

# THE HANDBOOK

## Lights, Camera, Action

Dreaming of displaying your design talents in front of the camera? Designers who made it big on the small screen get candid about what you need to know.

BY HALEY CHOUINARD



PHOTOGRAPHY: COURTESY OF DISCOVERY

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Carmeon Hamilton walks clients through their newly made-over rental unit on the set of *Reno My Rental*.

Whether it's the sugar high of celebrity or the practical appeal of licensing deals that may follow, many designers dream of landing their own television show. Others roll their eyes at the mere mention of HGTV—there's a perception, true or not, that high-quality design simply can't possibly happen on a TV-friendly timeline, and that home makeover shows have filled clients' heads with a whole host of unrealistic expectations.

For those who *are* eager to get in front of the camera—or who have ever been curious about the experience—BOH spoke to an array of designers with television experience about the realities behind the scenes, from getting scouted to designing on seemingly impossible timelines to capitalizing on a newfound level of notoriety.

### Cold Call

For most designers, the road to TV stardom was not premeditated—in fact, it often starts with a producer calling out of the blue. “For three weeks, we kept getting calls from a production company. I told my staff not to accept them because I assumed it was a scam,” says Springdale, Arkansas–based designer Chris Goddard, who appeared on HGTV’s *Design Star: Next Gen* in 2021. “Finally, my assistant looked up the producer and said, ‘No, this is real.’”

Two of Goddard’s fellow contestants on *Design Star*, Carmeon Hamilton and Justin Q. Williams, received similarly vague requests from producers. Hamilton was initially contacted over Instagram. “I figured it was spam and said, ‘No, thanks,’” she says. “But they were persistent and moved on to emails and phone calls. I agreed to a phone interview, which turned into three or four more calls. A part of me was like, This is overkill. But I’d been approached about TV opportunities in the past, and it had never gone as far as this seemed to be going, so I continued with it.”

During the calls, the designers were peppered with questions about their lives and careers, with discussions becoming more and more specific at each round. “It definitely seemed like the producer was getting feedback from higher up the chain and coming back to focus on certain things,” recalls Hamilton, who was asked about everything from how she describes her aesthetic to her biggest design pet peeve.



This deluge of calls all took place without the designers ever being told what exactly it was that they were being considered for. “The producers just kept saying that it was a show that would air on a major network,” says Goddard. “There wasn’t even a mention that it was a competition show until after we were selected.”

Cold calls have long been the first rung on the TV ladder, even in the early days of televised home makeovers. Designer and TV personality Nate Berkus got a similar request from Harpo Productions in 2001, relatively early in the genesis of design TV, asking him to do a home makeover

segment on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*—and with only a few days to prepare. “They wanted me to redo a small space in Boston, which meant I’d have to leave my office in Chicago that afternoon, and they also wanted me to bring my own team of contractors to do the work,” says Berkus. He asked for a half hour to consider the offer—one he knew would bring incredible exposure to his firm but also seemed like a completely unrealistic ask. “I called the producer back and said, ‘I would love to be a part of this, but I can’t leave this afternoon, and I can’t ask my tradespeople to walk off other jobs to make this happen.’” He suggested that they take a



Though his TV journey began more than two decades ago, Nate Berkus says the rush he gets from a TV reveal has never lessened. He has grown his TV presence into a family affair in recent years, cohosting programs like *The Nate & Jeremiah Home Project* and *Rock the Block* with his husband, fellow designer Jeremiah Brent.



beat and figure out a more practical timeline for the makeover, and that the production company reach out to big-box home improvement stores that could provide recommendations for local tradespeople. The producers were receptive to Berkus's suggestions, which kicked off a relationship that would last more than a decade and thrust the designer onto a national stage.

Who gets a design show? "There's a perception that, to be well known for design, you can either be a Miles Redd or a Kelly Wearstler, or else you're just plucked from obscurity and handed a TV show," says designer Brian Patrick Flynn, who began his career as a television producer and then set decorator before starting an interior design firm and landing hosting gigs on shows like HGTV's *Urban Oasis* and *Dream Home*. "In reality, there's a lot of variation between those two paths."

Getting tapped for a design show can sound very passive—a lot of waiting to be noticed, or for the phone to ring. But designers who have cracked the

code say that there are a few things you can do to position yourself: build a clearly defined brand, develop an engaged social media following and be authentic. Flynn, whose new show *Mind for Design* recently debuted on the Chip and Joanna Gaines-led Magnolia Network, says that the best way to get mass recognition—whether that's by landing a TV show or the cover of a magazine—is first to build a body of work that you're proud of. "The most important thing to me has always been that I'm taken seriously as a designer and that my name is synonymous with good design," says Flynn.

