

# Is a Career in Interior Decorating Right for You



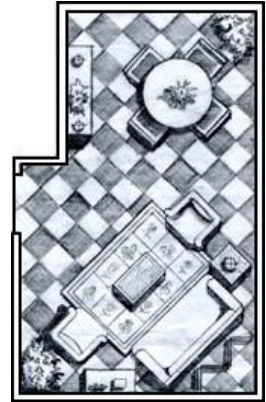
By Kimberly Merritt  
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## Introduction

I love to nest. The idea of creating a home and making a space beautiful is something I was born to do. I find great joy in creating warm, comfortable and inviting rooms. I often joke with students that I was born with a house-shaped gene that compels me to create any chance I get. I love to see their faces light up when they realize they must have been born with that gene too!

There's a reason shows on HGTV, the Learning Channel and the DIY network are so popular. HGTV has more than 86 million viewers alone and the numbers grow each and every day. There are people out there just like you who love everything to do with home. They want to learn it, live it and breath it all in.

However, long before HGTV became a cable channel back in 1994, interior decoration had been in existence for more than 2000 years. The Romans used decorative artifacts in both public and private spaces. Architecture itself is an art form that through the years has inspired the exterior and interior of buildings and homes throughout history.



In more recent years, home improvement shows such as This Old House with host Bob Vila burst on the scene and shared airtime with funky cooking shows making the public broadcasting channel the must-see TV of 1979. We watched as old, tired spaces became renewed and lovingly restored with hope that we too could improve our homes and in essence our lives just by tuning in.

Love her or hate her, you have to give Martha Stewart a big round of applause for bringing the art of home back into the forefront after a long rest. Women of the 60's spent so much time trying to run from all that "home" embodied, that the homemakers of that time faded into the background as more and more women went to work. Ms. Stewart reinvented the image of homemaker into something not only useful, but essential in today's world.

Throughout time, our environment became, and still is, an important part of our mental and physical wellbeing, and although I know I'm not curing cancer, I offer a beneficial service that can easily cure what ails you.

I worked on the redesign of a home with my associate Donna in the fall of 2006. This family of four needed my help to redesign several rooms. Their oldest daughter suffered from night terrors and her bedroom was tops on the list that day. A quick reorganization and rearrangement paired with a few minor purchases, Donna and I were able to turn her room into a fun, welcoming and comfortable space. Not only was the family thrilled with the results, but their daughter spent her first night sleeping peacefully alone in her room. But that's not all. I received an email not too long ago letting me know that one year later, she still sleeps in her room and hasn't had an episode since.

This story is just one of the many reasons I love my job. I bring beauty and comfort into so many homes. Sometimes it just makes people smile, and other times it literally changes their lives.

## Outlook

According to the U.S. Economic Census (last published in 2002) there were 11,295 interior design companies and 38,912 interior designers/decorators across the US with continued growth expected as we move into the year 2010 and beyond.\*

Approximately 26 percent were self-employed and 25 percent of interior designers worked in specialized design services. The rest of the interior designers provided design services in architectural and landscape architectural services, furniture and home-furnishing stores, building material and supplies dealers, and

residential building construction companies. Many interior designers also performed freelance work in addition to holding a salaried job in interior design or another occupation.\*

Employment of interior designers is expected to grow 19 percent from 2006 to 2016, faster than average for all occupations. Economic expansion, growing homeowner wealth, and an increasing interest in interior design will increase demand for designers. \*

**In 2006 there were more than 72,000 people employed in the field of design and that number is expected to jump to 86,000 in 2016. \***

Women comprise the largest market segment making most of the home improvement decisions. New home buyers spend nearly \$3,700 on average to buy furniture and window treatments and those who move into brand new homes spend an average of \$8,905 on furnishing, decorating and improving their home. Most notably in 2005, the Home Improvement Research Institute noted that 52% of home owners spent an average of \$4,900 on home improvements.

The art of home is big business. The general public is in need of home decorating services more than ever before and because more and more consumers have learned all they can by watching home improvement shows, they will look to interior decorators to help guide them in the right direction and less to traditional interior designers.

