

Democratic Design: First Encounter

From the seminar **The Reveal**

By Leslie Hart-Davidson, Allied Educator ASID, Member + Presenter NKBA

As I took on more custom sewing projects during my days off, I started to build a rapport with the clients whose homes the designers from Stickley would send me to for installation. While there, the clients would sometimes ask me other décor related questions. “I know that Carol sold us the furniture and the accessories, but can I ask your professional opinion about this other room while you’re here?” Helping those folks with their spaces reminded me of my days at Bowling Green in both the costume shop and in my design classes when I’d fret over tiny details that would make every project special. My suggestions were always off the top of my head and super creative, making the clients both very happy and very willing to refer me to their friends and neighbors.



The referral for my own first big-girl client without Stickley involvement birthed my entire design philosophy. In the fall of 2001, I rang the doorbell of a lovely well-maintained home in an upscale neighborhood. A happy couple answered the door and invited me to step in the foyer. “We’re so happy you’re here!” the Mrs. Nash said. “Our neighbor Suzie said great things about you! Here, let me take your coat, honey.” Mr. Nash was welcoming as well. Looking over his shoulder to ensure his wife was out of ear shot, he bent his 6’5” frame close to my ear and whispered,

“You aren’t going to make my wife cry, are you?”

Startled, I straightened. “I wasn’t planning on it,” I replied with a wry grin. “Good,” Mr. Nash said. “We had a designer from the studio down the street come for a consult last week and he made her cry.” “Oh no! Was it Terry?” I inquired, wondering if the marginally talented, egotistical dictator who often shopped Stickley with his clients was the culprit. “Indeed,” Mr. Nash nodded.

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Leading me to the living room, Mr. Nash explained the concern. “Terry waltzed in like he owned the place looked down his nose at everything. He started pointing at all my wife’s furniture and dramatically yelled ‘That’s UGLY. That’s HIDEOUS! UGH! BURN THIS or I’m NOT working with you!!!’ So you can imagine that my wife was pretty upset, especially since all the pieces he pointed at were what she just inherited from her dead mother a few months ago.” “I’m so sorry you had a bad experience with that designer.” I told him. “I promise there will be no requests of burning anything tonight. Let’s figure out how to make you and Mrs. Nash love your space, ok?”

At that precise moment, something clicked. I was furious that the ego of that dick designer stood solidly in the way of their happiness. I didn’t want to be a designer for the glory of the next portfolio score like Mr. Ego; I wanted to be a designer who helped clients live better in their homes. To accomplish that, I had to embrace the idea that a client’s possessions held weight and importance. In the case of Mrs. Nash, it was all she had left of her mother, and I was determined to respect and appreciate those pieces as much as she did as we created the new design.

From that client interaction forward, I explained my philosophy this way: *design is a democracy, not a dictatorship.*

Reactions to that philosophy were fascinating. Clients would often say “Wait—you’re not just going to TELL me what to do? I get an opinion?” “You sure do! When I’m done with the design, I get to leave. You still live here. Therefore, you get a say!” The Stickley designers were skeptical. “You’re letting them have a say?” they’d ask. “That’s the idea of a democracy!” I replied. “Yeah...good luck with that.”

I didn’t need luck. Twenty successful years later, I’m still happily using my democratic design philosophy with every client, and the only time I make them cry is with tears of joy when viewing their new space for the first time.