

# Choosing a Designer

by Charles L. Ross

KAREN FISHER KNOWS WHAT I WANT. I SIT ACROSS FROM HER at a round table in her Gramercy Park office in New York. A projector hums behind us, ready to shine slides of interiors on the opposite wall. Two deep shelves hold black portfolio binders. There is nothing else in the room. We do not want distractions.

I am here to find an interior designer who is the ideal match for my taste. I have already told Fisher that I don't want a traditional setting with period furnishings or reproductions. I prefer contemporary but not extreme.

The projector illuminates the first slide: a sleek white living room with bright, colorful abstract art. Fisher asks my opinion of the room.

"Too cold! Too impersonal."

"She wants to find out exactly what I mean by "contemporary." Another slide, showing a den with a 1950s ambience: butterfly chairs, lots of orange.

"I hate it," I say. No need to couch my feelings in niceties. I'm not insulting anyone; I'm merely selecting what I like—or don't. "I can't stand orange."

The next slide is a bedroom with a ragged, wooden headboard and plenty of white fabric.

"I like the bed, but the window treatments are too fancy."

Then a living room with strong architectural elements, overscale seating and khaki textiles.

"I like this room a lot," I say, "but I know who designed it, and I could never work with him. We'd clash."

Fisher's eyes widen. Not at my frankness, but because she now has a clear idea of who else to show me.

I like many of the rooms that follow yet still point out items that don't please. "I like the serenity, but that lamp has to go."

Each time I like an interior, Fisher shows slides of other rooms by the same designer. If I continue to like the work, she places one the black binders on the table. When we have eight of them, she turns off the projector. Each binder contains photographs of a designer's work. I flip the pages and offer more comments. Our goal, Fisher says, is to end up with three designers.

I eliminate two because I think the work is inconsistent. I look through the remaining portfolios several times, winnow them to three, but I keep returning to one book. Fisher says she can show me more designers,

but I clutch this portfolio to my chest.

"I want this one!" I say in a pleading voice that surprises me.

The designer is Ray Booth, and he doesn't even live in New York; he resides in Nashville, Tennessee, and often works with the architectural firm McAlpine, Tankersly. Booth's sedate, contemporary, interiors include a selected antique or two.

But as much as I love this man's work, this is not an article about him. It's about Karen Fisher and how she has brought selecting a designer into the twenty-first century.

Although she still has clients visit her Manhattan office like I did. Fisher now offers her service on the Internet. I did a test run and was amazed at how quickly she could show pictures of the rooms—in real time. We talked on the phone while I was connected to her website, and I told her what I liked just as I did in person. Technology has allowed Fisher to go beyond New York, and she has expanded her service to Los Angeles, San Francisco and Chicago with Atlanta and Houston-Dallas designers soon to follow. So a homeowner in Laguna Beach, California, can connect to the Web with Fisher in New York and see the work of many designers, narrowing the choice to three. Fisher, of course, also takes into consideration the homeowners budget, how busy a designer is and whether the homeowner's and designer's personality would blend.

"Fisher started her service, Designer Previews, in 1985. She was design editor at Women's Wear Daily, Esquire and Cosmopolitan and wrote interior design coffee table books, such as Living for Today and The Power Look at Home: Decorating for Men, with Egon von Furstenberg. "I was continually asked by friends and acquaintances for names of decorators," she says. "In the 1980s, people other than the born rich suddenly acquired a lot of money, and although at one time it was chic to say you had decorated your own place, it became more chic to find the right decorator. These people needed someone who knew the designers, and I certainly did, so I started Designer Previews." Her latest venture is called Designer Interactive.

Fisher's portfolios include many of the well-published designers such as Bray-Schaible, but she takes pride in connecting homeowners with young designers not yet "discovered." Of course it's good to scan shelter magazines looking for a designer to fit your style, but there are many fine decorators who have never been published. Karen Fisher knows who they are. And she knows what you want. ∞

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