

BUSINESS OF HOME

BOH

ISSUE 32 | SUMMER 2024



Inside Job

Want a better business?
Start by changing your mind.

THE HANDBOOK

Picture Perfect

Is your project ready for its close-up? Here's everything you need to know before your next photo shoot.

BY HALEY CHOUINARD

For a kids room in the recent San Francisco Decorator Showcase, the whimsical scribbles featured in the children's book *Harold and the Purple Crayon* inspired the selection of a Porter Teleo wallcovering with sophisticated linework.





Cusp Interiors



R. Bradley Knipstein



The photographer perfectly captured a dozing dog making itself comfortable in this Mediterranean-influenced entryway.


Intimate Living Interiors

Karyn Millet

Much like design, great interior photography all comes down to the details. “There’s a difference between documenting and telling a story,” says Los Angeles-based photographer Karyn Millet. “Photographing an interior is storytelling. We’re brought in to capture the emotion that a space communicates.”

And much like interior designers, some of the most successful photographers can make you think they were never there. “You don’t notice the photography unless it’s bad,” says Palm Beach-based photographer Nick Mele. “If the photography is good, you’re responding to the interior design, not the photograph. It’s ‘Wow, what a beautiful room,’ not ‘What a beautiful photo.’”

Finding a collaborative partner to capture your work is a no-brainer. It’s one thing to know you should be investing in quality photography to further your design business, but it’s something entirely different to actually take the plunge. Here’s how to spend wisely and get the most out of every shoot.

FIND THE RIGHT FIT

Just as you want to find a contractor you trust to bring your design concept to life, it’s essential to choose a photographer whose work truly captures your own. “Sometimes designers fall into a pattern of just picking a photographer they’ve heard of and not stopping to analyze: What is this person good at?” says New York-based photographer Brittany Ambridge. “I’ll be up for jobs against colleagues whose style is completely different from mine. It’s important to figure out what it is you’re responding to about someone’s photography. Is it the designer’s work you like, or is it the photographer’s? Designers typically only get one chance to photograph a home—homeowners aren’t keen to do this twice—so you want to make sure you’ve chosen well.”

Ashi Waliany, owner of Cusp Interiors in San Francisco, says that her approach to hiring a photographer has shifted over time. “It’s more about whose style is going to suit the home best,” she says. “Some photographers really lean into the moodiness of a space and excel at capturing saturated colors and playing with the shadows. Others like to bring in a lot of natural light. Two photographers could shoot the same space and it would feel very different.”

Designers aren’t the only ones seeking a good fit. Some photographers will only work with like-minded clients. As his profile has grown, Los Angeles-based photographer Haris Kenjar has gotten selective about the jobs he accepts, in an effort to protect his signature shooting style. “I want to make sure that the work I take on feels representative of how I see the world now,” he says. “I get inquiries for beautiful projects that are very modern and clean, and while I appreciate them visually, I don’t thrive in those environments. It’s similar to how a designer would think—if they are used to working with color, a client who wants a neutral palette is not a fit. You have to shoot what you want to attract.”

Beyond aesthetic alignment, connecting with the photographer on a personal level helps tremendously. Photo shoots can take



days, depending on the project's scope, so establishing a harmonious working relationship makes all the difference in the on-set mood as well as in the final product. "You can design the most amazing home, but if you don't gel with the photographer, it is not going to be a positive experience," says Leonardtown, Maryland-based designer Kate Abt. "You may have to bounce between a few different people to find someone you are happy with."

Even if you've found a great partner, there are times when it's good to try out other photographers. "No one wants to be stuck in one lane," adds Abt. "Just as your own design aesthetic evolves, you might want your portfolio photography to evolve." But finding the right balance is key. Despite embracing the virtues of mixing it up as a firm evolves, the designer cautions against too much variability or trying a new photographer for every shoot: "You want consistency with your portfolio."

Antonio DeLoatch, a designer based in New York, recently decided to take a chance

on a new photographer because the person he'd been working with was unavailable (and had increased his rates). "I really value his work, but I've also spent years working on this project and I want to get it out into the world—and I can't afford him right now," says DeLoatch. "I'll reach out to him again and hope to make it work in the future, but I need to find someone else for this one. As my brand's identity is getting clearer and stronger, it's about finding a small handful of photographers [whose work] feels cohesive. The big takeaway is that in almost any trade we work with, there's a good, better and best. [I'm looking for] a suite of photographers that can easily plug into that system."

GET COMFORTABLE WITH THE COSTS

Real talk: Photography is expensive. Really good photography—the kind that lands a dream client or even gets picked up by a glossy magazine—can cost thousands. Even early-career designers should plan to spend at least \$5,000 for magazine-ready images. If you are working with a more established

photographer, those costs may be closer to \$10,000 or \$15,000. Despite the initial sticker shock, designers say, without fail, it's money well spent.

