



📷 Haskell Studio

In this Great Falls residence, built by Keaster Construction, a tranquil atmosphere expresses the fine balance of color, fabrics and furniture.



ROBIN NEEL DESIGNING WOMAN

Quick. Picture an interior decorator.

If you are guilty of stereotyping, there's no way you are picturing Robin Neel.

She's not an anorexic style maven with effusive gestures and Prada pumps.

It's easier to picture her on horseback in jeans and a Carhart jacket yelling, "Ya-hoo!" than to imagine her shaking her head, going "tsk tsk" at someone's cluttered kitchen.

Robin Neel doesn't have to put on airs. Ask her clients: her work speaks for itself.

You might get the wrong impression if you venture into her lair at The Decorating House, at 3434 10th Avenue South in Great Falls. From the outside it looks like a big pink box in the middle of a sprawling auto dealership—on the inside, it's part showroom, part storeroom, part office, and all business.

It's Robin's nest.

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The clean stainless steel kitchen accents are paired with cement countertops and Alder cabinetry custom made by Moderne Cabinets in Great Falls, Mont

“SHE LOVES TO MINCE STYLES, IF IT CAN BE DONE WELL. ‘I DON’T HAVE A PARTICULAR STYLE,’ ROBIN EXPLAINS. ‘I TRY TO GET UNDER THE SKIN OF MY CLIENTS TO DETERMINE WHAT WORKS FOR THEM.’”

When I called her to schedule an interview, she’d just returned from the field, literally. “Did you get lost?” her rural customer inquired after Robin showed up a bit late for a design consultation at a remote farmhouse.

“Of course I got lost. What kind of directions were those anyway?”

Robin Neel doesn’t mince words.

She loves to mince styles, if it can be done well. “I don’t have a particular style,” Robin explains. “I try to get under the skin of my clients to determine what works for them.” Often she’ll start out with a single object, a painting, a treasured heirloom or the client’s favorite color. A single design element can become the nucleus for an entire project.

It’s important to have a gut feeling for what people really want. Robin’s eyes spark when she says, “Often I have an instinct for a person’s taste before they even say a word.”

Her projects range from re-doing a \$5000 bedroom on the lower North Side to a \$100,000 design budget for new a home along the Missouri. At any moment, Robin is juggling two or three major jobs and putting together perhaps a half-dozen smaller projects. Her work takes her all over Big Sky Country.

Robin Neel is the Grand Dame of interior design for North Central Montana, and her presence, though casual, is imposing. She’s a tall gal with short layered hair and a critical eye. “Nice office,” she tells me as we settle in to talk at my studio.

I am relieved to get her seal of approval.

Robin and her mother, Suke Foster Neel who recently turned 92, were partners in their own firm as well as work for the LMH Company, a business that flourished in Montana a few decades ago.

Robin, the second generation of designing women in her family, has been at it for over forty years. Prick her and she bleeds chintz.

Robin works for the Decorating House, which is affiliated with Thomasville furniture, but she resources design elements from as close as Gallery 16 and as far away as New York. She just finished a project with built-in solid wood cabinets from a small, family-owned company in Twin Falls, Idaho, and prefers to work with local artists, artisans and craftsmen.

“Redecorating is too expensive to make a mistake,” Sandy Clapshaw, a recent client, recommends Robin’s services. Clapshaw ventured into The Decorating House looking for some furniture for her daughter and wound up hiring Robin to update her living room. Though she worked within Sandy’s aesthetic, Robin stretched the envelope. “I love the way it turned out,” Sandy says with confidence. “I never liked draperies, and Robin talked me into them. Now they are a favorite part of my living room....It’s great to work with someone who is as excited about your redecorating project as you are.”

Clapshaw said it was more like working with a friend who happened to be an expert and wasn’t afraid to tell her what worked and what didn’t.

Most of Robin’s clients give her free reign. “They hire a professional, and I give them professional level work.” Robin

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Each design element in this Great Falls residence kitchen enhances the next while complimented by a warm Terracotta palette.

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“REDECORATING IS TOO EXPENSIVE TO MAKE A MISTAKE,’ SANDY CLAPSHAW, A RECENT CLIENT, RECOMMENDS ROBIN’S SERVICES.”



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The mono-chromatic color palette of this Great Falls residence living room adds unique warmth and contemporary elegance while making a small room appear much larger.

usually consults with a client, develops a proposal and then goes full steam ahead.

Robin cautions about three common design mistakes. First, many people don’t realize that, if you buy products from a store or designer, the consultation is often free. People don’t seek advice when they should. Second, it’s tempting to skimp on poor quality furniture. Robin recommends buying one piece at a time instead of a roomful of bargains. Third, “You can’t wimp out on color. Color is everything.”

What’s hot right now? Robin is thrilled with the revival of Mid-Century Modernism and the resurgence of Art Deco lines.

With all the enthusiasm she musters for each project and all the warmth for her clients, it’s hard to believe she’s

been an interior designer for three decades. “I’m so fortunate to live in Great Falls and do what I do,” Robin tells me as she looks at her watch to be sure she’s on time for her next appointment, a consultation with a returning client.

She just can’t wait to get started on the job. 



~Claire Baiz, a Great Falls native, owns Big Sky Gold & Diamond Brokers in Great Falls and is a freelance writer.

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