

Residential Design

How to approach a home design project — from the first conversation to the final installation.

A GUIDE FROM HARMONY HOUSE

The Harmony House Guide to Residential Interior Design

A home design project is one of the most significant investments most people make — financially, temporally, and emotionally. Done well, it produces a home that holds its quality and its meaning for decades. Done poorly, it produces a beautiful set of renderings that turns into a series of compromises on the way to an underwhelming built reality. This guide addresses the decisions and principles that distinguish a successful residential project from an unsuccessful one.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This guide is organised around the decisions that most determine whether a residential interior design project succeeds. Each section addresses a distinct design consideration — the questions to ask, the trade-offs to understand, and the principles that guide our approach. Use it as a framework for your own project conversations.

01

Space Planning: Before the Aesthetics

The most common mistake in residential design is beginning with aesthetics — the palette, the furniture, the finishes — before the spatial strategy has been resolved. Aesthetics without a resolved spatial plan produce rooms that look good in photographs and feel wrong to live in. The sequence matters: space planning first, then material, then furnishing.

Space planning in a residential context means understanding how the household actually lives — how circulation flows through the home, where natural light arrives and at what hours, which rooms are used most and how, and how the spatial sequence of arrival through the home creates or undermines the emotional register of each room.

- Map actual daily circulation before fixing furniture layouts
 - Understand natural light: which rooms have morning light, which have afternoon
 - Identify the room's anchor object or focal point before furnishing around it
 - Resolve the entry experience — it sets the key for the entire home
 - Consider the sequence of spaces: compression and release, public and private, active and calm
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“The sequence matters: spatial strategy first, then material, then furnishing. Reversing the order produces beautiful photographs and difficult rooms.”

02

Scope: Whole-Home vs. Room-by-Room

Residential design commissions range from single-room renovations to whole-home commissions. The approach to each is genuinely different, and it is important to be honest about which kind of project you are undertaking before work begins.

A whole-home project requires thinking about the home as a composition — a sequence of experiences that affect each other. The dining room's mood will be heard differently depending on what came before it; the stairwell is an interlude between movements, not a utility. A room-by-room approach is necessarily more focused: what does this room need to accomplish, and how does it relate to the rooms it adjoins?

- Whole-home: establish a through-line (material palette, colour logic, hardware finish) before room-by-room design
- Room-by-room: define the relationship to adjacent spaces before designing in isolation
- Phased projects: establish the design direction fully before phasing the execution
- Full-service scope includes procurement and installation — understand what is and is not included
- Construction management is a separate scope item with significant value for complex projects

03

The Material Palette: Cohesion Over Variety

The single most common mistake in residential design is over-complexity in the material palette. A home with too many materials — too many tile patterns, too many wood tones, too many paint colours — reads as unsettled regardless of the quality of the individual choices. Cohesion is more powerful than variety, and restraint requires more design intelligence than abundance.

We recommend establishing a palette of five to seven materials that will carry through the entire home before specifying any single room. The same hardwood floor throughout the main level, the same hardware finish throughout, the same plaster texture on all walls — these consistencies create the sense of a home that has been considered holistically rather than assembled room by room.

- Establish a floor material hierarchy: one primary material, no more than two secondary
- Hardware finish: choose one metal family and hold to it throughout the home
- Paint palette: three to five colours maximum, all drawn from the same tonal family
- Tile: the bathroom and kitchen can carry their own tile logic, but should share a common sensibility
- Textiles: introduced as layers within the established palette, not as new palette entries

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04

Lighting Design: The Element Most Often Underinvested

Residential lighting is the design element most frequently underspecified and most consistently regretted. A home with beautiful materials and considered furniture, but a poorly designed lighting scheme, will feel flat, institutional, and joyless after dark. A home with modest materials and a well-designed lighting scheme will feel warm, layered, and genuinely pleasant to inhabit every evening.

The investment in a proper lighting plan — separate circuits, dimmers, layered fixtures that work together — is modest relative to the overall project cost and enormous relative to its daily impact. We consider it non-negotiable in any residential commission.

- Every room needs at least two light sources — never rely on a single overhead fixture
- Dimmers on every circuit: the cost is low, the daily benefit is high
- Table lamps and floor lamps are as important as hardwired fixtures — plan for them in the floor plan
- Warm white (2700K) for living, dining, and bedroom spaces; slightly cooler for kitchens
- The art light is one of the most cost-effective ways to elevate the perceived quality of a room

05

The Wet Rooms: Where Craft Is Most Exposed

Bathrooms and kitchens are the rooms where craft is most exposed and where the decisions made during the design phase are most permanent. A tile pattern installed incorrectly cannot be adjusted without demolition. A cabinet proportion that is slightly wrong will be seen every morning for twenty years. The precision required in these rooms justifies — and requires — a level of technical documentation that exceeds what other rooms demand.

We produce highly detailed technical drawings for all wet room specifications: tile layout drawings with dimensions, millwork elevations at every wall, plumbing fixture locations coordinated with tile patterns, and lighting reflected ceiling plans. These documents protect the design intent through the build process.

- Tile layout drawings are essential — specify where grout lines land relative to fixtures
- Millwork elevations at scale: every wall in the bathroom and kitchen should be drawn
- Coordinate plumbing fixture locations with tile patterns before rough-in
- Verify ceiling heights in wet rooms: standard heights can compromise the spatial quality significantly
- Waterproofing specification: this is not a detail to leave to the contractor

06

Working with a Full-Service Designer

Full-service interior design means something more specific than selecting finishes and furniture. It means taking responsibility for the design through the construction process — being present when decisions are made on site, reviewing shop drawings, coordinating between trades, and protecting the design intent at every stage of the build.

Clients who engage a designer for the concept phase only — and then hand the project to a contractor without ongoing design involvement — almost always receive a built result that diverges significantly from the approved design. The details where this drift occurs are often small individually; cumulatively, they change the character of the space.

- Understand what "full-service" includes: concept, documentation, procurement, and construction administration
- Construction administration is the phase where design intent is most at risk — and most worth protecting
- A designer on site at key construction milestones is not overhead — it is quality control
- Design fees should be understood relative to overall project cost: typically 10–20% is reasonable
- Ask specifically about what happens when the contractor substitutes a specified material — who decides?

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OUR WORK

Selected Projects

The following projects represent our applied work in this category. Each was approached as a unique design problem — shaped by the client, the site, the budget, and the brief. Visit harmony-house.com to see full photography.

Beck Road Residence

Bainbridge Island, Washington

A complete whole-home commission on Bainbridge Island — living spaces, kitchen, bar, dining room, stairwell, primary suite, three bathrooms, two offices, and the spatial sequence that connects them. Designed as a composition rather than a collection of rooms.

Tyler Estate

Tyler, Texas

A full-home interior design commission for a 15-room luxury residence in Texas — requiring a deliberate reconsideration of every Pacific Northwest design instinct in response to a different light, a different scale, and a different spatial vernacular.

Cheltenham House

Texas

A 5,000 square foot custom new construction home designed from the ground up — floor plan expansion in collaboration with the builder, custom millwork throughout, full specification from finishes to furnishings.

READY TO BEGIN?

Let's Talk About Your Project

Harmony House designs residential projects at every scale — from single-room renovations to full-home commissions and new construction. If you are planning a residential project and would like to discuss how we work, we would be glad to hear from you.

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