

Joan Kohn's

it's your bed and bath

Hundreds of Beautiful Design Ideas



The shared excitement of the creative process turns teamwork into team play, and problem solving into fun!



ABOVE With poetic precision, this closet has a place for everything. Expert detailing continues on walls defined by 1/4-inch reveals above 8-inch flush baseboards.

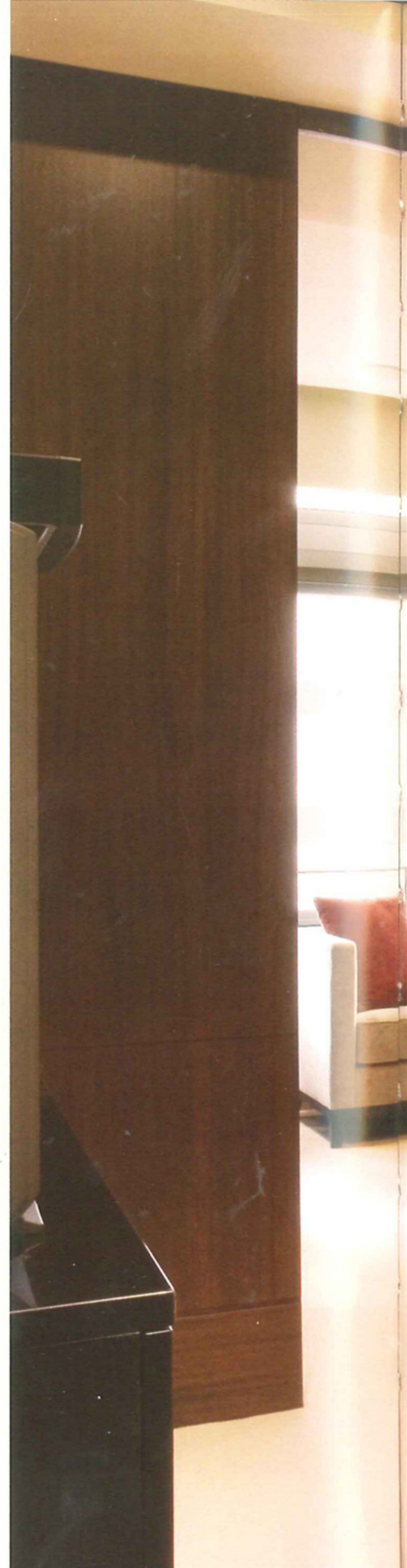
OPPOSITE When the shoji-screen doors are open, this bedroom is flooded with natural light and enjoys a wonderful city view.
Design: Peter Sollogub and Maho Abe
(all images in chapter)

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hile successful designs vary widely, successful design teams often look and feel very much the same. Inevitably, there is a quiet understanding and mutual respect among the homeowner and each artist, craftsperson, consultant, and strategist that permits all of them to thrive. And the common thread is that everyone listens to everyone else.

Design help is widely available today. In addition to asking for references from friends and family, you can find many manufacturers and retailers who offer professional assistance. Organizations such as the National Kitchen & Bath Association, the American Institute of Architects, and the American Society of Interior Designers can also help you put the right design team together.

This chapter begins with the story of a truly successful design collaboration, and also includes tips for choosing your design team and surviving construction.







LEFT The hardware for the woven curtain in the bay of the study is concealed in the recess surrounding the floating ceiling plane.

RIGHT To separate the bedroom from the study and still maintain a sense of openness, a structural column was hidden in cabinetry that also incorporates storage and a desk. A sliding shoji-screen partition, made of rhya rosa wood and milk-white glass, provides privacy for the bedroom.



It occurred to me today that although design is a real-world process that always involves a measure of serious struggle, when it's over most good design teams seem to remember only the joy of it all. That certainly was the case with film producer Mitchell Robbins's fabulous Boston apartment.