Lindsay Lucas, the principal of Lindsay Laine Interiors in Pittsford, New York, had been photographing her own work for the first year of her business before she reached out to an interior photographer. She went back and had several key projects shot professionally, something that, luckily, her clients were happy to accommodate. "It took a lot of effort, because people were living in their houses, obviously, so I had to style everything and make it look like it had when I'd originally finished," says Lucas.

The payoff was immediate. After debuting her revamped portfolio (accompanied by a new website design and a fresh logo), the caliber of inquiries she received changed dramatically—from smaller-scope projects like kitchen and bath remodels to ground-up construction projects. "It makes you seem much more high-end," she says of the new photos. "Even if you have only done a few

Candy pink stripes mingle with deep greens and crisp whites in this classic take on Palm Beach style by the late Carleton Varney.



Dorothy Draper & Company



Nick Mele



A pink range makes for a surprising pop of color in this detailed kitchen.



Kate Abt Design



Stacy Zarin Goldberg

projects, professionally photographing just one of them is worth the investment.”

Paying for photography can be daunting when you’re first starting out and your margins are slim. If your budget is tight (or nonexistent), designer and business coach April Gandy of Alluring Designs Chicago has a bold suggestion: “Barter your services. Offer to do design work for a photographer, or even just style their home and have them shoot it. They can take pictures in exchange for your expertise.”

Gandy also suggests booking a half-day shoot to capture the strongest spaces of a firm’s early projects rather than documenting the entire job. “Your first projects aren’t typically your best anyway, so why spend thousands of dollars on photos you may want to take off your website in a few years?” she says. “Even if you just get a handful of shots of the strongest room, there are ways to get the images you need without overinvesting.”

And while the outlay for a shoot may seem out of reach, it can help to put it in the

context of your long-term goals. “Where do you want your business to go?” asks Ambridge. “Do you want to have licensing deals or a \$1 million minimum budget for projects? If you’re only spending a few thousand dollars photographing your half-a-million-dollar project, you’re not going to get there.” She suggests that designers think of photography expenses an essential cost of moving their business forward, much like computers, rent or payroll. “If you’re a luxury business, you have to present a luxury product,” says the photographer. “You will get that money back, I promise.”

UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU’RE GETTING

A simple truth of copyright law: The design of a room cannot be considered intellectual property. While you’re responsible for the design and execution of your project, the actual photograph of the space belongs to the photographer, and is actually *their* IP.

Before you hire a pro to shoot your project, make sure your expectations about photo usage are in alignment. Portfolio photography that’s going to live on your website and social media feed might be one fee, but sharing those photos with your vendors, publishing them in a magazine, or using them in a book down the road could be extra. Even if you think you might eventually use the photos in a context other than your portfolio, it’s worth talking through those intentions with your photographer before you sign a contract.

Most photographers include their policy on usage rights in their contracts—do yourself a favor and read carefully. Ambridge has run into situations where designers clearly didn’t, making for an awkward interaction late in the game. After shooting a showhouse room under her standard rate for portfolio photography and sending the images over to the designer, they mentioned their excitement about sharing the pictures with the 20-plus vendors featured in the space—which was not part of the agreement. “My quote was based on one person having access to these images. If there are multiple people who want to use them, especially brands that are going to use my work to sell products, that’s a different rate,” says the photographer. “If you’re clear upfront about how you plan to use the images, we can negotiate a price that’s fair to everyone.”

Some photographers, including Mele, take a more lax approach to usage rights. “A lot of photographers have multiple fee structures—which I understand—but I just have a flat fee and designers can use it how they want to, as long as I get credited properly,” he explains. “Once I take the photos, use them how you want.”

Talking about your intentions, as well as the photographer’s policies, before you sign on the dotted line is the only way to ensure

both parties are on the same page. Just as designers wouldn't want a client relationship to sour because they didn't fully understand the firm's fees, photographers don't want to be contentious with their designer clients. "For a lot of people, their only previous experience with photographers is for live event photography [like a wedding], so there can be a misconception that they're paying a one-time fee for my time and then they can do whatever they want with the photos," says Ambridge. "This is a different situation and a different specialty, but I want to talk through all of this with my clients—I never want to surprise anyone."

One place where navigating photo rights can quickly get knotty is on social media, where it has become increasingly common for brands to share photos of designers' work when their product is featured. While a designer might think nothing of the additional exposure, such a scenario can rub a photographer the wrong way—especially if they're not credited properly. If a company wants to share your portfolio work on their own accounts, it's a good practice to alert the photographer who shot it so they're not surprised if they open the app and see their image on a major brand's profile. In many cases, photographers are amenable as long as they get credited or tagged; in others, they may expect the brand posting the image to pay a licensing fee to use the image.

