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A European lakeside project by Winch Design, whose ethos is to focus on exceptional communication with clients as a way of making sure that projects go as smoothly as possible.



Setting the boundaries

by Emily Brooks

Communicating with clients – or potential clients – has the power to make or break a project, creating a solid understanding of what happens when, and smoothing those inevitable bumps along the way

MANAGING EXPECTATIONS requires a combination of emotional intelligence – being tactful, knowing when and how to compromise, being able to “read the room” – and being able to confidently lay out the practicalities of what will be delivered when and for how much. The first isn’t readily taught to interior designers or architects in training, and elements of the practical side are learned by making mistakes – so here’s what some seasoned professionals have gleaned about client relationships.

“The most critical thing is the information contained in your proposal,” says Susie Rumbold at interior design firm Tessuto. “We restate the brief, so that right from the off, we’re saying ‘this is what you’ve asked us to do’, and that translates into a series of deliverables, which are set out in detail.” Rumbold’s proposals say that only when one stage is signed off can the next one be moved on to, a process she calls ‘freezing’. “So if a client decides they want that bigger bathroom, we have the option to say ‘of course we can do that, but we will have to charge to do the new drawings.’”

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In this project by Armstrong Keyworth, a small budget was stretched by mixing bespoke items such as the light above the dining table, with inexpensive objects.



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Of all client-facing jobs, being a residential architect or interior designer requires the asking of some pretty personal questions to get an optimal final result. Creatives need to be able to fast-track their relationship with a client in order to make that intimacy feel comfortable. "I started in commercial architecture and this was a huge shock to the system when I started my own small practice," says Christine Thornley, founder of Grove Studio Architecture. "But it's a skill I've developed and get better at the more I do it. I talk to my clients how I would like to be talked to and the more honest I am, the more honest they are with me."

Selina McCabe, partner, architecture interiors at Winch Design, says: "I always try to focus on exceptional communication and acknowledge my client as an individual. No one wants to feel like they are just another client on the books." Her other advice is to "follow through. When undertaking a project, you must be prepared to deliver what you promised from day one, regardless of how difficult it may get".

Jennifer Jarvis, senior designer at Helen Green Design, says "developing a basic level of trust" is critical. "My job is to give people a home that's representative of them, and to do that you have to sincerely get to know them." That trust then acts as a buffer if things don't go to plan. "When you have an honest relationship, you can have those hard conversations - so one uncomfortable conversation doesn't sour all of it," she says.

Jarvis says that "as the market becomes more saturated, we're constantly thinking about customer service". But how does this not translate into being at a client's beck and call? "A little bit of professional distance," Rumbold says. "We always say we'll respond to clients in normal business hours. Some expect instantaneous replies - you have to push back on that a bit."



Dean Keyworth of Armstrong Keyworth, who designed this project, says having difficult conversations gets easier with time and experience.

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One delicate situation designers need to handle is when couples cannot agree on what they want. Rumbold says she asks them to nominate a lead client, so all decisions are fed through one individual, while other designers use all their powers of tact and creativity to navigate the situation. "I often have husbands and wives sitting either side of me, telling me the complete opposite of each other," says Thornley. "I point out that there's going to have to be

some compromise, try to give them options that take something from each of their preferences and let them discuss it together. Sometimes showing people with a drawing or a sketch why something won't work is helpful. People respond better to that than trying to change an argument."

Dean Keyworth of interior design firm Armstrong Keyworth says he once walked away from a potential project because of marital differences of opinion. "A couple had been living in a warehouse apartment in New York but had come back to a Georgian country house. The husband loved the warehouse style and wanted to replicate it; the wife hated it and wanted chintz and comfy sofas," he says. "I started off suggesting different rooms could have elements of each, but that set off a massive row. I didn't take that job in the end."

Not every difference of opinion is that extreme, though. "It's usually a case of

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The sitting room at this house in Chelsea had to function as both a formal drawing room and a more casual family space. The room's scale gave Helen Green Design the scope they needed to create a scheme that strikes the perfect balance.

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drilling down to find out what's really important," says Keyworth. "If someone says they like antiques, that might actually mean just one thing they inherited and like; someone else might say they want no colour at all, but when you show them something with splashes of colour, they're fine with it."

He also has advice on managing expectations about what can be achieved on a defined budget, and once again it comes down to transparency. "You have to be realistic from the get-go, otherwise everyone's going to be disappointed." What about when clients are reluctant to disclose the budget, for fear their designer is going to spend it and then some? Keyworth says that "early on, I show them a few things with the prices; you quite quickly see whether you're way off."

Rumbold says that knowing the budget can avoid a soured relationship later on: "If you don't know whether you're shopping at Harrods or Ikea, and you show them the Harrods solution and it turns out they've only got an Ikea budget, they won't be happy with anything you show them from that point onwards. You've sold them a dream they can't have."

As well as managing expectations around costs, most designers have a talent for wise spending. "Instead of going bigger, we can be cleverer," says Thornley. One of her clients wanted a huge extension, but as the house was in a conservation area, the materials were largely predetermined with no wiggle room. "We extended to a smaller extent to give them the light and space they wanted, but also rejigged existing floor space and improved things like lighting - a very cheap way to make it feel bigger. They love it."

Rumbold agrees that lighting is a good target for value engineering if an integrated system is proposed. "You can compromise and only do it in certain rooms; you can pre-wire for things but not actually do the installation." Inexpensive furniture packages and using plain blinds until money materialises for curtains are other options.



With spectacular views across the gardens of King's Chelsea, this bathroom in a four-bedroom contemporary apartment was created by Helen Green Design.

Scrimping on the fabric of the building, and anything that it would be expensive and disruptive to change, such as kitchens and bathrooms, are much less desirable options.

Don't think designers working at the very highest end don't have to deal with cost issues: Winch Design's Selina McCabe says that "every client, regardless of wealth, has a budget and it comes down to how they want their money to be spent."

Do designers ever say no to a client - and is there a nice way to do it? "It gets easier," says Keyworth. "Because I've been doing it so long, I now feel like I can say when something really isn't right." As with untangling marital differences in taste, he says it's about drilling down to what a client likes about a disputed element: "If it's a sofa, is it the comfort, is it the colour? So you can say, 'that won't work - but here

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Christine Thornley,
Grove Studio Architecture

are some alternatives that match the thing you like about it."

Winch's Selina McCabe says that "there are tactful ways of saying no without saying the word 'no.' Hopefully, if you have managed to build a strong rapport with the client this is slightly easier to do.

"When you do have to say no, make sure you have a good reason and let them know in an honest and direct way while expressing genuine interest and dedication, conveying that you really are working to give them what they want. Offer alternative solutions and keep communicating."

Social media sites such as Pinterest and Instagram may have fuelled appreciation for design, but has it also given people an unreasonable expectation of what can be achieved? "I would steer clients away from an Instagram photo if I think it is either not suitable for the house they're living in or is going to date quickly," says Dean Keyworth. "I've had people show me pictures of huge swag-and-tail curtains, but they live in a 1970s flat where the ceilings aren't high enough. You have to gently explain that it's not going to happen."

Architect Christine Thornley, however, thinks it can go the other way. "People are intimidated by shows such as Grand Designs and assume they won't be able to afford something like that. I quite often have to say, 'there's no reason why you can't have something really amazing and different.' My job is to make their life better - I'm there to make it special." 📍

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