#### Business (Not Quite) as Usual

Filming a show requires some major adjustments: For designers who already have thriving firms, a TV gig means time away from their business. Filming a season of a show can take several months, so designers must either entrust their staff to handle existing projects while they're on set, or put those projects on hold for the duration of the shoot.

When filming *Design Star* last year, the contestants signed a contract agreeing to keep their appearance on the competition show under wraps, which meant they couldn't tell their clients exactly why they were going to be MIA for six weeks. "I joked at the time that my clients probably thought I was going to rehab or on some self-healing retreat because all I told them was that I was going to be in California for a few months working on a personal project," says Goddard. After shooting all day, Williams would go back to his hotel room and log on to his email to check in on his Atlanta-based design business. "I got a lot done before I left, and I rescheduled any installs that would've taken place while I was away," he recalls. "I made sure my clients weren't wanting for anything."

Hamilton, meanwhile, was a one-woman operation at the time, which meant there was no one she could delegate to while she filmed the show. "Once I found out I was cast, I did a mad blitz for my clients, getting as much done as I could," she says. "I put a note on my website essentially shutting down my availability and started a waitlist for new project inquiries. There were a few clients I had just signed that I ultimately had to refund because filming derailed the project's timeline. That was the hardest part."

*Design Star* was a competition, but shows often feature real projects in real clients' homes, which can add another layer of complexity to the equation. On Bravo's reality series *Million Dollar Decorators*, which aired from 2011 to 2013, five high-end California designers tackled their existing design projects while cameras followed them around, cinema vérité style. "I found that clients were, for the most part, eager to be featured," recalls Kathryn M. Ireland, one of the designers on the show. "I remember one woman who agreed that we could film the house and the work we were doing, but insisted that she wouldn't be on camera. But when we showed up with the crew, there she was in full hair and makeup. It was early days for reality TV and it was very interesting to see how people reacted to the cameras."

#### Talent on Set

Setting foot on a job site that's also a television set is a unique experience, one in which a designer becomes a host and is seen as the talent. Hamilton, who went on to win *Design Star: Next Gen* and, consequently, landed her own program, *Reno My Rental*, recalls her first day on set for her own show fondly. "You've got production assistants coming up to you asking if they can get you anything and producers making sure you're comfortable and taken care of," she says. "On *Reno My Rental*, I definitely felt like a star."

The shooting schedule was also a bit more manageable for Hamilton's own show, which was filmed in Memphis, Tennessee, where she's based. She was on set four days a week for six weeks, with one of those days generally set aside for talking head-style interviews that narrated the episode's action. To pull off the actual makeovers, Hamilton had a team of contractors, procurement specialists and stylists provided by the producers. Even her clients on the show were cast through the

Carmeon Hamilton landed her own show on Discovery+ after winning the streaming platform's competition series *Design Star: Next Gen*. The difference between being one of many designers on a show and being the host and driving force was a stark contrast, but one the designer ultimately welcomed. "On *Reno My Rental*, I definitely felt like a star," she says.



production company. "I had no say in who is on the show," she says. "I'd get a link to a Pinterest board and some photos of their space, but I didn't meet them until we were rolling. It was a really different experience than my day-to-day design work, where I'm agreeing to take on a client and then handling everything myself. I got to be more of a creative director than the person doing everything, which is actually a structure I'd love to be able to eventually replicate with my firm."

How much control designers have depends on their level of involvement in the production. Hamilton was not a producer on *Reno My Rental*, which limited her say in some of the details. (She did, however, have total control over the design, as well as some influence on how the show featured the city of Memphis.) On Berkus's most recent show, *The Nate & Jeremiah Home Project*, which he co-hosts with his husband, fellow designer Jeremiah Brent, Berkus serves as a producer—a role that brings him a good deal of authority over what projects are featured on the program. "Our production company is still handling vetting and casting, but they then send us the candidates and get our input before moving forward," he says.