The specialized fields of interior redesign and home staging continue to rise along with conventional interior decorating services and more and more trained interior designers are adding decorating consulting, redesign and staging to their list of services.

Both elder related services and green design methods continue to grow with amazing speed. The Baby Boom generation is retiring and downsizing to smaller homes or moving into retirement communities. That's a lot of houses that need attention and a lot of furniture that needs to find a home.

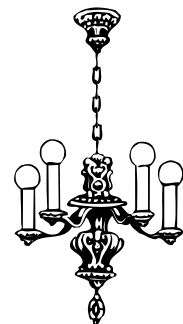
Green\* design methods have jumped into the mainstream market the past few years. Although green design methods have been around for a while now, the ever increasing need to rethink the way we use resources today has made green design products and services more popular than ever.

*\*Green design - Sustainable design (also referred to as "green design", "eco-design", or "design for environment") is the art of designing physical objects and the built environment to comply with the principles of economic, social, and ecological sustainability. The essential aim of sustainable design is to produce places, products and services in a way that reduces use of non-renewable resources, minimizes environmental impact, and relates people with the natural environment. Source: Wikipedia*

## Definition

Although many people TiVo their favorite decorating programs and sit glued to the screen ready to learn all they can, they're not ready to tackle projects on their own. That's why they hire interior decorators.

Unlike conventional interior design, which deals with structural changes and building codes, a decorator handles the cosmetic changes or improvements of a space. An interior decorator can be just as talented and skilled as an interior designer, but it's important that you understand the difference. *See licensing requirements in Education below.*



The world of design encompasses many definitions and branches. As an interior decorator you have the option of specializing in fields such as residential or commercial, redesign or staging. You could stylize windows or storefronts, create floor plans and shop for, or with, clients. You can work in hotels, spas and restaurants. You can even offer accessory placement and consulting services – the possibilities are endless. Any space that is in need of a little TLC is in need of a decorator.

Your job may include finding the perfect paint color for one room or several rooms, rearranging or purchasing furniture, shopping, accessorizing and consulting on a variety of design-related issues. You may stylize an event or party, work with children's rooms or in retirement homes. For as many jobs an interior decorator might be hired for, there are just as many facets (or niches) you can specialize in.

Interior decorators are problem solvers. If a room is not arranged properly, it isn't going to work. From there you can determine any additional elements that may be needed. We solve little problems and big problems with a discerning eye and lots of creativity. Your ultimate goal is to create functional, attractive and comfortable rooms for the client's who have hired you.

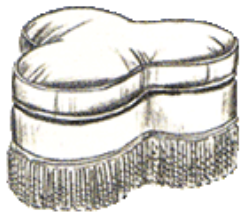
Interior decorators can work with a client by the hour consulting on paint color and furniture arrangement, or as a soup-to-nuts project director and/or stylist. He or she has the freedom to offer a variety of services and can work alongside contractors, architects, interior designers and other interior decorators. There is no cookie-cutter description that might fence you in, allowing you tremendous freedom to work on a variety of jobs at once.

You may opt to work with clients for a couple of hours outlining a decorating plan they can implement themselves or investing your time and energy in a project that may last years. For me, a client is hopefully a client for life and I can help them now and with future projects both big and small.

As a "designer", I sit on both sides of the fence. But I have to admit, I love decorating a room more than any other part of design – I get to work with the fun stuff. My absolute favorite part of decorating is adding those final details and embellishments that help complete a room.

## Specialized Design Services

### Interior Redesign



One of the most rewarding parts of being an interior decorator is the one-day (or one week – depending on the project) service I offer called interior redesign. It doesn't matter what kind of budget my client has, I know I can work magic in one day or less just by rearranging the furniture. Not every job requires throwing the baby out with the bath water. Most of the time, I can work with what's already there regardless if I'm hired to start from scratch or not. In fact, I often save my clients money by simply reworking the arrangement of the room and repurposing items I find throughout the home. Before I begin any project, I talk with my clients

about what I can keep before one more step is taken whether I've been hired as a "redesigner" or a "decorator".