Despite the fact that the building was under construction and he had been alerted to its complicated structural issues, Mitchell knew that he had found the perfect space for his new apartment. Loving Boston as he does, he had to have the incredible view of Copley Square that the space offered. The dynamic energy of this unique panorama was sure to nurture his creative spirit, and he had a clear idea of how he wanted the interior spaces to work. Mitchell had expected to buy a larger apartment, but for a bachelor who uses his home primarily as a retreat in which to study and write, this place was too good to pass up.

Mitchell began by doing his homework. Knowing that he wanted to transform a standard three-bedroom unit into a loftlike space, he pored through magazines, tearing out every image he liked. "I think it's important to provide that type of communication to your team. Otherwise you're just throwing out words, such as 'I want it to be open,' or 'I want it to be light.' I think you should be able to describe those words in a picture form."

At their very first meeting, Mitchell was not only able to show his team the look he was after, but he went one giant step further. Taking a break from their conversation, he asked the whole team — including principal-in-charge Peter Sollogub and Gretchen McPhee, an architect at his firm; interior designer Maho Abe and her associate Rina Okawa; client representative Lorraine Sweeney; general contractor Geir Boger; and project manager Ginette Castro — to listen, not to him, but to his favorite CD. That was the breakthrough moment that everyone still remembers . . . the moment the design began to crystallize.

"It was really important that I work with a team that could conceptualize what I was feeling," says Mitchell. "I said, 'Peter, I want you to forget about all of the other things you've been working on, I want you to just listen to the music and think what I'm feeling. I want to feel this type of vibe when I'm in my place.' "

As Peter recalls this moment, "He had chosen a Latin piece, soft and bright, a flowing, lyrical composition entwined with musical ebbs and pockets of melodies. As we listened, he said, 'That's what I want.' It was this moment that provided the foundation for the entire design strategy."



Inspired by the music and using movable walls and carefully articulated ceiling heights, Peter configured the apartment with an open plan that allows one space to flow freely into another while highlighting the city views. Having movable boundaries between public and private areas allows his client to comfortably use all the space himself when he's working (his favorite spot is actually in the corner of the living room couch, where he can read, write, or review tapes on the flat-screen TV). And for entertaining guests, the circulation patterns and the fantastic city views are equally wonderful.

Interior designer Maho Abe's minimalist instincts and perfectionist's eye for detail played perfectly into these spaces and into Mitchell's desire for harmony. This is a clean,

uncluttered look with a serene arrangement of colors and materials. Maho prefers a pared-down look herself, but laughingly admits, "I don't like edges — lines, lines, lines. So I use color and material to create comfort and elegance." Her softening palette included maple and a pearly onyx in the bathroom, ribbon-stripped mahogany and rhyta rosa wood in the dressing room, and mahogany and textured paint in the bedroom (with traditional Japanese red lacquer finishes inside the cabinets in the study). The French limestone floor and baseboards in the bathroom blend perfectly with the neutral carpeting Maho used throughout the rest of the suite.

Wonderfully pleased with the results that he and his team achieved, Mitchell attributes much of that success to regular meetings in which they "reviewed, and reviewed, and reviewed" each stage of the project. And as Maho observes, "The client is a film producer, and he treated this architectural project the same way he makes his movies. He acted like a producer, using us as the team to create his dream. He respected everybody's opinions, and was very open and receptive to new ideas."

"What I'm most proud about," says Mitchell, "is that we actually ended up getting the feeling I was after. This is where I come to get away from the intensity of my office so that I am able to write in a more contemplative environment, and the space serves one hundred percent in the way I wanted it to serve."

Joan's Five Rules of Thumb

These few simple rules will prepare you for design success on any project large or small, whether you're remodeling, renovating, or building anew.

① Assume Nothing

Making assumptions is like trying to find a shortcut through dense woods; it's tempting, but you run the risk of getting lost. For example, just because your friend is thrilled with the work of a particular interior decorator, don't assume that you will work well with that person. Think long and hard before you choose members for your design team. Are their personalities compatible with yours? Will they understand your point of view and respect your needs and opinions? Do you like the work they've done for their other clients?