In some instances, it's possible to find a middle ground: While he isn't a producer on *Mind for Design*, Flynn is able to weigh in on storylines and the clients he'll take on but isn't involved in the post-production elements like how an episode is edited. "It's very collaborative," he says. "The Magnolia Network authentically wants to follow my body of work and how we're actually working with my clients, so we don't necessarily have to find dramatic stories that have built-in cliffhanger moments where you cut to commercials. That was important to me from the very beginning. I'm heavy-handed in the storytelling process: We pitch the development people, 'Hey, this is the project I'm working on, and I think this angle is really interesting.'"

### Behind the Scenes

Makeover shows often make it seem as though the designer and a few tradespeople are alone in a space, but Flynn says there are roughly 15 people—ranging from the camera crew to caterers and medics—on the set of any given *Mind for Design* episode, most of whom are never seen on camera. "It creates a lot of energy on set," says Flynn. "Even on a shoot, design still takes time. You may end up sitting around waiting for hours for the wallpaper to dry before you can move on, so it's fun to have all those people around."

For *Design Star: Next Gen*, which featured eight designers going through various design challenges, there was a crew of more than 200, with each designer assigned their own producers, production assistants and camera operators; tradespeople to help execute the designers' ideas on the show's tight timelines; and a team dedicated to COVID prevention and monitoring (filming took place in fall 2020 and cast members and crew were tested every two days). "You would never know just how many people were really there from watching the show," says Williams. "There was even a stylist who planned out our outfits based on the clothing we brought."

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A major conceit of TV makeovers is that they take place on a condensed timeline. A project that may take months in real life happens over the span of a few days on the small screen. The reality behind such a feat is that the majority of the work generally happens weeks, if not months, in advance of filming. “There’s an intense level of pre-planning that goes into each design,” says Flynn. “If I know I want a specific piece of furniture but we find out it’s on a 16-week lead time, we’ve got three backups selected. If I know that my usual wallpaper hanger in Atlanta, where we film, is going to be unavailable in three weeks for a shoot, my team is reaching out to our favorite wallpaper hanger in Los Angeles, seeing if we can fly them in and how to adjust the budget accordingly. Everything still has to be done to the best of its potential. It still has to be something I want my name on.”

On *Reno My Rental*, Hamilton started formulating her designs as soon as clients were cast, generally about three weeks before the shoot began. While the design work was done before Hamilton ever actually stepped foot in the space, the filming schedule worked out to about four days on location for a given project, with one day dedicated to capturing “before” shots of the space. As the actual renovations unfolded over 10 days, Hamilton relied on what’s known in the industry as a “design producer” to bring her vision to life. “She was executing all the designs when I wasn’t on set, as well as taking care of sourcing and logistics,” says Hamilton. “She also had a team of assistants. There were so many people dedicated to making these reveals happen on schedule.”

In addition to the realities of pulling off a renovation on an otherwise impossible timeline, there is also that pesky camera capturing it all for 10 hours a day. “I never would have believed that you could get used to it, but you do,” says Goddard. “It’s a weird transformation to go through, but you have producers guiding you through it, asking you questions like, ‘Why did you select this paint color?’ You quickly learn to vocalize your process and get out of your head.”

Berkus says that there’s a gratifying quality to making decisions quickly and seeing a space come together in a matter of days. “A private project might take three years from your first meeting until the installation day,” he says. “Seeing a home go from a vision to a reality in sometimes as little as 48 hours—that’s amazing.” While there is a team of people working all hours to pull off a makeover on the show’s allotted timeline, Berkus says that he still prefers to be hands on: “A lot of designers on makeover shows just show up at the end and walk the homeowner through, but on my shows, I’m there up until the last minute, styling every bookshelf and making sure everything down to the picture frames is where I want it.”

### Show Me the Money

For all the hustle it takes to get on TV—and for all of the grueling work that’s in store if you land a spot on a show—is it actually *that* lucrative? The answer is complicated, and one that differs from network to network and designer to designer. But generally, a TV show alone is not enough to keep a designer

Brian Patrick Flynn had a stream of one-off gigs on design TV programs before finally landing his own show, *Mind for Design*, which is one of the debut programs on the newly launched Magnolia Network. It was important to him that the show be story driven, so he’s gotten involved in the preproduction elements of the program in addition to overseeing the design featured on each episode.