People often get stuck with the idea that a particular piece of furniture has to be used in a certain room in a certain way. I'm able to help them break free of pre-conceived ideas and create rooms that come alive. This also works well with couples who bring their own sense of style (*Her French Empire sofa; his wagon wheel coffee table.*) and their own separate households full of furniture together.

Interior redesign is often a perfect solution for anyone who is working within a small budget and/or wants to make changes gradually. In fact, I will put together projects by outlining different phases the home will go through starting with a redesign and outlining purchases for the near future and in years to come. I am

able to take a young couple from a post-dorm look to a stylish pad for very little money. Then once they're ready, we can continue to upgrade furnishings and add any additional elements to their home as their family grows and they experience life's little changes.

Interior redesign is also a great green design solution. Because we re-use and re-purpose items, we're not taxing environmental resources by reducing the amount of things we need to buy and the process in which they are manufactured.

Because I feel interior redesign is a *facet* of interior decorating, it goes hand-in-hand with any decorating service you may offer. In fact, most of my projects include one form of interior redesign or another.

*P.S. – No it's not as easy as it looks on "Trading Spaces", "Design on a Dime" or "Sell This House". I can't repaint walls, rearrange furniture and shop in 30 minutes! Please understand these shows are meant to entertain us as well as educate us. (I don't think networks are ready for a week-long or month-long show just yet!)*

### **Home Staging**

Home staging (real estate staging) is a *facet* of interior redesign, so if you can redesign, you can stage. Contrary to what you might have learned already, staging is more than de-cluttering, de-personalizing and cleaning a home. It takes a combination of marketing and decorating to sell homes.

The way I explain the difference is simply stating that when I redesign or decorate a home, I am decorating for the client, when I stage a home, I am decorating for the house. In other words, I'm hired to make the bones of the house (the architecture and overall style) look its best and that takes a fair amount of decorating ability.

In most cases, staging a home requires that you remove a good amount of "stuff" from each space and then create an inviting home with everything that's left. Anytime I can re-use, re-purpose or re-design the contents of a home I'm about to stage, I do. Slipcovers and pretty pillows can do wonders without having to get rid of the sofa, but sometimes that's a necessary step in the process.

You may need to replace a piece of furniture by renting or purchasing something new, recommend and/or contract painters to repaint walls, and push and pull furniture around to emphasize architectural features and open up the floor plan.



Not only can you stage a home to sell, but you can offer other services related to both interior redesign and home staging such as downsizing, combining or blending households, and move-ins.

My job is to create a warm, friendly and attractive space so that the potential buyer wants to linger longer and make an offer. No one wants to move into an ugly, crowded or messy home.

*According to an HGTV survey, 61% of people who attend open houses aren't in the market for a home, they're looking for decorating and landscaping tips!*

### **Color Consulting**

Color is also big business these days. Years ago, clients were afraid of color, but that's all changed with the variety of color information, products and services now available. (Thanks in part to HGTV once again.)

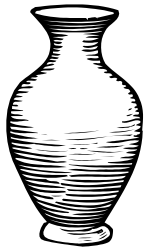
The Color Marketing Group (CMG) forecasts color trends and promotes color education to the industry. They predict future color trends and select color palettes for a variety of manufactured goods including home design products.

Paint manufacturers watch these trends and create additional products for both the general public and design professionals. They work closely with the home décor market and partner with interior decorators to help sell their product which in turn allows us to use their products to introduce color into our client's homes.

Color consulting is a service that can be combined with a variety of interior decorating services or offered on its own. In fact, I provide color consults as a separate service and allow the client to choose from one-room to whole house color packages. Color consulting is also a great way to get your foot in the door so you can offer additional services to clients who may have just called you to help choose a paint color for their living room.

### **Feng Shui**

The ancient art of Feng Shui has been around for more than 5,000 years. Feng Shui is the Chinese art of interior placement and translates literally into "wind and water". It is used to help balance the elements of nature which in turn infuses energy ("Chi") which flows into everyone and everything including our homes.



