a little unsettling," than after the window of opportunity closes, he believes. "One of the biggest compliments I can get," continues Davis, "is when a client comes up at the end of a project and says how they finally understood why I pushed them in a particular direction." Letting the client know what is possible within the allotted budget–and what is not possible–is a savvy move, says Ginny Blair: clients (herself included) have an interesting way of mobilizing resources for ideas that initially seem out of reach if they are sold on the design.

Assemble a Successful Team

"We are in the people business," says Tony Chi, "so chemistry is the backbone" of a project. The design team–the contractor, the HVAC and lighting consultants, the client (to say nothing of the architect and the interior designer)–should mesh. Although many firms offer both architecture and interior design services, interior designers frequently interface with architects from outside practices. Kronick offers advice to that effect. He examines the team already involved in a project (with corporate clients, he has discovered that project managers, engineers, and real estate consultants are sometimes hired first) to evaluate whether or not he can collaborate happily over a period of six months to a year. "I ask who I can have a dialogue with, and who I like." Although fees and credentials are important, "comfort level" is more so. "By the end of a project, people often end up hating each other–it is easy to become antagonistic," exclaims Oller. Although this does not preclude a successful outcome, "when you end on good terms with a client, they are more likely to recommend you to others," and to give you repeat business.

Be Selective about Choosing Projects

It is generally evident from the beginning whether or not a project bears the earmarks of potential success. Are client expectations suitably realistic? Are there opportunities for creative expression? Is the design team "simpatico" with the client? By extracting as much information about the project, the client, and the target objectives up front, and weighing the pros against the cons, a designer can predict probable outcomes. A job may be lucrative, but will it involve hand-holding a high-maintenance client, compromising design integrity, or sacrificing sanity?

"From a visual and artistic standpoint, we ask ourselves if this is a project we are going to be proud of," says Davis. "We assess in the very beginning so that in the end the client is pleased and feels they have spent their money well."

Thomas Polise, who heads a small, family-owned engineering practice, says his firm "definitely picks and chooses who we work with," including both designers and clients. Although "clients who pay" are his number-one consideration, it is just as important, he says, to ascertain whether the team involved is likely to give total commitment to the project. "Can the client or designer allocate the time to give 100 percent?" he asks.

Oller looks for clients who are "unique, fun, and irreverent," but also "that I'm comfortable with. I don't ever want to feel like the client and I are on completely different pages." A comfortable dialogue and a "cool, casual, creative atmosphere," make the process enjoyable and worthwhile.

In the end, such insights are a result of the "gut instinct" that comes from maturity and experience, says Chi. If the project does not seem likely to lead to a successful outcome, it probably won't.

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