The reverse doesn't apply. Because the photographer owns the copyright, they do not have to check in with the designer if a brand approaches them about picking up a photo. Blair Moore, a designer in New York and Rhode Island, ran into this when a project of hers was picked up by a large online retailer without her consent after the photographer sold the company rights to the images. Moore now makes it a policy to only work with photographers who let her buy the copyright—a considerable expense, and a choice that significantly narrows the pool of professionals she's able to work with, but a move she feels is essential to protect her brand. "I pay an extra fee for each image that I want to own, but, to me, it's worth it to be able to use the images how I want in perpetuity," says the designer.

DeLoatch has taken a similar approach, finding photographers who will let him pay extra to own the rights to a handful of images from a shoot. "I don't ever want to be caught in a moment where I need to use images from my portfolio and I'm having to chase down a busy photographer only to find out they want an additional \$2,000 for me to use it to promote my business," says the designer. "I respect the fact that we're both building our businesses, but these photos are not just portfolio stills to me. I want to make sure that I have full autonomy to be able to tell my story, and I don't ever want to put a big

opportunity on pause because I can't share a photo." He has found that open dialogue—in this case, a candid conversation about his business goals and how imagery of his work contributes to achieving them—is a surefire way to get everyone on the same page: "Nine out of 10 times, the photographers I've worked with are willing to negotiate when they understand my brand and my mission."

SCHEDULE WISELY

If you have your heart set on working with a specific photographer, it's never too early to inquire about their availability, especially if

you already have an install date in mind. Most photographers recommend that you reach out at least three months in advance, though Kenjar has had designers reach out a full year ahead of time. "I'll hold the date, and we can revisit six months out and make sure that still seems realistic," he says.

Figuring out when to shoot can be a difficult endeavor. Leigh Lincoln, co-founder of Newport Beach, California-based firm Pure Salt, sometimes tries to install a project and shoot it at the same time—both to capture the house while it's in pristine condition and to avoid disrupting the homeowners twice.



A glamorous black-and-white bathroom offers a view into the bedroom.



GreyHunt Interiors



Sarah Shields



Natural light filters into this cheerful bedroom—fitting for a space with a palette inspired by the sunset.



Meg Braff Designs



Nick Mele





Layers of cookware, foliage and produce add a liveliness to this California kitchen by photographer Karyn Millet's frequent collaborator, designer Joe Lucas.



Lucas Studio Inc.



Karyn Millet

Photographers, meanwhile, suggest considering the state of the home's exterior when choosing a shoot date, and they speak from experience when they say waiting may be the best route. "I had one shoot where the landscaping was only just finished, and you could see the tiny, newly planted trees out the windows, with stakes still in the ground," says Millet. She found a way to make it work—"We had to come up with angles where you couldn't see them," she recalls—but you may get better results if you wait for the seasons to change or the landscape to mature. In other cases, they described shoots that had to be postponed because there wasn't a way to shoot around a muddy landscape: "Those are the kind of details that can throw the whole thing awry," says Kenjar.

If your clients have already settled in by the time you are shooting, be sure to bake in some extra time to clean and tidy before the photographer arrives—especially if pets and kids are in the equation.

BE STRATEGIC WITH YOUR SHOTS

When you're building a portfolio, it might seem smart to photograph each new project in order to showcase the breadth of your work. But even in a firm's early stages, it is wise to pick and choose what to document.

Established designers like Sallie Lord, the principal of Indiana- and Virginia-based GreyHunt Interiors, say that when it comes to photography, quality is better than quantity. "If I'm going to do it, I'm going to invest in a high-end, editorial photographer," she explains. After 15 years at the helm of her firm, Lord estimates that she only shoots about 25 percent of her firm's work.

A common piece of advice: Shoot the projects that will get you the work you want next. Gandy, for example, won't schedule a shoot if the project doesn't reflect her vision. "Maybe there were budget constraints, or clients were really pushy about keeping certain pieces that didn't fit within our design plan," she says. "It's work that I'm still proud of, but we don't necessarily need to invest in photography in those cases."

Especially if you're in the phase of saying yes to every project that comes your way, remember that not every job needs to be documented—sometimes doing the work can be about the financial benefits of the work without furthering your portfolio. William Brown, a designer based in Kansas City, Missouri, takes a curatorial approach to photographing his portfolio. "I try to think of it as an art director would and ask, 'What is this project trying to say?'" says Brown. "I don't want to photograph a kitchen just to have another photo of a kitchen on my website. I think of the direction I want my work to go in moving forward."

Shooting less means that you need to focus on getting more out of the projects



ABOVE, FROM LEFT:

Custom millwork in a dusty green lends sophistication to this softly lit living room.



Lindsay Laine Interiors



Kristin Leitten

Horizontal paneling and herringbone floors add a subtle geometric edge to an open entryway.



