

BLOG HOME



A PASSION FOR FUNCTIONAL AND PHENOMENAL: HOW KAREN SEALY APPROACHES HER DESIGNS

Written by *Danielle Karr* on August 24, 2018

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Anyone who spends a few minutes with award-winning Canadian designer Karen Sealy can testify to the fact that she is as down-to-earth and charming as the spaces she creates. Owner and lead designer of [Sealy Design, Inc.](#), her passion and expertise for both design and functionality sets her apart in the field as she balances her focus between trends and tools. She was the designer of HGTV's "Summer Home" (s.1), and her work has been featured in the New York Times, Elle Décor, Style at Home, and more. She is a regular design expert on the national TV show [Cityline](#) and shares her vast knowledge on how to create functional, on-budget, stunning spaces.

We spent some time with this renovation powerhouse to talk with her about everything from business to psychology to her latest venture, [The Pickering Project](#). Below, we are sharing some of the answers that inspired us.

How would you describe your design style when creating spaces for clients?

I don't like to say I have a particular style when it comes to creating spaces for my clients. My motto is that it's not about me in design: it's about creating a space that will be beautiful and functional for the family. I always try to put the client first—for example, if a family has kids and pets I wouldn't recommend working a lot of white into that design. I want to create a space that is beautiful and comfortable for them to live in; I don't ever want anyone worrying about really living in their home. It is a totally different experience to walk through a showroom space versus actually live in a home long term, and sometimes I have to do a bit of educating to help the family understand what they *really* want. I look at their life and think about how they could best enjoy the space I'm creating. I also think of smart ways to utilize money and make sure that we bring trends into the home to make the space feel fresh and alive but also do it in a way that is interchangeable so the homeowner can easily update the style in a few years when the trends change and not break the budget.

What are some of your priorities when designing for homes, large or small?

My biggest concerns when starting out on a new project are making sure that I get a clear vision of their budget and 'wins' for the space as well as how to work in as much double functionality as I can with

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products and solutions in the home. Budget—even when it is a very large one—is so important to respect because once you go beyond it clients leave their comfort zone and that's when stress kicks in. I want my clients to have a fun and enjoyable experience, which is why I always take time to learn what is most important to a client when designing a space to make sure I protect their space 'wins.' I talk with them about things they can get in the budget now and maybe things they want to plan on upgrading to in the future. For example, smart-home technology is a conversation I have with clients in the beginning because the technology available today can really elevate daily living, but you have got to work it into the budget from the start. I love working [Control4](#) products into my designs, but sometimes my smart-home integrations consist of simply planning for future upgrades. I think that is me being a responsible designer—helping clients plan ahead as well as in the moment and respecting their current budget. I'm doing a lot of getting clients ready for the future and working them into the technology at their own pace.

How do you make sure you're giving your clients what they want?

I got my bachelor's degree in psychology and spend a lot of my time using principles I learned in that degree to make sure my clients are getting what they really want. I think of my meetings with clients as my time to really understand them—what do they want? Why are they wanting it? What do they want now versus what can wait? Sometimes I get to challenge my clients to think about spaces in a different way and sometimes we have to compromise their wants, but I always try to make sure they don't lose what they are really loving about the redesign during the process.



Where do you find your inspiration/how do you keep your ideas fresh?

I find my biggest inspiration comes from building out my 'toolbox.' I am the type of designer that loves looking through hardware magazines and geeking out over hardware innovation. As designs become more affordable and more options open up, me being aware of that allows me to offer more to my clients. If you don't know about the tools available to you, you can't offer them to your clients, right? It may seem a little tech-geeky of me, but functionality is central to successful design, so I try to make sure I'm always up on the latest innovations and trends.

I also love going to trade shows, especially European trade shows and hospitality trade shows, because a lot of trends are happening there first and they present new ways of incorporating functionality into design. Social media is also a great way to stay up on trends—of course I end up going down a rabbit hole of links when I'm researching a new product or feature. I'm regularly on live TV presenting lessons on design and home, so I'm always trying to learn about new suppliers and doing research to have good conversation about the industry on the show. I need to know my stuff if I'm going to be on live TV! I have to be able to speak on the fly and be authentic. I would say that I'm a very informed and curious designer partly because it's my nature and partly because my career forces me to be.

What do you look for when deciding what brands to use in your designs?

I want to have a great relationship with the brand—we are real people at my company and we want to work with real people. I want to be able to take care of my clients and trust the brand to take care of our clients as well. We are advocates for brands that are high quality, great product warranties, and awesome customer service. Joel at [Premier Smart Homes](#) in Canada is a great example of this. Control4 provides a comprehensive smart-home experience with a single-app solution, alleviating the multi-app mess a lot of piecemeal smart-home technology creates. Plus, the customer service and overall experience is amazing.

You are always on the go. What do you do to keep yourself grounded?

I love what I do and love being busy. However, I find a good way to keep myself centered and balanced is by going for long walks in nature whenever I can. I'm a big believer that you need to take time for yourself, and so taking time just to be in nature is one of the ways I slow down and reconnect with myself.

Do you have any passion projects you are working on currently?

We are in the process of renovating a home to use as a showroom of sorts—we've lovingly named it the Pickering Project because that's the name of the street the house is on. I'm really enjoying the freedom that comes with doing a project that's completely mine. I want to show that you don't need a ton of square footage to create a breathtaking home that still is budget conscious. It's all about finding the right solutions for each space in the home. I have been pulling out all the stops in this renovation—from design to smart-home technology to product functionality—to create a space that is both family friendly and phenomenal. Be sure to follow the [#PickeringProject](#) and join us on our amazing renovation journey.



Want to learn more about beautiful smart-home design? [Click here.](#)

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