a lot of people who come into the office and they start off with, Well, I need to meet with you separately, or once you give them the contract, someone else comes back and doesn't want to sign the contract because they weren't communicated with properly about what was going on. And so one of the things that's always best is to get both people in on the meeting, get both people to sign off on the contracts and get both people to hear with the same sets of ears, the same information, because the second someone leaves the meeting to communicate what they learned, they've already forgotten probably 50% of what you had talked about, and then they're conveying it to someone who's going to forget 50% of what they talked about. And they are literally going to have one decision maker, hopefully not the one who's writing the checks come to you with less than 20% of what happened in that meeting and asking questions, pointing fingers and creating problems.



Maria: [03:59]

And so as interior designers, our responsibility isn't to make clients behave and act right. But it's just to create really good boundaries so that they have to behave correctly and they have to submit to you a little bit in the beginning, because if they're willing to agree to acting properly in the beginning, when you teach them how to work with you, then you're going to be set up for more success in the future. Jason, you were going to talk to me a little bit about one of your experiences with one of your clients.

Jason: [04:34]

Yes. And I have to say what you talked about, making sure that you have both of the individuals involved, especially the ones that's actually writing the check. So I have the opposite experience. So one of the residents that we designed it was a husband and wife, and the wife was very involved in the process from the start, she said all of the guidelines, all of the particulars, and she knew everything. She already had everything laid out. She looked at magazine, she had everything clipped out that she wanted to have a certain way. We got I'll say, about three months into the project and we were in design development phase. So we already did most of the Schematic design, most of the concept. And we were already in design development, where we were looking at the FF&E furniture fixture and equipment. And then we start to talk price. And so now lower and behold, the husband shows up because he's not happy with the price. But he was not involved prior to in any of the planning process of Schematic design development.

**Jason: [05:41]**

And now he wants to say, why does this cost so much? We have budget. It needs to be XYZ. And my question to him is, why are we just now hearing about this now as opposed to early on in the process? And so that caused a lot of issues. And for about a month or two afterwards, we had I spent a lot of time as a marriage counselor and just, you know, trying to get everybody back on the same page. And so that took about two months. But eventually the project got completed. But there was some angst in there within that two months that honestly could have all been avoided if the husband wasn't far from the outset of the project.

Maria: [06:25]

So what's really interesting is that I've had even these situations where the husband will hire me and say, hey, I need you to help my wife. And it's very interesting because I actually had a situation where the wife was coming here from a foreign country, but she spoke English fluently, and there was never a language barrier of any type. And so one day he came to me and said, I'm sorry that she doesn't speak good enough English to have understood that she spent this much money on these items. And so I had been taught multiple times throughout the process, over and over again that the ultimate decision maker is technically the person who writes the check. It doesn't matter who the person runs off Scott free and goes and does stuff on their own or on the side. You really don't want to be in a situation where you're polarizing the couple against each other in any way, because what that does is that creates an issue where you might have the project sold before you even completed it. I've seen projects where when the relationship is not working out or when there's so much contention in the project that the house, once it's almost complete, will be put on the market. I've had projects I haven't been able to photograph because the person who bought the house change, like two or three paint colors and brought in her own designer. And so it's really hard as a designer to think that if we work hard enough, if we do enough, if we can associate or help these people out enough that they are going to be happy.

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Maria: [08:14]

The reality is I feel like as an interior designer, we spend the largest chunk like I have a graphic I put on Instagram where it shows like a pie and the smallest liver of the pies design time. And the rest of it is what I call comforting the clients. And I feel like the majority of what I do for work. And I think most interior designers probably feel the same way is that we educate and we create comfort during a highly stressful time in their life. Right. And one of the things that I've learned that happens is that I get people who think that the bigger house is going to make them more happy, that the more expensive house is going to make them more happy. But realistically, putting in \$5,000 dishwashers does not make anyone happier. It kind of stresses them out, makes them more irrational if there is an error or an issue with them. When someone's going from using like, a \$750 kitchen aid dishwasher to something that's a lot more expensive. They are highly aggravated and disappointed when it's been freshly installed. It's been up and running for a few weeks, and they find out that need to use different types of dish tablets and that the more expensive dishwashers don't have drying mechanisms in them that they use condensation to dry the dishes. And so when you're using condensation to dry the dishes, they come out and they can be a little bit wet if they're not glass or metal. So if you throw in a plastic cup, that thing's going to be soaking wet your plastic Tupperware. So when someone's going from a house where they're used to having plastic cups and plastic Tupperware and a \$750 American made KitchenAid dishwasher that has a heating mechanism that has a dryer on the dishwasher, and they go into these bigger, more luxurious, more expensive products, and they don't understand that their life is going to change and that these more expensive products are made and engineered for something that's more expensive and not their plastic, where they become very disappointed and very aggravated that they can't bring their old lifestyle with them into the new homes.