This rule applies to every step in the design and construction process. Don't assume that the beautiful faucet or duvet cover you've always wanted is still being made, or that your contractor will consider daily cleanup to be part of his job. It's wise to take nothing for granted.

② Never Take No for an Answer (at Least Not Right Away)

When someone says, "It can't be done," remember that design problems often have unexpected solutions. Before you accept no for an answer, take extra time to think things through; there may be a yes out there. Talk to others, or try to come up with a solution of your own. Precisely because you're not a professional, you may discover an unconventional solution.

As one home improvement enthusiast I know wisely observes, "No one cares more about your home than you." A self-reliant frame of mind is invaluable in designing bedrooms and bathrooms that satisfy your expectations. Bring your own focused intelligence and creativity to bear on the problem. You'll be amazed at what you come up with!

③ Never Take Yes for an Answer Either

Even small-scale projects can become extremely complex, pulling your attention in several different directions at once. When this happens, it's tempting to take yes for an answer without making absolutely sure that your instructions and wishes are clearly understood. It is easy to accept assurances that everything is going along according to your specifications and schedule without checking for yourself. But be watchful! Reviewing the work in progress, asking questions, and clarifying instructions will save you time, money, and regret.

④ Be Unsophisticated

There is no such thing as a dumb question when it comes to getting the new bedroom and bath you want. Your expertise will grow over time, so don't be embarrassed to ask questions. This is especially true when dealing with buzzwords. If a designer or contractor uses words or concepts you don't understand, stop the conversation and ask for an explanation. Avoid the temptation to nod your head and smile knowingly when you don't fully comprehend something. You owe it to yourself — and your pocketbook — to be unsophisticated.

⑤ Think Backward

It's easy to look ahead when you start a design project, imagining that glorious day when you will walk into your wonderful new bathroom and fill the tub with bubbles. But when it comes to the rough-and-tumble construction phase, you'll be in much better shape if you also remember to think backward in the planning stage.

Once you have envisioned your final design goal, work backward to break it down into all of the many tasks that must be accomplished in order to achieve that goal. Something as simple as a new wall-mounted light fixture for your bedroom requires sourcing, ordering, delivery, and installation, and may also require new wiring, plastering, and painting.

Even if your designer and contractor will be taking responsibility for most of this work, thinking backward and

identifying all the steps involved in your project *before* you get started can help you be a more effective leader of your design team, and give you a big boost in getting the job done on time, on budget, and to your satisfaction.

More Tips

Here are more tips on choosing and working with your design team and on surviving construction.

