

ISSUE 4 | 2014

SD DESIGN

The Official ASID CA San Diego Magazine



The Kitchen and Bath Edition

AMERICAN
SOCIETY OF
INTERIOR
DESIGNERS



CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

You Want It Done By When?

Tips for successfully managing fast-track projects

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All photos in this article by Gail Owens

We have all had clients who want their project completed in an insanely short amount of time. Unfortunately, I am one of those designers who hates to say “no.” I know I am not alone in this, as it has caused many of us crazed days and sleepless nights, followed by the promise to never, ever do THAT again. This scenario has happened frequently enough that I am determined to figure out a way to say yes, without losing what’s left of my mind. Sure, I could just learn to say “no,” but I recognize that just may be impossible.

A Case in Point

Recently, I had the opportunity to take on a dream project for my design firm. A lovely family was in the process of purchasing a gorgeous, large home on the ocean. Before they moved in, they wanted to remodel all five bathrooms, freshen the kitchen, paint every nook and cranny, as well as “update all the hardware, lighting, windows, and other little items like that.” The home has amazing natural light, interesting architectural details, and a boatload of possibilities. I was giddy with excitement. The excitement turned to panic when

they said they would like all this done so they could move in two months. Gulp.

I knew two months was not *impossible*, but everything had to run perfectly to meet the deadline. Decision time—do I take this project or let it pass.

First, I weighed the pros:

- Would be a great project for my portfolio
- Could provide some excellent marketing opportunities of the finished design
- It would be lucrative

Then I looked at the cons:

- I would have to delay other projects in order to give this one the attention it needs
- I may alienate my existing clients or potential new clients
- I may not sleep for eight weeks

I love a challenge (sigh), so I said yes, recognizing that in two months time I may be saying, “I will never do THAT again!”

This project took me on an emotional roller coaster from giddy excitement to panic to exhaustion to absolute delight with the process and the results.

called for a light version and a dark version of the same tile on two different walls. The tile setter missed that note on the drawings, and put the same color on the walls. By being there that day, we were able to make the correction before too much of the work was done. When the client stopped by and noticed the mistake, we were able to tell her we already caught it and had a plan to fix it that would not delay the project.

The homeowner stopped by almost daily. She got to know the team working on her home, and they got to know her. I believe this greatly helped positive morale on the project, and gave us all a clear goal of why we were doing the work. We all wanted to make her happy and create a fantastic home for the family.

Step Five: Be ready for changes

Just like most projects, we had the famous words come up... "while we are at it..." During one of her visits, the homeowner said she was thinking about updating the fireplace surrounds and built-ins. Since the GC, and I were both on site, we were able to discuss budget and timeframe implications so she could make a good decision. She decided to extend the move-in date by two weeks and increase the budget to make the fireplace changes. Now I just had to design some custom cabinetry—fast.

Out of necessity, I had to rely on new vendors since some of my tried-and-true ones were not able to meet the deadline. Fortunately the new vendors did a fantastic job in both the work and in their professionalism. I have new, great folks on the install team.

This project took me on an emotional roller coaster from giddy excitement to panic to exhaustion to absolute delight with the process and the results. I am much more likely to take on fast-track projects now that I have experience in how to deliver them effectively and an incredible team with whom I can partner.

Final thoughts

My company received all the benefits from the original pros list, as well as some unforeseen perks. The design student turned out to be a valuable asset, and we are going to continue working together. I realized what an incredible benefit it is to have a product/project manager and someone to help with drawings so a new draftsman, who also acts as a project manager, has joined my company. I can now focus on getting new business and designing, hopefully at a more normal pace.