Maria: [10:31]

They can't swap out their own light bulbs on the second floor if their husband wasn't helping them to fix the little things here and there in the smaller house, he's not going to be able to help in the 10,000 squares feet house you have to have a handyman. Are you comfortable with hiring someone to be your home support system to help you with things? You actually have to create a greater breadth of anonymity from your spouse and be more of someone who can do house management as almost one of your jobs and your task that you would be adding on to your already full schedule. And if you don't feel like you want to add more on, if you don't feel like you want to be more responsible for or have to deal with appliance repair people when your \$10,000 refrigerator has an issue, then the bigger, more expensive homes don't create happiness. And so if you're miserable in the small house, you're going to be miserable in the big house. And the other thing, too, that happens, is that you will also find out that people will sit and kind of push back about a project not being done enough, and they're not happy enough about that as well. And the reality is you can always look back into someone's life. You can look into who they are and where they've been, and if they've had happiness in the small house, if they've had happiness sooner, marriage in the small house, they will continue to be a happy client and they will be happy in their new space. But when you're dealing with people who are unhappy and all they want to talk about is how miserable they are and how everything is bad or once they get into the bigger house is going to make them more happy. I have people come to me all the time and say, look, my open floor plan, big, open, beautiful mansion I live in is so loud and annoying, and I can't get away from my family members. And there's no private spaces. I really feel like there's an Echo always. I really wish my rooms were all closed off. So even the bigger the spaces are, the more you have, it just adds to your burden, and it adds to your problems. And so whenever a designer thinks that they can fix an inner in depth, deep hole that someone has in them about why it is that the house is going to create societal success or why that house is going to make their family so much happier because it wasn't happy before.



Maria: [13:12]

You will find that they will never get to the goal. And as the designer, you will never get them there either. And no sacrifices you make working is going to solve that. And so I just like to have open conversations about these things when someone comes in and they're like, Well, I want this really big house. I want these two story tall ceilings throughout. But then they're walking me through their home with a nine foot ceiling and they point out that they can't get their husband to change out their light bulbs or that the smoke detector goes off and they just wish they had someone who could come in and do that when I start asking them, Are you comfortable with what your housekeeping bill it's going to be? Are you comfortable with having someone who comes in and changes out your light bulbs and that you have to schedule them regularly? And it's part of your agenda to have your filters and your air conditioning unit all swapped out seasonally, that you might have to buy a different type of dishwasher detergent for your more expensive dishwashers that you I will have these issues and they will always happen. And they will go on for a long time. And something that might have been one \$500 to fix in your previous house might cost you ten to \$15,000 to fix in the future. Do you feel comfortable with that? I mean, I've had people before look at me and balk about spending money on furniture when I know their tax bill is going to be in the \$45 to \$50,000 a year price just for property taxes on that house alone. And I'm like, Well, you do know it's going to cost you \$50 to \$65,000 to live in this house per year, just in property taxes that doesn't include all of your utilities and all of your other expenses that you're going to have to be in this house. So why is it that you think \$150,000 to furnish it so that you can live in it? It'd be beautiful for the first few years. You're not already spending that money somewhere else. It's those types of conversations, and it's those types of things that really need to be talked about early on in the game because you will find so many people are coming to you smoking to fix their marriages.



Mirjam: [15:23]

So, Maria, let me ask you a question. So when you see the red flags pop up, like, what does it take for you to turn down a project? I mean, it just helps you be prepared going into it, or does it come to a point where you actually say, okay, I don't think this is worth it or the risk of not completing the project is so great that I'd rather not get started with it, which would be hard to turn down, really.

Maria: [15:54]

But that's the thing. I think a lot of interior designers think that no matter what, they can get a project finished, I think that they commit at anything and say, grumpy client, I can fix this. I can do some things to get this project completed. I think everybody I understand we don't have a superpower to change someone else's life and that we need to know when to protect ourselves and that we need to know that when we are working with people a lot of times what I will I do if I have a couple that is very problematic and they need to sit in the furniture and I know they may want to return something. I will not provide any furnishings. I will make suggestions of items that they can go out and spend the weekend shopping together. A big issue that I find is that a lot of my couples think that home design is a relationship activity and that they go out and like to on the weekend to look at model homes and do all of that stuff, which is fine when they decide that once you get enlisted, that they keep you in the loop and they're not going outside of you and doing stuff. But there's a point at which you can tell you no longer have any control. I like to call the client that I want to step away from an unmanageable, and they're called unmanageable for a reason because they don't follow the rules. They don't have boundaries. And even if you were to tell them something is better for them, they have to go and like, do the opposite just to prove you wrong. Those are the people that, you know, you just have to step away because all they're going to do is cause stress and heartache and damage to you.



