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Clients Who Want It All, and Designers Who Love Them



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DECOATING STARS Bunny Williams and Bill Stubbs at the Decoration & Design Building.

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By [JOYCE WADLER](#)

Bunny Williams and Bill Stubbs gave a talk to a room of designers as part of a lecture series at the Decoration & Design Building last week (sorry, like the swatches at Schumacher, which held the breakfast after, it was open to the trade only). And while the purported topic, according to Mr. Stubbs, a decorator based in Houston, was how to build a brand, the real subject was how to handle a difficult client.

"You have to decide. 'Is this sofa going to be the hill I'm going die on today?'" said Mr. Stubbs (shown above with Ms. Williams), who is such an enthusiastic and fun-loving fellow, he bounces. "If she's crazy about that red sofa, you have to be able to make it work."

Ms. Williams, a decorator who — as you would know if you had been invited — got her start with Albert Hadley and Sister Parish, provided the wry commentary to Mr. Stubbs's rollicking, dishy spritz: "One lesson I learned from Albert and Mrs. Parish, when you install a job, you install a job in one day, not a sofa one day, a lamp the next week. It never looks good until it is a whole. You always want to make magic, and the magic comes with finishing it." "With my upper-end kinds of projects," Mr. Stubbs added, "I put my clients up at the Four Seasons." It is rather moving to see genuine awe descend upon a room of sophisticated New Yorkers, Ms. Williams included.

"I don't do that," she said.

"I used to work at the Four Seasons," Mr. Stubbs said. "The Four Seasons says 'yes' to everything and then figures out how to bill for it. You all go, 'Oooh, I'm not going to spend that kind of money.' Just figure out how to bill for it!"

"That sofa just got a little more expensive," Ms. Williams said.

Of course, when it comes to establishing the brand, both decorators are tops. Ms. Williams's fee for doing a house starts at about \$250,000; Mr. Stubbs is the host of the public television show "A Moment of Luxury" and, as he told the crowd, was involved in the design of a \$100-million plane. At the first meeting to discuss the project, he said, he informed the seven aeronautical engineers with whom he was working that he wanted to have an armoire near the door and hardwood floors. (By the way, he got them.)

The designers gazed upon the pair with the longing and appreciation a Victoria's Secret model might shoot at Melania Trump: *Oh, honey, you bagged it and you will never have to hail a taxi in the rain again.* When Mr. Stubbs told the crowd that having a TV show involved a financial burden "you don't want to know about," one could feel the unspoken response: *Oh, yes we do.* Mr. Stubbs, who is, after all, in the pleasing business, sensed it, too. "It costs us about \$2 million to produce each show," he said.

Not that the pair's brand-building advice was out of the stratosphere: For those who do not have the luxury of putting up a client at a hotel, they suggested coordinating delivery of all the furnishings on the same day, so that the client sees only the finished project. They also stressed the importance of documenting work with good photography and having good word of mouth. And Mr. Stubbs told of getting a job after accepting an invitation from a grouchy client who had a villa in the south of France, where Mr. Stubbs met "a big, muscular Russian guy in a Speedo" who kept demanding to see his "peectures."

"I'm thinking this guy doesn't want to see any pictures," Mr. Stubbs said. "But after three days, I show him the stuff, and he says, 'What eeccs this stuff?' *Trin. 'Eecc vccy nice trin, you do my friend's apartment in Moscow.'* If you do international work, banking instructions, that's the key. So I whipped out my banking instructions, and when I got back to Houston, \$100,000 had been transferred into my account."

Appreciative murmurs from the crowd.

"I did four apartments," Mr. Stubbs said. "Then I did the \$100-million plane."

Finally, it was time for a little Q & A. What do you do when the budget changes, a blond designer in the audience asked.

"I'm getting a plane to Kiev to get in the middle of a hot mess," Mr. Stubbs said. "Don't think it changes when you reach wherever; we still have these issues. I was dealing with the husband, about a lake house. The wife was focused on a new house they're building. He said she doesn't want to be involved. They want it finished April 1. Well, last week she went to the house — all the furniture has been ordered — and she sent a seven-page e-mail of the things she doesn't like. Everybody in my office is going, 'What are we going to do?' I said to them, we just have to figure out how to bill for this."

He continued: "I'm going to tell her, 'This is your house, you can have it any way you want, I'm here for you.' Then I'm going to go to the husband and say, 'This is what she wants, this is going to cost you another \$500,000.' I'm taking this negative to the bank."