Your Design Team

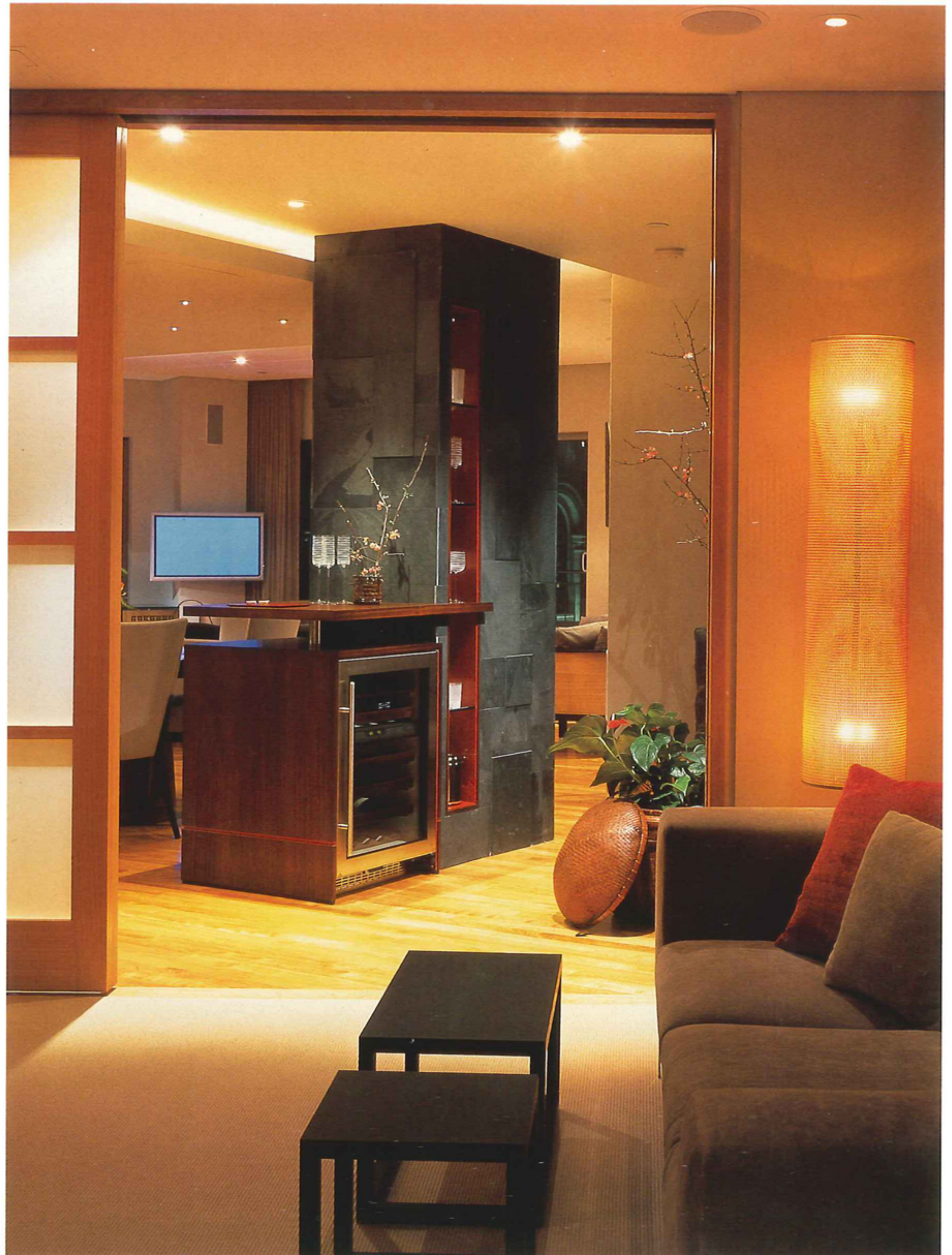
- Every design project takes teamwork. Even stouthearted, self-reliant “I-can-do-this-all-by-myselfers” seek counsel and support from time to time. And help is everywhere! In today’s competitive marketplace, many retailers and manufacturers often offer free design advice on-site, on the web, and by phone.
- When asking for personal recommendations for team members, ask for three at a time. Someone else’s second choice may be solid gold to you. Ask your friends if they were “unconditionally satisfied” with the people they worked with, and if the fees they paid matched the results. Base your decisions on detailed information, and pay particular attention to rave reviews.
- Choose people who are as highly trained as possible. If the scope of your project justifies it, specialists such as lighting designers or faux-finishers can help you avoid costly mistakes. And getting things right the first time saves money.
- Ask for multiple references for each prospective member of your design team, and to see photographs of their work. Visiting their completed projects can be invaluable, and dropping in on them while they’re working on a project can tell you volumes as to how they run a job.
- Every project has its share of unexpected problems — even a “dream job” can have a little nightmare or two. Ask interviewees for examples of how they’ve solved problems

in the past. You can learn a lot from their answers (as well as from their willingness to share these revealing stories).

