

The Client – Designer Relationship

Unit 15

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Learning Outcomes:

On successful completion of this unit the candidate will be able to:

- ✓ **describe how to communicate effectively with the client.**
- ✓ **explain how to take the brief.**

The profession of interior designer has received much media attention in recent years. Today's interior designer is a multifaceted professional, with expertise in building and safety codes, project management and everything required to improve the function and aesthetic quality of an interior space.

The interior designer brings to mind a picture of a designer's sketching plans, by playing with colours and textures, providing exciting schemes and by hunting out specialized shops, tracking down unique pieces of furniture, decorative objects or detailing to customize his work. This can all be a part of the job but before the designer can consider any of the creative process, the pre-design work involves a great deal of information gathering and methodology around which the project will be based. This process begins with the client relationship.

Many clients have confused idea about what they want and are not able to articulate their requirements fully. It is more usual for a client to list the problems they have and to put forward a random collection of ideas, rather than to present the designer with a thoroughly considered brief. It is therefore the designer's task to create and write the brief as the relationship develops. However, a good design is not necessarily related to the actual quality of the client relationship. Some good designers are bad at articulating and conversing with a client, while for others it is important to make the whole process as enjoyable as possible for the client. The client relationship works on a number of different levels and there is never a right and wrong approach. In reality, it is a partnership to which both parties contribute.

In recent years there have been numerous changes in the relationship between designer and client, with the designer taking on more of a consultative, rather than prescriptive, role. The designer must understand the client's needs, personality and style and in a commercial situation, to appreciate the wider economic context of these aspects. To strengthen this designer-client relationship, mutual trust is vital, and to achieve this, the designer needs to be able to speak the client's language and to listen to the client, in order to interpret his ideas. This ability to observe and listen is of paramount importance when dealing with couples. The one who appears to be more dominant in the meeting may not be the decision maker and the situation can be further complicated when one of their relatives, a friend or domestic staff steps in, with his or her own ideas. A good design is all about keeping a sense of balance and earning the client's respect. The designer is required to work in a co-

operative way, by adapting to the client's changing circumstances and priorities, and keeping the client fully informed at each stage.

There are two types of clients; the private client, who wants his or her domestic interiors to be redecorated or refurbished, which is quite personal work ; the other is the commercial client, whose requirements will be more impersonal but will offer greater scope for planning the space. Some clients give a clear and easy to follow brief; but in most cases you, as a designer, will have to extract the necessary information by asking careful questions from your client and by becoming extremely observant. In short you need to be a consultant and psychologist rolled into one. Remember, however, that you can never impose your ideas on your client. You are there to advise and interpret your client's ideas. After all, they are the ones who will be living there, so it should reflect their personalities.

Communicating Effectively With the Client

Communication is the key to a productive working relationship with the client, and one of the most important aspects in this regard is the programming and phasing of a project, especially in a commercial situation. Few companies or hotels, for example, can afford the luxury of completely vacating their premises and so any refurbishment will need to be carried out in carefully planned phases to allow business to continue at the same time. These days the availability of good computer systems, digital cameras, internet transmission of data all facilitate this area of the designer's work, and also enables the whole team to have access to work progress at every stage. Effective communication is part of the whole design process, its importance is vital, whether considered in relation to the client or members of the team working together.

The Initial Inquiry

From the first point of contact with your client your professionalism should be at the forefront. Carefully record the main points of the first conversation, which may be a telephone conversation. Try to establish where you are going to be given your first brief, or whether it is merely a conversation. Follow up this conversation with a confirmation letter. If it is just a conversation, include in your letter a note of your fee for the service. If both the husband and wife are to be clients, try to get them both to attend the briefing. It is also helpful to establish who will be the decision maker and who will be paying the bills. This will help avoid any confusion and misunderstanding later on.

Initial Meeting

The initial meeting with the client gives both the parties an opportunity to get to know one another and form a view as to whether they can make a successful working partnership. Nothing makes a worse impression than arriving late and flustered, so prepare carefully for the meeting. Check travel and parking arrangements beforehand as this will save you valuable time. Before you leave the office make sure that you have a prepared questionnaire.

Start the observation process by observing the exterior of the house carefully - its age, style and position - before you go inside. During the briefing your aim should be to establish exactly what the client wants you to provide. Observe the clients as carefully as the interiors themselves. Factors like height and weight can be important when you are going to buy beds or seating. Other factors to consider are the lifestyle, the dress, family, pets, the surroundings and so on. Listen to what the client wants; their likes or dislikes.

