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WOMAN IN THE KNOW

Legendary designer **Bonny Williams** shares her words of wisdom on the world of interior design.



Interspersing accessories among books draws interest and avoids a monotonous look. Williams added a painting of her late dog, a terrier mix named Charlie, to her shelves to mix things up.

Looking to hire an interior designer? Thinking of starting your own design firm? We reached out to iconic designer Bonny Williams for her tips on navigating the interior design field. Williams, who started her own firm in 1988 after working for Parish-Hadley Associates for 22 years, has gained unrivaled wisdom throughout her celebrated career. Lucky for us, she's willing to share. 

Written by Shawn Gauthier • Photography by Patrick Cline • Art Direction by Michelle Adams

Wondering how to get the best results from a designer? According to Williams, it comes down to three key factors: research, preparation, and trust.

Before hiring a designer, be sure to research his or her experience and reputation. Focus on finding someone whose aesthetic resembles what you'd like in your home. "Do your homework," says Williams. "There must be a good fit between client and designer."

Once you've chosen your designer, be prepared to communicate what you're looking for in your space. "From a client's perspective, it's extremely important to express yourself in regard to what you want," she says. "Do you want a cozy, family house? A serene, modern house?" Collect magazine tear-outs, fabric swatches, and color samples to help you articulate your expectations.

Trust your designer. "I find that sometimes clients feel that if they're not presented with a thousand different ideas, they're not getting their money's worth," says Williams. "In reality, if someone is really passionate about their work, often their first ideas are their best. You must have trust and confidence in the designer you've chosen."

A 19th-century marble bust of Perseus keeps watch out the window.



In the design library, Williams sourced an antique Swedish bed canopy—an architectural crown from which fabric would drape as a canopy over a bed—to act as a focal point above the planning table. The needlepoint leopard rug from John Rossetti Antiques adds texture and pattern to the space.



Thinking about setting up your own design business? Take Williams' advice on what to do first:

Remember, it's a business. "The business side is as important as the creative side," says Williams. "There have been many talented decorators, with great eyes for design, who have lost their shirts because they did not deal with the business end." If you don't have a knack for business, find a friend who can handle it for you. "You're either a business person or you're not, and you have to acknowledge that in yourself right away," says Williams.

Consider working for someone else before starting your own business. "Nowadays, everyone wants to start a firm at 25, and no one is learning how to run the business end," says Williams. "Even if you work somewhere for two years, you'll learn bookkeeping, purchase orders, worksheets, all the intricacies of the design business. It allows for a lot fewer mistakes when it comes time to open your own doors."

Williams' team often gathers to plan projects in the design library, where she stores samples ranging from fabrics to wood and paint. Architectural etchings line the wall.

Williams finished off her bookshelves with gold-futed columns. Her book collection is carefully organized by topic.



Original sketches by Albert Hadley line the wall of Williams' conference room. Beneath the mirror is an antique Swedish cabinet filled with tile samples; the lamps are from Williams' Beeline Home collection.



The 18th-century English painting is a family heirloom. The bar is a Swedish chest from the late 1700s.

Your design business is off and running; here's Williams' advice for turning a profit.

Determine the budget at the beginning of a project, and be completely up front about all costs. "The clients are much more confident when they know they're buying within their budget," says Williams. "The project will start off on a much better footing."

Never be naïve and assume the client will like something and therefore pay for it. It's essential to get signed estimates and guaranteed financial commitments. "There are clients I've worked with for years, and I still will never order anything for them without a signed estimate," says Williams.



Williams chose a two-toned stain for her gallery space's floors to make the room feel larger.

The most valuable lesson Williams has learned in her career?

Always maintain a good relationship with your suppliers. "We are only as good as the sources we use," says Williams. "Treat your suppliers as nicely, respectfully, and fairly as you treat your clients. If something goes wrong, they'll go the extra mile to be there for you."



Williams' gallery, where she meets with clients, is designed to resemble a home. The couch and striped chair are Beeline Home pieces.