Maria: [17:39]

They're going to make you not sleep at night. They're going to cause you to have issues with how you feel about your business or how you feel about who you are as a person. And so I just like to call it. We don't call it that there's a one red flag because you could work with a red flag client under red flag circumstances and still make it profitable and still do everything that needs to be done. If you have really good boundaries and you have rules and everything's in place. But the reality is when you get someone who's completely and totally unmanageable, you're never going to have any kind of stamp of approval on the project. In the end, you will see someone in a lawsuit with their builder or their architect before the project ends. You might even be stuck into it. And those are the things that you just want to pull back from. And typically, you know, if someone is bad talking there, previous people that they've ever hired usually means, once again, they're not able to be made happy, and they can't communicate what could make them happy. I'm not saying that someone who has a really good resource of therapeutic modalities, I guess you could say that they just got worked into their businesses, that those people can't get them through some of those issues before they're making design decisions. But it's a question of do you feel solid about your job as an interior designer and charging 150 or \$200 an hour to listen to this and complain about there, to complain about their spouse, to complain about how they don't have the right budget and that they're doing all this stuff from the wrong motivation. So I've sort of put together a Maslow's hierarchy of needs to have a graphic on my website, and we can stick it on ours for this podcast in particular. But it just talks about the real reasons why people need something they want it for safety is the bottom of that Maslow's hierarchy of needs. And if someone is choosing it because it makes them safe and secure, that's usually a pretty solid reason for why they're doing it. And then if they start working at the pyramid, it becomes they're trying to please other people.

**Maria: [19:52]**

They're trying to achieve acceptance. You can never create acceptance for someone else through design. And so if someone walks in the door and you know that they're there to try to achieve acceptance, then you have to say, hey, look, you know, I can't create that for you. But what I can do is I can create something that meets your base needs. And for example, I had one couple have me come out, and they were like in 6000 square foot home in Texas. And they said, hey, we need you to redo this house with furnishings and things to make it look cool. Nothing architectural. And we'd like to have it already work for our new place in New York. And I said, Great, can I get the plans and all the information on the house in New York? And I said, Well, we haven't picked one out yet or bought it. I said, Well, I'm sorry I cannot design for something that doesn't exist. And I walked away from that project, and so that's the thing is that you can't design for something that doesn't exist and that's outside acceptance. So when your client can get all the way up Maslow's hierarchy and need and understand that things outside of them doesn't make them happy and that their home isn't the source of happiness for everyone else in it, which is like the biggest burden women carry when they walk in the design office. I just want my house to make everyone in my family happy. And you're like, once again, that's not my job. I can't create happiness. Homes don't create happiness. There are a place of safety and security. It's the way that people are treated when they're inside, as to how they're going to feel in regards the structure that they're living inside of. And that might be so how you treat yourself. And that might be how your spouse treats you. And if they aren't treating each other kind in your office, they're not going to treat each other kind inside the house.

Mirjam: [21:47]

So you're looking for clients that are internally motivated, as opposed to externally, right. Because they unit for themselves then not for others.

**Maria: [21:58]**

Well, they at least have I've had multiple people come in where the wife is, like when my husband has to work and I can make all the decisions. I've done three homes for us, no big deal. So they've come in and they selected everything. And I have always had them back in the office because the second the husband saw everything that was magically selected for them, he had an opinion and he wanted to reselect. Even wives can't even pick for their husbands. And I can say for a fact, I can pick out stuff for my husband only because I am allowed to because I'm the only trained professional in the family for home design things. But under normal circumstances, I would really almost need, like, just you have to see them. You have to see them together to see how they work together. And you have to see if they're in the office and they're discussing things, how they are communicating the same story. So, Jason, now that you had your clients that were dragging you around on the regular buyer heir and I discussed what was going on with my clients and how they worked in office, what are the big things that you know now that you would never do again?

Jason: [23:17]

Well, one, we don't do residential projects.

Maria: [23:21]

That solves the problem. We had most people that does.

Jason: [23:26]

So we do many commercials. But what I learned from that process is that you have to have everybody all the decision makers at the table at the start of the process. Like I said, we went three months, and then he chime in at about the three month Marketing in for about a month and a half, two months. We were having some discrepancies. But then once he learned the process was what the concept was, why we made the decisions we made. He was now able to understand and he was able to write the check knowing that it was in the best interest for all of them.



Jason: [24:03]

And we were able to save on some of the aspects that you were not able to see and being put more money into the areas that you would and so that's how we worked within his budget but also satisfy his wife with all she wanted to have. The main thing I would just say make sure you have all the decision makers at the table at the start of the project.

Outro: [24:25]

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 at 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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