Antonio DeLoatch Design
+ Interiors



Rayon Richards



you do decide to document. When she's on set, Ambridge aims to get as many angles and arrangements of each room as possible, including detail shots and vignettes so that her client has plenty of options if multiple publications end up wanting to publish the images. "It might be that a project runs in *Elle Decor* in the U.S., but an international edition of *Architectural Digest* reaches out later and wants to run it too—but only if they can have different images from what was already published," says the photographer. She recalls a two-day shoot in a two-bedroom pied-à-terre where the designer assumed there would be about 12 shots. She got 26.

That get-as-much-as-you-can approach paid off: "Between domestic and international publications, every single image has been published," says Ambridge. "It was a great use of the designer's money. Now, that's not everyone's goal—if this designer had just wanted portfolio shots for their website, 12 shots would have been fine—but I think it's better to spend a little more money and get every single option, because you will use it." If nothing else, all of those additional vignettes are also a great way to keep your Instagram feed fresh.

DECIDE HOW TO STYLE THE SPACE

When adding up the costs of a photo shoot, it's important to remember that the photographer's fees won't be the only bill to pay. There are also flowers, accessories and, quite possibly, a stylist.

Working with a stylist can be a divisive topic. Some designers swear by them, while others can't fathom handing over creative control to a third party. (And some would love to outsource but balk at the additional cost—designers interviewed for this article have paid anywhere from \$150 an hour for a stylist's time to as much as \$5,000 per day, plus additional fees for any rental props.) It's a matter of preference, and it can depend on your goals. If you're hoping to get a project picked up by a magazine, for instance, a stylist might elevate your images and give them a more editorial look. They can also add a fresh perspective to the room that a designer, who has been working toward a specific vision for a space for so long, might not always see.

"Whether it's through props or a really interesting choice of flowers, or even rearranging the furniture, stylists can bring a new twist that completely opens up a room,"

says Millet. That said, the photographer also works with plenty of designers who prefer to style their own shoots—and do an incredible job. "[Los Angeles-based designer] Joe Lucas is like a one-man-band on a shoot," she adds. "He'll bring a moving van full of props and roast steaks on the grill for the outdoor shots; other designers want to hand all that off. It's really up to you."

The Pure Salt team prefers to keep the task in-house. "Styling is something we're thinking about throughout the design process," says Lincoln. But she's also quick to acknowledge that styling a photograph is very different from styling a home: "How something looks in the frame of a camera can be totally different than how it looks when you're sitting in a room. Good styling brings the essence of the home to life."

Some designers say handing off styling is as much about ease as about creative vision. "The time investment that it takes to shoot a project is substantial—it's not just the financial cost," says Lord. "My clients will be like, 'But the house looks great—what's left to do?' It's kind of like when you're getting your own picture taken: You're going to put on some extra makeup."



Playing with the angles of furniture during a shoot can create more interesting vignettes, as in this dreamy study.



Michelle Gerson Interiors



Brittany Ambridge

Decorative artist Caroline Lizarraga helped designer Noz Nozawa bring a client's design direction of "rainbow" to life with a fluid fuchsia motif on the walls.



Noz Design



Brittany Ambridge



RIGHT, FROM TOP:

Fine art and antiques mix harmoniously in a sun-drenched sitting room.



Will Brown Interiors



Christopher Douglas

A black-and-white color scheme creates graphic contrast in this bathroom.



Alluring Designs Chicago



Laquisha Love of Llove Studios

KNOW WHAT TO EXPECT

When the shoot finally arrives, be prepared for the house you spent countless hours creating to be transformed into a set. There will be staging areas, photo equipment and, if you're working with a stylist, a full range of accessories. The photographer might also suggest rearranging furniture plans in order to get the best possible shot—and if they do, don't take it as a comment on the design scheme. "As a general rule, our goal is to have the photos feel the way the space does in real life, but at the same time, things don't always translate in a photo, so sometimes you have to move things around a lot," says Ambridge.

Some photographers work off scouting shots and will show up with ideas about a shot list (a punch list of images to capture), while others will be seeing the home for the first time upon arrival. Mele likes to walk through the project with the designer to get a sense of what they're most proud of and which areas they want to highlight. "I have no ego in this. It's their vision, I'm just there to capture it," he says. "I'll get a sense of the natural light and where we should start based on where the light is hitting in the room. For me, it's about setting up and framing the shot the way I see it, then having them look at it. I'll see if they agree and what they like, if flowers need to be moved this way or a chair needs to be angled differently. And then we can lock it in."

During photo shoots, Lincoln's team has been known to rearrange an entire floor plan in order to capture the room's best qualities within the frame. "It's helpful to think of photography as a representation of the design, not a perfect document," she says. "It's all about what feelings the photos evoke. It might not be apples to apples, but the photo should reflect the ambiance you intended. I think that really helps guide you in the right direction." ■

