

# STAND AND DELIVER

Three interior designers share their insights on how they keep their clients happy

BY KIMBERLEY WRAY



To deliver a complete experience, Gary Inman of Baskervill (shown on p. 40), says the most important thing is to make the story about them.

## Show Them the Real You

For interior designer Barbara Lewis, with design studios based on Long Island, NY, and in Stamford, CT, serving affluent clients goes hand in hand with the visibility and validation that comes along with high-profile showhouse work.

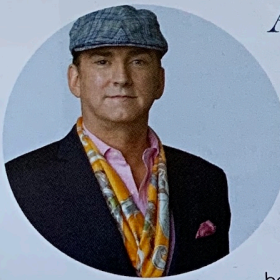
"Unless it's a direct referral, people interested in working with a designer start off by Googling names and looking at your website. So, you have to have a cohesive, easy-to-navigate website today that's packed with really wonderful photography that shows off your work," she says. "But showhouse projects take you beyond taking your personal work and putting it up on a website. It's a seal of approval that someone else thinks enough of you to have you be a part of their show, to help them look good."

Most recently, Lewis was a featured designer for the prestigious Rooms With a View at the Southport Congregational Church, where she created a classic, yet current, entry vignette inspired by Albert Hadley. (Hadley himself was a church member and until his death served as the show's honorary chairman.) Founded 25 years ago, past designers associated with the annual fundraiser have included Bunny Williams, Thom Filicia, Charlotte Moss and Alexa Hampton, among others.

The same month, Lewis was also a featured designer at Holiday House New York, where she created a bar lounge inspired by the Café Society of 1960s Manhattan. This, on the heels of the critical acclaim she received earlier that year for her work at Holiday House Hampton.

Though the designer acknowledges the impact of the internet, with its saturation of information and photographs that lead consumers to think they can just point and click their way to good design, she notes, "That person is really not my client." But in an era of transparency, she too points to the importance of "having the right contract. Either they are going to agree to your terms and sign it, or they're not your client," she says.

"My clients still expect me to do the entire job for them, right down to the accessories, with a lot of customization. And as any designer will tell you, you do your best work when they give you free rein because they trust you. I've earned that trust through experience, transparency and a long career."



## Acing the Interview

Vice President of Hospitality for architecture, engineering and design firm Baskerville, the 13th largest hospitality firm in the U.S., Gary Inman concentrates mainly on that sector these days. But the designer still has his hand in whole-house projects, typically when the houses are large and important enough to have a name, such as Millstone Manor, a recently completed country estate. "We're hired because the client knows we have the capacity to handle the scale of their project," Inman says.

Inman, who got his start as a fashion designer in New York, working with the likes of Vivienne Westwood, Mary McFadden and Liz Claiborne before moving into the world of interiors, has witnessed "a fundamental paradigm shift" in the nearly three decades since he began. "There was no AutoCAD truly for the trade only," he says. "As designers, we had access to so many things that the public did not, and I appreciate that more these days than I might have at the time.

"What I think my high-end residential clients are looking for when they



Interior designer Barbara Lewis says you should have a cohesive, easy-to-navigate website packed with wonderful photography of your work.

hire a true designer — and I think to some extent this is true hospitality as well — is a person who has the capacity to give the best products and design solutions available. Because they can see so much on the internet, and they can shop around, I tell them, 'I will edit the world for you.' Most people don't have the ability to edit, process or create cohesive connections between a myriad of design elements. It's overwhelming for most. As a designer, I'm able to weave those things together.

"I think one of the things my clients value most about working with me is my capacity to look at everything, all the potential things they could have in their home, and then edit it down and choose the right things to tell the story in a way that feels very personal to them."

Like Lewis, Inman says, "There is value in being at a point in your career where you've earned a certain credibility. Obviously, you always have to be cultivating work, but it isn't like the first years when you kind of take what comes along. In the early days, I thought of it as an audition, and I felt I had to really get them to like me and be impressed by my portfolio. It was all about trying to prove to a potential client that I could be valuable to them, that I had the right taste and the right skillset. It was really a very one-side equation.

"After I practiced for about 10 years and had all these issues come up that teach you lessons," he shares, "I developed a certain degree of wisdom about the process of how to deliver design to clients and how to be a good practitioner. I learned to spot the tell-tale signs when people had decision-making issues, for instance, and to steer clear when a person has anxiety about making small decisions because when you're creating a large home, there are going to be thousands of decisions and you'll never achieve any momentum. Now, when I go into an interview, I look at it very differently. I've learned to interview them as much as they are interviewing me and to trust my instincts."

To deliver a complete experience, Inman says, the most important thing "is to be passionate, to really make the story about them and not about yourself. I don't have a signature style because I'm always interpreting someone else's dream. It's about having empathy and caring about their lives and creating a place that reflects who they are. And, it's a powerful feeling when you've moved someone emotionally, when they are almost speechless about their home. I love that. It's the reason I'm still doing it almost 30 years later." **FLD**