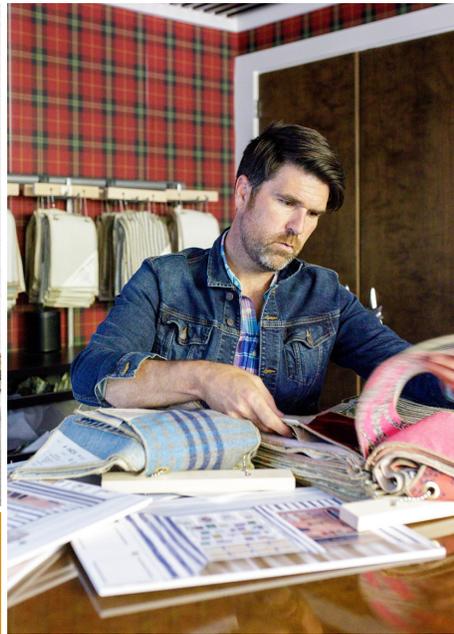
afloat. For example, on a recent episode of *The Business of Home Podcast*, designer Orlando Soria said he was paid \$40,000 for a season of his HGTV show, *Build Me Up*, which took 10 months to film. After agent fees and taxes, he says he took home just \$17,500.

While it’s hard to know for certain if Soria’s experience is typical, the designers interviewed for this story agreed that the fee earned for their TV appearances was not a replacement for the other facets of their business. Hamilton, who was paid a per-episode talent fee on *Reno My Rental*, has started to see some licensing opportunities come in, but concurs that the compensation she earned on the show was not akin to taking on a design client, or even the payment she’s received for some brand influencer partnerships on Instagram. “But the exposure is worth it,” she says. “The waiting list for my firm has gotten longer and longer, and my social media following is only growing.”

Designers who have tried TV generally suggest looking at a show as an amplifier—something that could boost your profile and help land licensing partnerships, paid speaking engagements and book deals, in addition to an influx of private design clients. “The money is incidental to the other deals the opportunity leads to,” says Ireland.

Her former co-star agrees. “TV is the fastest track to product deals,” says Martyn Lawrence Bullard. “Take a look at Joanna Gaines or the Property Brothers—the money they’re making is not from TV, it’s from the products they’re getting their name on. If you market yourself correctly, it opens up all these new possibilities. I understood that going into *Million Dollar Decorators* and made sure I represented myself in a way that would open those doors.” Not long after the first episode of the reality show aired in 2011, the designer started getting calls from licensing agents. “By the end of the first season, I’d signed three new deals,” he says.

PHOTOGRAPHY: COURTESY OF MAGNOLIA NETWORK



When new clients do come calling, they're often of a different caliber. "What surprised me was that the inquiries I've gotten where the potential client referenced the show—they're all luxury clients," says Goddard. "That let me know that I'd been really authentic to my brand and hadn't misrepresented myself or the quality of work that I do." For both Ireland and Bullard, their turns on *Million Dollar Decorators* attracted high-profile clients. Actress Lindsay Lohan watched the first season of the show and subsequently hired Ireland. (Lohan and her home were then featured on the show's second season.) Bullard, who has done numerous homes for

members of the Kardashian-Jenner clan, says that the family became aware of his work through the show. "It opened up an unbelievable array of fans who turned into clients," he says. "The Kardashians saw it and wanted to work with me, but so did Arabian royalty. The reach of the show was massive."

Still, for every perfect client that comes from a show, most designers say that the exposure nets them a dozen more with unrealistic expectations, tiny budgets or both. Berkus recalls his firm being flooded with inquiries after he started appearing on *Oprah*, most of which didn't align with his firm's full-service offerings. "We were getting calls every day from people wanting me to redo their basement or come organize their garage," he says. His team put up a client intake form on the firm's website that spelled out their minimum budgets and typical project scope, as well as a separate form for people interested in appearing on *Oprah* that was forwarded directly to the show's producers (and which explained that Berkus had no say in who was selected). "I had to get very organized internally very quickly," says Berkus.

### True Colors

Like any path to success, no two journeys to TV stardom look exactly alike, but designers who've made the leap to the small screen all agree that staying true to yourself is the key to making the most of the whole endeavor—from getting scouted to being engaging on screen and landing deals outside the production. "Audiences and producers alike, they're looking for fresh points of view," says Goddard. "Chip and Joanna are taken. You just have to be yourself."

And while it might be easy to look cynically at home makeovers, especially for those inside the design industry, Berkus espouses a more sincere view of the process. "There are very few people in the world that can say that they've had the experience of holding someone's hand and saying, 'OK, open your eyes—this is your new home. This is a new chapter in your life,'" says Berkus. "After all those calls, all the creativity, all of the fun, all of the research, all the drawings, all of the designing that goes into that—it's magic. Even after 20 years, I still get a rush from it." ■