



Less is More?

Derailed! Slashed budgets put high-end interior designers on the fast track to TK | *By Amy Girvan* |

Your walls are painted just the right shade of Farrow & Ball gray, your custom curtains are hung, your Waterworks fixtures are installed. And then your stocks plummet, Madoff takes off with your 401K and you're left with a supermodel house: stunningly beautiful but essentially empty. Such has been the plight of many a high-flying Angeleno. Now the city's high-end interior designers are adjusting their strategies to cope.

Westside neighborhoods that once echoed with the rattle of jackhammers and the beep-beep of construction trucks are suddenly silent. In Brentwood, an investment banker with a recently depleted portfolio pulled the plug on a multimillion-dollar project with Joel Dessaules' LDC Design after investing heavily in custom curtains and finishes.

Designer Kishani Perera just had a Beverly Hills client bring down what she's willing to pay for furniture by a hundred-fold. "When we started in August 2008 we were at the Pacific Design Center picking out \$20,000 chairs and by October 2008 she was saying, 'I think \$200 is too much for that table.'"

And in Bel Air, Rafi Kalichstein and Joshua Rose, founders of Form Design—who have seen some projects halted midstream and budgets slashed by 50 percent or more—witnessed a series of financial ups and downs that turned a client completely gun-shy. First, her architect inadvertently misrepresented his costs, telling her the total would run \$70,000 to \$90,000 when the real bill was \$250,000. Not to worry: The client got a loan from her bank and propitiously landed a new job with a fat raise. Then things got crazy. "A week or two later, she finds out that her old job is suing her for breach of contract for leaving and the new job gets put on hold until the legal issues are sorted out—plus she's pregnant!" says Kalichstein. Fortunately, the client found a new job, but the ordeal was enough to scare her out of spending another penny on her house. According to Kalichstein, the designers went from choosing brand-new furnishings to figuring out how to finish without buying a single additional item.

So what can you do with a \$50,000 to \$75,000 design budget that's been whittled down to \$20,000 or less? Each of these designers CONTINUED...



MEN AT WORK

Designers Rafi Kalichstein and Joshua Rose in a Bel Air property purchased by a house flipper. The project originally had a \$12 million budget; now it's completely stalled.

...CONTINUED has a different take, from making creative trade-offs and going straight to manufacturers for high-end furniture (Kalichstein and Rose) to hitting up flea markets and eBay (Perera) to opting for a room-by-room approach (Dessaules). “Plenty of people can find beautiful things in a showroom,” says Kalichstein, “but when money is an issue and the designer actually cares about the project and the person, they don’t want to push them into something they don’t have the money for, so it becomes a different challenge that requires a different set of skills.”

When one Form Design client—an attorney at Fox—lost 60 percent of his money as the economy nosedived, the project became weighted by anxiety rather than buoyed by excitement. “We didn’t want to suggest stuff that would change the budget even a penny, so if we found amazing things that were beyond the budget we’d either just table it, change it, or find the money somewhere else in the budget,” says Kalichstein.

The result? The colorful \$30-per-foot backsplash tile was replaced with a \$4-per-foot monochromatic choice in order to put money toward the \$1,000 faucet that acts as the centerpiece of the kitchen. And while the leftover 1950s vanity in the powder room remained, the designers painted it and made new doors out of some leftover countertop pieces—according to Kalichstein, it’s now “a smash hit.”

To help her clients finish derailed design projects, Perera obsessively trolls eBay, looks for discounted designer fabrics at some of her go-to L.A. haunts (F&S Fabrics, Diamond Foam & Fabric, International Silks & Woolens and Michael Levine, Inc.), and takes clients to her favorite vintage stores and flea markets. “They are

Form Design’s Rafi Kalichstein and Joshua Rose have seen some projects halted midstream and budgets slashed by 50 percent or more.

really starting to get into it, which is fun for me,” she says. “There was a time when I wouldn’t even want to say the words ‘flea market’ to these clients, but they are actually seeing the value in finding quality antiques. It also ties into the green thing for people—reusing a quality item rather than purchasing something new.”

Dessaules has decided that the best approach when a client’s budget dips is to design room by room, instead of taking on the entire house all at once. “Clients will turn to me and ask how much they should spend on a given room, and I’ll say it’s a guest room and your house is worth x and people who come to visit expect x and we figure it out,” says Dessaules. “A lot of clients just aren’t clear as to how much they should budget.” He also ensures that clients leave some money for finishes. “Now more than ever I get across to them that when I look at a room, I don’t look at a sofa or a bed but how it’s finished,” he says. “Often people spend on big-ticket items and then their home looks like a showroom... there are none of the personal artifacts there that really make a room great.”

But the choice isn’t always cost-prohibitive on one hand—and Cost Plus on the other. Customized items can actually be a way to salvage decimated design budgets. Dessaules, for example, customized drapes for a recent client whose master bedroom was surrounded by windows. “We wanted to maintain the view and the budget, so I purchased some nearly perfect grommet draperies that just needed a little ‘tummy tuck’ to remove something from the midsection. The final result is custom, tailored, and inexpensive,” he says.

Form Design is going custom with every single piece of furniture for clients who are renovating a barn in Vermont. “We went with the clients to Holly Hunt and picked out all this extraordinary stuff and then realized that it was four or more times what the budget was for the home—we’re talking a single sofa for \$15,000 or so,” says Kalichstein. “The group of people who can still afford that and not worry about it is shrinking. Right now people, whether or not they can afford it, don’t want to spend that cash. So in this case we’re custom-making every single piece of furniture because it’s cheaper—in some cases by 70 percent.”

Kalichstein and Rose work with a variety of custom builders in Los Angeles, ranging from the very pricey but beautiful William Stranger to the more affordable Room Service, which “is not going to last a lifetime, but for the price is pretty great,” according to Kalichstein, who adds that he and Rose use Room Service for “modern/midcentury/Palm Springs-inspired pieces.” For a truly over-the-top, personalized experience, DCS/Argent Custom Furniture is Form’s custom builder of choice. “They can help with ‘value engineering’ when budget is an issue, but they specialize in making your dreams come true, which does have a price,” says Kalichstein.

While there are bargain-basement custom builders out there, Dessaules cautions against having just anyone with a hammer and an upholstery gun attempt your dream sofa. Sure, he says, “there’s a custom upholstery shop on every corner, right next to the rug shop. But the key is getting it done right the first time so you’re not spending time and money trying to fix the mistakes. People sometimes spend so much time trying to get this look for less and they get it and it just looks cheap,” he adds. “It’s all about the details.”

No matter how they go about it, the mandate for each designer is the same: Deliver the level of luxury their clients are accustomed to, for far less money. After all, Angelenos aren’t about to go around flaunting their newly shrunken budgets. As Dessaules puts it, “This is L.A.—even if you don’t have the money, you don’t necessarily want everyone

...THE RADAR SCOOP knowing it.”
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