If they are not clear on what they want ask questions. Remember, your design should reflect their personalities; after all they are the ones who are going to live with your designs.

Equipment

A clipboard with your prepared questionnaire attached and a pen are the essentials. You should also consider taking a camera to record specific details but ask permission before you use it. It is always useful to have a steel measuring tape with you. If the clients have not seen any of your works before, you could take a small portfolio with some appropriate examples to show them. Another effective thing to help clients to arrive at the sort of style they want is a file of ideas for different rooms from magazines.

The Brief

The process of gathering information from the client regarding requirements and life style is usually referred to as “taking the brief”. It cannot be overstressed how important this stage is, as without real understanding of the client’s needs it is unlikely that a project can be brought to a successful conclusion. Consideration of the life style is of great importance; what is the point of using up valuable space with a formal dining room, for example, if it is to be used only once or twice in the whole year. The designer will have to build up a detailed picture of the client’s life style. For instance, a designer would like to know what the client’s needs are in terms of storage, working spaces, comfortable seating, up-to-date technology and the style he is happy with.

Taking the brief is a logical process and some designers work with a prepared questionnaire to help establish the number of people in the household, how much time they spend at home, how and where they like to relax, eat, watch television, work, listen to music, cook and entertain. There might be an elderly relative living in the family, raising all sorts of safety and access considerations, or pets, necessitating a particularly practical approach to the final choice of materials and finishes. The designer can take note of the existing decorations, which can prove helpful in indicating the client’s taste, style and the way they live.

A commercial brief will need to take into account the market factors also. It will be necessary for the designer to know the commercial area, in order to understand exactly how the operation works and any particular requirements that the proposed project might raise. Designing for public spaces can be extremely exciting and challenging, also.

Although not always the easiest area to discuss, it will be important for the designer to get some idea from the client about the budget that is available. Inevitably, some clients may have fixed ideas about their requirements, which are not viable within the budget they are suggesting, while others may not set any form of budget figure for fear of the designer's reaction. However, it is such an important area that it requires early agreement if the project is to reach a satisfactory conclusion.

The Survey

The survey, which is the most important part of the fact gathering process, consists of two stages. The first relates to a thorough analysis of the detailed measurements of the space; and the second, relates to the information about the space which is non-measureable.

The space needs to be measured so that the scale drawings can be produced as a basis for spatial planning and subsequent layout. The detailed measurements are then recorded on the rough floor plan, which is done by working systematically all the way around the site. This includes information about any existing fitted furniture. It is important to allow enough space around the plan for the inclusion of dimensions. The designer should also mark the position of any existing services, such as soil pipe, gas pipes, radiators, television, electrical sockets and switches. Also added to the plan are heights of the windows from the floor, as well as depth of the sills. The doors of windows and cupboards are also included in the measurements for the survey. The way a room faces will also need to be indicated on the survey plan, because the decisions on design and decoration are affected by the quality and strength of the sunlight.

The second part of the fact finding process for the designer is to carry out an analysis of the existing space. This will include all the information relating to the space involved that is non-measureable. The use of a video or digital camera can be a valuable additional but before using any such source you will need to ask permission from the client. It is also important that the fabric of the building is in a decent state of repair. Older properties may have been built without a proper damp proof course, for example, and there may be some other hidden problems also, which obviously have to be remedied before carrying out any decorative work. Any such work would need to be built into the castings and schedule of a project. In some cases the existing problems may not be immediately obvious and the designer might need to bring in specialists to inspect a range of items such as roof timbers or floor joints.

To complete an analysis of a space for a domestic interior, a designer should provide a checklist for each room:

Ceiling

Does the ceiling have any beautiful mouldings or any other details which need to be restored? Is it too big for the volume of a room? Are there unsightly beams or bulks which could be lost by introducing a suspended ceiling area?

Walls

Are the walls built of bricks, stone, concrete or building block, traditional lath, plaster, modern plaster board or timber studding? Is there any decorative plaster work or picture rail? And what is the condition and style of the skirting board?

Flooring

Does it suit the client's life-style and is it a practical choice for the function of the room? Is it a wooden suspended floor, concrete, stone or quarry- tiles? If carpeted, are there loose or squeaky boards, and what is the sub-floor under the carpet?