I always explain that good interior decorating and Feng Shui have a lot in common. They both exist to create balance. Having learned a bit more through the years, I now understand that there are many forms or "schools" of teaching that not everyone is in agreement with. Some people have studied this art form for years before becoming a "master" of Feng Shui and many people feel that you must commit to becoming a student for life there is so much to learn.

Having a basic understanding of Feng Shui can be helpful and depending on where you live, and the popularity or need for Feng Shui services, will determine how much education you may need.

### **Client Needs**

Some people want to hire an interior decorator because they're tired of their furnishings or they want to create a whole new look. They may have retired, sent their last child off to school or have taken up a new hobby and need a room to reflect their new lifestyle.

Sometimes people need to hire a decorator simply because they don't know how to make their rooms work. Many people acquire a good percentage of their furniture from family members and/or have a collection of old and new furnishings they're not quite sure what to do with or how to blend the old with the new and combine styles and colors.

It doesn't matter what facet of decorating you offer; it's all about the client. You cannot be a successful decorator if you don't involve your client in the project from beginning to end. It's your job to create a functional and beautiful plan based on your client's needs and no one else's. Yes, that's right – function is your number one priority when working with clients. If it doesn't work for them or the room, it just doesn't work, no matter how beautiful it may be.

Your client therefore becomes your "boss". Every new job you take on is like getting hired all over again. You need to be able to work with a variety of personalities and help translate your client's ideas into solutions. Interior decorators must engage the senses and heighten the client's enthusiasm through communication and visual aides. Because there is no tangible product to buy, you must help your client's define their taste, listen to their needs and adapt your vision to help them succeed.

In order to do this properly, the number one skill you need to master is the art of listening. Let them do the talking and you will gain the knowledge necessary to do your job well. Whenever I consult with a client –

no matter how small the job is – I let them do the talking first. Once you get a bit of information, you can then guide them with pointed questions and visual aids that will move the project into the next phase; the solution.

You also don't have to be skilled in CAD or draw like an artist in order to present ideas to your clients. There are many tools and aids available to give them the visual clues they need in order to make good decisions. As long as you present your ideas in a clear and professional manner, you're good to go.

## **Service vs. Product**

Today's interior decorator is not restricted to trade-only resources. Savvy decorators are educating their clients about the real-life services they provide which extend far beyond sales. Many firms are offering strictly service fees for the do-it-yourselfer and the person who needs a solid design direction. Others are offering the combination of service and product by acquiring their wares outside the walls of conventional design centers and trade resources.



The decorating consult is a viable and sought after service that more and more people are utilizing. Today's consumer understands design better than ever before and are looking for decorators who can help pull it all together and guide them in the right direction.

## **Trade vs. Retail**

Of course one of the benefits of working in the design business is your ability to buy merchandise at trade prices. Trade resources allow you to buy at cost and from a variety of outlets you can find in design centers throughout the country. Although many design centers cater to the top 1% of the population, there are many secondary design centers that offer both high-end and moderately priced furnishings to choose from. And though many centers do require minimum orders, there are an equal if not greater amount of centers that are small design firm friendly where you can purchase just one or two items at a time.

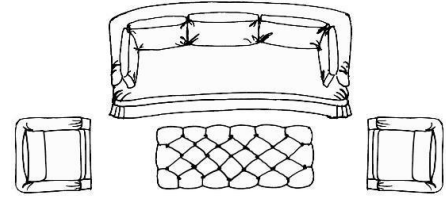
However, some decorators have turned toward the retail world to provide clients with everything from window treatments to tchotchkes. Quality furniture and design products are now available to the everyman and this trend is only growing. Today's decorating professional now receives discounts from a variety of retail outlets making the thrill of the hunt that much sweeter and more accessible to small decorating firms.

As you've probably noticed, big name designers such as Victoria Hagen are now offering designer items en masse in retail chains. Good design has gone mainstream and can be found just around the corner and at a price we can afford. After all, good design doesn't have to be expensive.

Scouting for beautiful things will lead you to antique shops, flea markets and even tag sales. As long as the quality of the item fits your client's budget and décor, it doesn't matter where you acquire your wares.

