

# Designing a career as an interior decorator

## Advice from the experts

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(AP) -- If your dream is to become a top interior decorator, listen to Betty Sherrill:

"We don't particularly believe in ruffles and bows, but we do believe in education of interior designers," said Sherrill, president of McMillen Inc., founded in 1923 and billed as the first professional, full-service interior design firm in America.

"Almost everybody and his brother calls himself a decorator nowadays, even if it's not quite true," said Sherrill, speaking from her New York City office.

"It really is a serious profession because there is so much client money involved. It passes through our hands, but it's theirs. If you order wall-to-wall carpet and it comes in the wrong size, it's very expensive. Rugs are expensive, so is a good paint job, and so are antiques. You can't buy 18th-century pieces anymore -- they're all in museums -- so you buy some nice reproductions."

Now 76, Sherrill is approaching the half-century mark devoted to the firm, a pioneering company through which she has provided the proper look for the homes of Rockefellers and royalty, from drawing rooms on Park Avenue to the palace of a Kuwaiti shiek.

It's not enough to have a flair for color or a feeling for chintz, she said. This often misunderstood profession requires more than lingering over fabric swatches or doodling out designs.

## Eye for color, head for business

Part decorator, part architect, the interior designer today must also have a head for business and budgets as well as a command of materials and marketing. He or she must know fire safety codes as well as how to knock out a wall without the house tumbling down. Typical designers are just as likely to be dealing with a plumber or electrician as they are to be measuring a space for paintings, drafting a contract bid, or making sure the wallpaper hanger is working in the right room.

Becoming an interior decorator starts with schooling. "You must get training because there are so many pitfalls," said Sherrill. "For instance, you have to learn scale. You don't



**Interior designer Betty Sherrill tells aspiring decorators to get a solid background in design, materials, architecture, marketing and business**

want to be shipping furniture that doesn't fit and then have big trucking charges. A large-scale chintz in a little tiny room or a small-scale chintz in a big room -- you have to think about all those things. I don't think you're necessarily born knowing scale. You might be born with aptitude, good taste and a nice color sense, but I think they made us draw all those models in school so we'd learn scale."

Today's professional standard, said Terri Maurer, new president of the American Society of Interior Designers, requires a four- or five-year degree in interior design, preferably from a program accredited by the Foundation for Interior Design Education and Research. The degree offered and its length depend on the school and its program.

Courses cover interior design, art, architecture and technology. Also required are two years' minimum of post-graduate work experience in the field, followed by passing the interior design qualifying examination monitored by the National Council for Interior Design Qualification.

"With more and more states having legislation to regulate either the title 'interior designer' or the practice of interior design, those basic requirements have become the standards," said Maurer. She added that continuing education "is critical to keep designers current on advances in the profession."

## **Traditional colleges vs. design schools**

Sherrill believes it's important to attend a design school, such as Parsons or Rhode Island School of Design, even if it means not attending a traditional college. "I have interviewed so many people with a B.A. from college, and they can't get a job. I'd like them to go right to design school straight from high school, if they know that's what they want to do. If your family has paid \$25,000 a year for college and you can't get a job, it makes a difference."

New designers do not usually start by landing a blockbuster project, she said. "You'll be asked to do the living room or the baby's room or bedroom. But it's worth it for young people. If their ideas agree with the client's, it's a nice testing ground."

Often the new designer is hired as assistant to a more senior staff member, put to work updating research and sample libraries, performing project research and drawing plans, said ASID's Maurer. "Even small errors at this level of expertise can be quite costly to the firm, so seldom will the new designer's work be left without some supervision."

Today about 85 percent of all interior designers in the United States are women, said Maurer.

That profile fits McMillen, which has had only two presidents, both female. Sherrill, like founder Eleanor McMillen Brown, graduated from Parsons School of Design in New York. Sherrill took the helm of the company in 1975, when Brown retired after 52 years.

Longevity seems to run in the organization. Brown lived to the age of 102. "I worked for Ethel Smith (a senior decorator)," said Sherrill. "She has been at the firm for 60 years, and she always says she was born here. She put up with me for everything. I've never known her to make a mistake. She always has a house in her head."

## **Advising the Kennedys and Vanderbilts**

Sherrill's own start began at home, in her parents' New Orleans house. She asked her mother for permission to fix up the third floor of the house. New wallpaper and painting the stairway an unheard-of shocking pink were the results.

Another shock was her intent to become a career woman.

"I didn't think of becoming an interior designer," Sherrill said. "My father and grandfather were architects. I would have liked to do that, but I don't think girls were really becoming architects then. I used to go up and down the street, looking at antiques shops. My father and everybody I knew were against my working at McMillen. Or anywhere."

Nonetheless, she signed on and excelled in representing the same clients through every phase of their lifetimes. She even has worked with three or four generations of a single family, be they Kennedys or Vanderbilts.

She worked with the White House when it was occupied by Lyndon Johnson. "We were the first who knew he wasn't going to run for office again because he wanted his four-poster bed sent back to the ranch."

## **Avoiding trends**

What does this famous interior designer's own home look like?

"Betty's home hasn't been redecorated for 40 years," said Sherrill's publicist Eleanor Lambert. "She's probably the best-known decorator in the country and heads up the best-known group of decorators. It's a nouveau riche attitude to think you have to have the latest chintz or the latest something. If it's right, it's right."

Said Sherrill: "There's nothing new under the sun, you know that. Trendiness usually passes. I don't like too many fancy curtains unless they're in a chateau in France. They're dust collectors. We don't really do very fussy curtains unless it's called for, like in the White House.

"It's a partnership. You get to know the client very well. And if you don't, you didn't do a good job. You have to know how they like to live."