

What these 4 designers learned from their very first client

By Fred Nicolaus



Tasteful furnishings and layered artistic detail come together in this living room by Kate Taylor. Courtesy of Kate Taylor Interiors

THE BIRD LADY

Chicago-based designer **Kate Taylor** tells the story about her unusual first client, who came from another designer's rejection list.

I have always been in design, but I didn't start my own firm right away. After design school, I had a job with **Baker Furniture**. I worked for **Nate Berkus** for a long time, and then I lived in New York for five years before I made my way back to Chicago. Suddenly we were in a less expensive city, and it was like, "This is the time—let's take the plunge!"

I had a good network in Chicago, so I started reaching out and letting people know I was starting a firm. One of my first clients I got through another designer; I had asked her to send any projects she wasn't interested in my way. So the first client I got was one that she had been smart enough to say no to—though, to be fair, I don't think she knew what I was in for.

The client had a two-bedroom apartment, and initially she described the project as a refresh because she was thinking of selling it. But when I got there, I quickly discovered that there was another problem, which was that her apartment was full of birds. I'm not totally sure how many there were—it's possible that she fostered birds, if that's a thing people do? But there were around 10 of them, and they weren't always in cages.

The project quickly turned into organizing her bird situation, consolidating all the cages into one room, which freed up the other areas of the house. We painted a little and organized things; it wasn't so much a traditional interior design project as a space-planning job. Whatever it was, it was stressful. I'm not an animal person, and the birds were loud and smelly. There were always things moving in the background, and sometimes a bird would land nearby and startle me.

I stuck with it because she was my only client at the time, but eventually I did end the relationship—not just because of the birds! She had my cell phone number, which meant phone calls and text messages, and she sent lots of emails, continually asking me to come back and tweak things, but then not wanting to pay for my time. It taught me a lot about **setting boundaries** with my clients and what red flags to look for—and for me, a house full of birds is one of them! —

Kate Taylor



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good attorney, and probably thought, "Kelly's going to attack this with the same gusto she did a big trial." She knew I would get it done.

Lawyers were the people I knew who had money—that's my network of people with disposable income. They're not the Rockefellers, but somebody I hired at my old firm is now in the process of building a \$3 million home. I try to tell young designers who are coming up: This is a luxury service; it's helpful to know people who can afford it. —Kelly Finley

THE FACEBOOK FRIEND
Austin, Texas-based designer **Sara Malek Barney** of **Bannd Design** shares how a social media encounter led to her first client.

I was in the entertainment industry for a long time, but I had always wanted to do my own thing. The problem was, I didn't quite know what that meant. Then in 2016, I woke up one morning and had a lightbulb moment: "What if it's interior design?" So I started to take classes on the side, working toward getting a degree in design. As I was nearing the end of my time in school, I started to see these leads popping up on Facebook in neighborhood groups here in Austin. In one that was dedicated to buying and selling vintage furniture, people would post: "Does anyone have a recommendation on a great interior designer?" I started to reply, "Well, me?" Because you're interacting with people who you probably have Facebook friends in common with, there's a little bit of built-in trust there. I got my first project through a post like that.

The client was a woman who had recently bought a new house. I had absolutely no idea how to say what my services were or how to charge, but I threw out a number as a flat rate and then ran to tell my husband. "She accepted! All these thousands of dollars and she said yes!" And he was like, "Great, but you're going to need a lot of these to add up to a salary." That was a real learning moment.

The project itself was also a learning experience. I went shopping with that client all the time, but she never really wanted to hear anything I brought to the table; she mainly wanted me to say, "Yeah, that's cute!" She was also buying a lot of things secondhand—which, looking back, makes total sense because she found me on a secondhand furniture Facebook group.