- You must feel a personal connection with your designer, and have a strong sense that the listening will go both ways. Remember that a good designer challenges clients to stretch their tastes, but good clients challenge designers as well. Follow the same instincts you would on a first date. If the chemistry is wrong, move on with no regrets.

Surviving Construction

- Be realistic and try to keep smiling. Think of the construction process as “creative chaos.” Remember that every problem has a solution. You may be pleasantly surprised to discover that “mistakes” can often lead to unforeseen and innovative results.
- Decide in advance on the chain of command — what role you and every other member of the team will play during the weeks or months ahead, and how decisions will be made. Clear systems for allocating responsibilities, communicating, and making payments will protect against unnecessary conflicts or surprises. Signed change orders are particularly helpful in tracking costs.
- Once construction begins, trust yourself and your team, allowing everyone the freedom to work in his or her own way.
- Try to remain flexible and open to new ideas suggested by your team members as work proceeds. But remember that major changes once you’re under way can cause serious budgetary overruns. Take all the time you need in advance to detail every aspect of your design plan.
- Be diligent about visiting the construction site. And when you catch a mistake, resist the temptation to “live with it” — at least until you’ve examined all your options. Even a major mistake, when spotted early enough, can be relatively



RIGHT With a convertible couch and its own bathroom, the guest bedroom is as multifunctional as every other space in this home. Directly accessible from the bar, dining area, kitchen, living room, and master suite (with sliding, shoji-screen "movable walls" for privacy), this room continues the uninterrupted circulation throughout the apartment.



LEFT The extraordinary vanity of luminous onyx is the centerpiece of this master bathroom. The custom gridwork on the cabinets is repeated in several rooms throughout the apartment.

simple to fix. For example, when you notice that a window has been framed too high, reframing it can be relatively easy, while “letting it go” can seriously affect the view forever.

- Have regularly scheduled face-to-face meetings with your team to discuss goals, budgeting concerns, and scheduling issues. I know some homeowners who attribute the success of their remodeling project to *daily* meetings with their contractor.
- If possible, don’t move out of your house during a remodeling. Being there each day will not only help you spot issues as they arise, but can also have a positive impact on your team’s morale.
- Allow ample time to clear out your bedrooms and bathrooms prior to construction. Don’t do it the night before your builder is scheduled to arrive! Pack and label everything with time to spare, taking stock of your wardrobe, toiletries, books, and other personal items, and reorganizing them for proper placement in your new rooms. You may find that the necessities you *don’t* pack away are all you really want to keep.
- Because delays are an inevitable part of the building process, try not to let the demolition work begin until all your raw materials, new cabinets, and fixtures are ready for delivery.
- Prepare for construction by providing the crew with a dedicated entryway, restroom, and convenient space for snacks and lunch.
- Make sure your construction area is sealed off with at least two layers of plastic sheeting, with damp towels at the bottom, to control dust. Floor mats for wiping shoes are helpful both inside and outside the work area, and removing pictures from walls in adjacent rooms is a good way to prevent accidental damage.

- Clarify in advance the procedures for daily site cleanup and safety.
- Minimize the disruption to your personal and family life by maintaining your daily routines. Although your commitment to your bed and bath project may be boundless, other family members may have less vision and patience.
- When the pressure builds, find a way to regenerate. Regain your perspective by spending a night in a charming bed-and-breakfast, taking an architectural tour, or splurging on some inspiring new design magazines and books that will rekindle your enthusiasm.
- Don’t invite houseguests for the day after your scheduled completion date.
- And most important of all, remember that in the realm of all possible problems, design problems are good problems to have.

Final Thoughts

One of the most enthralling aspects of interviewing homeowners, architects, and designers for my TV shows and books is hearing their exciting stories about the creative process itself. While we’ve all heard the occasional design horror story, what I hear most often are extraordinary tales of the joys of collaboration. When the team is right, each individual contributes his or her unique talents and perspective toward a common goal. The result is not only a beautiful room, but wonderful shared memories as well.