Fireplace

If a gas fire is to be installed, is there a gas supply, or if coal fire is required, is there space to store the fuel? Does the fireplace need cleaning, restoration or replacement?

Electrics

What is the position of fittings, switches and the quality of sockets? What types of switches are there? Where are the computer terminals, telephone and television aerial points situated?

Heating

Is the property heated by oil, gas, electric storage heaters, solid fuel boiler with water-filled radiators, or a combination boiler or mega-flow system?

Joinery

What is the quality and adequacy of the storage already provided? What is the height of any existing joinery? Is there any kind of new joinery required, for example bookshelves, cupboards, radiator casing and other boxing in?

Doors

Is there any need for enlarging the width of the doorways or raising their height? Are the doors plain, polished, flush, stained or in need of refurbishment?

Windows

Are the windows worthy of attention? Or are they unsightly and in need of screening or removing? Are they difficult to operate? Are there any trees in view and if so, how do they affect the light and view in summer and winter? What is the condition of fitting? And is there any double glazing? How do the windows open?

Surveying a Room

- In a survey report a designer should make a note of any existing furniture. A piece of furniture might give a new look if placed in a different room.
- If it is a listed building, planning permission will be required for the removal of specific interior decorative detailing, such as plaster work.
- A designer needs to discuss with the client whether a fireplace is to be removed or retained.
- The designer should consider any problems with circulation around a room in relation to its use and the client's life style.
- Note should be taken of any existing services, which could include radiators, electrical sockets, gas points or pipes.
- It is important to check which type of flooring is already laid.

After you have collected all this information in the form of the client brief and survey, you can begin the process of formulating a creative response. To do this you will need to write a design analysis, in which you can include all the available facts in detail about the client and the project. This record forms a basis for producing ideas and concepts. Finally, a decision would then need to be made as to which are the best ideas and concepts to meet the brief and this will then be worked up to the presentation stage.

Preliminary Research

Some element of research is always required in an interior design project. In the case of a hotel or restaurant for example, a valuable part of the process of formulating ideas will be to visit other similar establishments to look at the space, the layout, the style and so on. Even for a residential project some form of research may be required on the period of architecture or a specific theme or style that the client has requested.

Nearly all projects require some research into materials and finishes and a design practice will have a trade reference library to help support this function. The contents of the library will depend to some extent on the type of work undertaken by a particular practice, but it may also include catalogues of companies supplying items such as lighting, furniture, glass, kitchen and bathroom equipment, mirrors, suspended ceilings, partitioning, wall coverings, floor coverings and accessories. There will also be lots of pattern books and samples.

Most designers depend upon the publications and seminars of market research because trends and styles change so fast. Another important resource for interior designer could be trade fairs and exhibitions, which offer the largest technology for interiors, new collections of furniture, materials, finishes accessories and inspirational room sets.

Many suppliers update their collections seasonally and a designer may visit the showrooms to see the latest products and can discuss with the sales representatives how these can best be used. Another source of new ideas and styles can be show houses and flats.

Style Considerations

Identifying the style that the client has in mind can be very difficult; it can either be a matter of interpretation or misinterpretation. The client and designer might have very different views of what constitutes modern or classical style for example. Therefore some designers ask the client to bring some magazines or clippings to the briefing meeting, to show what he has in his mind. In some cases the client gives very clear guide lines about the style. If the client does not have any particular idea of his own then there are number of options open to the designer. One idea, for example, is to base the style of the project on the architectural style of the property. In the areas where the architectural features are not dominant, there is always an opportunity to introduce a historical style as Gothic, Art deco or shaker. Another option can be to work with a theme such as Oriental, American colonial, romantic, retro or minimalist.

Also it is not a matter of copying a style. Rather, it is the inspiration of a chosen style interpreted through the individual approach of a designer. The concept of contemporary classic provides a comfortable bridge between modern and traditional styles. These types of interiors combine contemporary furniture and design with luxurious and traditional fabrics. Colour combinations are simple and architectural detail is important and well defined. Lighting is soft and diffused and window treatments are simple.

Suggested Further Reading:

- ✓ *Professional Practice for Interior Designers, (2014), By Christine M. Piotrowski*
- ✓ *Marketing and Client Relations for Interior Designers, (2008), By Mary V. Knackstedt*