Toward the end of the project, she tried to change things up, saying, "So, you'll go shopping and bring me stuff, and if I don't like it, I'll return it—and you're not going to charge me for that, right?" I replied that I would charge for that, and after that we parted ways. What I learned is to only take on clients who trust what we do and value

the process—not someone looking for a personal shopper or a buddy to OK their ideas. I don't look on Facebook groups for work anymore, but it wasn't a bad place to get started. And funnily enough, that original client has kept recommending me to people over the years! —Sara Malek Barney

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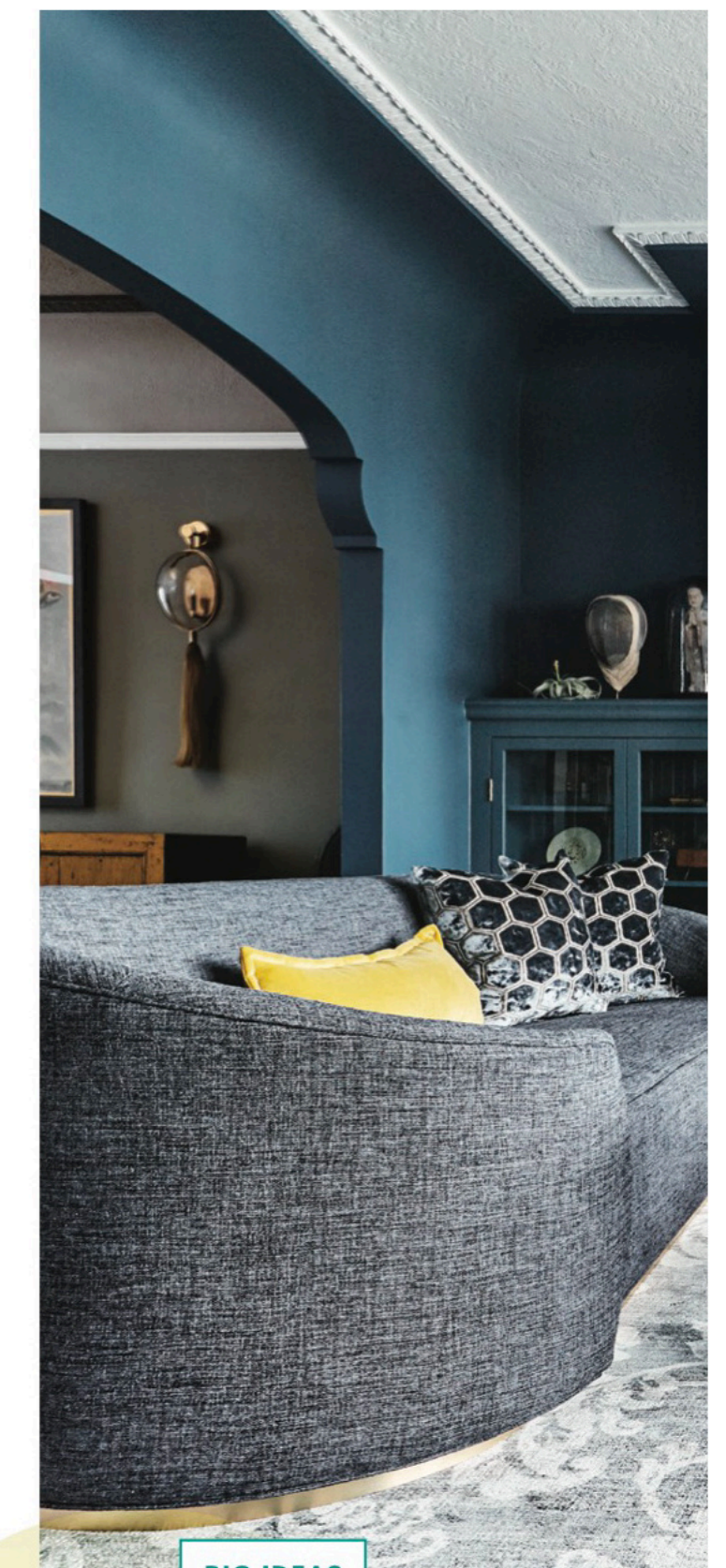
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BIG IDEAS

The Price is Right

Designer Noz Nozawa makes a convincing case for dispensing with the mystery surrounding industry pricing—and with the notion that design is a zero-sum game.

BY MARINA FELIX