## Education

So what does it really take? If you decide that interior design is something you'd like to pursue, it is necessary to acquire a degree in interior design and pass a licensing exam. In fact, 25 US states require licensing in order for you to practice as an interior designer.



As an interior decorator you don't need a degree in interior design, but you do need to seek out some form of education that will equip you with the necessary skills to do your job well. Although there is no standard decorator training, it is wise to seek out schools or programs that offer you the best education you can find. You should be able to plan space, work with color, pattern, texture, lighting, art and accessories. Do your research and find the program that works for you.

Train your eye. I'm sure you've already started a Style File of your own, but if you haven't, start tearing magazine pictures and collecting snippets of color cards and fabrics to get a sense of what design is all about. Visit show houses, museums, favorite restaurants and any other place that makes you *feel* good and looks beautiful.

Practice makes perfect. Your home is your laboratory so go ahead and move the furniture, paint the walls and create vignettes often. *(Please tell your significant other ahead of time so they don't trip over furniture in the middle of the night!)* Now spread your wings and offer your advice or council to receptive family and friends so you can understand how to decorate for others. Decorating for a friendly face is your first experience in dealing with 'the client', so you can learn how to translate ideas into real rooms.

Classes on color, space planning and textiles are a great introduction into the world of decorating. You can find many design related classes at your local college or high school continuing education department. There are even many online courses that offer certificates in interior decorating. Because decorating is such a visual medium, make sure you'll receive enough pictures – either in book format or online – that support the information you're learning about.

Remember you never stop learning. Be prepared to continue your education throughout your career. Seek out organizations or associations that not only support you as a decorator but offer additional benefits such as industry discounts, additional educational resources and exposure for you and your business.

## Business by Design

If you're thinking of going into business for yourself, a solid business program (design related if possible) or taking a variety of business courses is a must. *(Something they don't teach you in design school.)* As a first-time student, the idea is that once you've completed your education, you would work for a company that teaches you the ropes. But if you're contemplating changing careers and you want to work on your own, then you'll need to know how to open and operate a business.

An interior decorating business is relatively easy to start and operate. Because you work in your client's homes, you won't need to rent office space or house your business anywhere other than a spare room (or corner) of your home. Even as you grow, you may never need to move out of your home office which keeps your overhead low and allows for bigger profits. In order to protect you and your business, there are a few things you need to have such as the proper licensing and insurance as well.

You can begin a career in interior decorating by working either part-time or full-time. As a mother of three, that meant I was able to adjust my schedule by seeing clients in the evenings and on weekends, so I could still be *Mom* and attend sporting and school events.

And even though having a business in interior decorating means you get to do something you love, it's still a business. Be honest with yourself. You are no doubt going to be good at different aspects of running this type of business and not so good at others. Write down your strengths and weaknesses and then decide if this is something you can do on your own or with help from others.

If you are a self-starter, personable, organized, flexible and creative and just LOVE interior decorating, this may be the career choice for you! In fact, interior decorating is a great second or even third career.

Gone are the days of gold watches and retirement plans after working 40 years for the same company. More and more people are working in two or more different industries (slash careers) in pursuit of greater satisfaction and balance in their lives.

*Slash careers allow you to work in related and non-related fields, so you have the opportunity to do many of the things you love. I am a designer/educator/writer for instance. Other interesting combinations include school teacher/fashion model and real estate broker/art consultant/yoga instructor. In fact, according to her book, One Person, Multiple Careers, author Marci Alboher writes that a person who takes on a variety of careers is both happier and healthier.*

## A Day in the Life (just for fun)

There are many things I love about being a decorator and one of them is that no two days are ever the same. This works well in my world of pick up the kids, write an article, select paint colors and move furniture – not necessarily in that order! You might find me doodling in my notebook while waiting for a delivery or my children or because inspiration has struck at the most odd time. You may find me at my computer researching an article, typing a summary for a client or shopping for products. You may also find me rolling up carpets, moving an armoire and always looking for my tape measure! (*I swear it has legs!*) This is what I love. The energy from one part of my job feeds into the other.



Here's a small peak into my world...

- Wake up sometime in the early morning. (*I'm not a morning person, so this is the most painful part of my day.*)
- 7:30 a.m. – Check email, respond to some and make notes of others. Check voicemail for late night calls from the previous day.
- 8:30 a.m. – On the road to the studio or client house depending on the day. Today I was off to the fabric store.
- 9:00 – Client file in hand, I look through books and racks to find just the right complement to existing fabrics in my file. Of course I get a wee bit side-tracked and find a fabric that I must have and ask the clerk to cut a decorator sample for my personal file.
- 9:45 – Fabric is selected and ordered. This part of the project is complete, so I put away this client's file and open another.
- 10:30 – New client meeting. I greet Ms. Homeowner and chat about her answers to my questionnaire. (Sent one week before the appointment.) I tour her home and pay close attention to the rooms I'll be working in letting her do most of the talking.

- 11:30 – I return to the studio and make additional notes to my new client’s folder, immediately pull out paint fan decks and make my initial selections and then record these in my notes. I then order larger samples from the paint company and have one copy shipped directly to my client and several shipped to the studio. Phase one is now complete.
- 12:15 – Time for lunch. I run out for a quick bite with a colleague and we chat about design ideas while trying to eat healthy!
- 1:00 – Back in the studio to exchange files for the next day. I check supplies and order additional materials for an upcoming class. I select several fabrics from the shelf and start putting together ideas for my new project and existing projects. I research suppliers and pick and choose the ones that will help the most. I do an initial search online for merchandise and schedule a shopping day to see things in person.
- 2:15 – Round one of school pick-ups.
- 2:30 – Back in my home office, I sit down to begin the summary for my new client and make additional notes to summaries for existing clients. I check email and phone messages again and return any calls or messages. I spend the next two hours researching products and making notes.
- 5:00 – Time for a stretch and a bit of inspiration. I open my own Style File and dream away. I often get ideas for client projects, my newsletter or articles when I least expect it, so I have a notebook handy. Family time begins.
- 7:00 – I wrap up anything left undone and prepare for the next day. Sometimes this is my writing time or planning time depending on my mood and if I can put two words together or not. Then it’s time to crash until tomorrow. Design shows on HGTV will have to wait for another day. Redesign scheduled for tomorrow.

## **Passion**

The single most important trait you need to succeed in this business is passion. It’s true when they say “do something you love and the money will follow.” If you are passionate about creating beautiful spaces and look at each day as a chance to do something fresh and new, you’re on the right path. It’s obvious that I am passionate about my job. And although not everyday is as simple as the one I’ve recorded for you above, I look at each day as an opportunity to do something I’ve never done before. I’m inspired by my surroundings and burst with new ideas each and every day that I just can’t wait to share with my clients or my students.

If you have found your passion too, then go forward and embrace the new world that lies ahead. Think big, then dream huge.

## **About the Author**

On a personal note...“When I started decorating, I received a great deal of joy from encouraging people to create and trust in their style. Now eighteen years later, I get to empower men and women to embark on a new career; one that has fulfilled so many dreams of my own.”

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Kimberly Merritt has been making spaces beautiful for eighteen years. She is a designer, educator and writer whose words and work have been featured regionally and nationally in New Hampshire Magazine, New England Home Magazine and HGTV.

She teaches the art of interior decorating, interior redesign, home staging and color from her southern New Hampshire design studio. She is the creator of the Certified Decorating Professional® programs and offers both certified and certificate courses as well as decorating workshops and classes.

She invites you to subscribe to her monthly e-newsletter – Ideas & Inspiration – by visiting her website <http://BeautifulLivingStyle.com>

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<http://AcademyofDesignandDecorating.com>

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\*Sources – U.S. Department of Labor. The U.S. Economic Census findings are published every five years. 2007 statistics will be available February, 2008.

### **WAIT! THERE'S MORE...**

#### **You May Also be Interested In**

##### ***Business by Design* Teleseminar**

In conjunction with our **Is a Career in Interior Decorating Right for You** eBook, the teleseminar will allow you to ask Kimberly questions about interior decorating and the business of design.

Our FREE Business by Design teleseminar is scheduled throughout the year. Please visit the website or contact us for more information.

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