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Need to Know

8 Project Install-Day Mistakes—and How to Avoid Them

Start your project's big day on the right foot with tips from designers who have been there

By Kelsey Mulvey

For a designer, install day is the most important time of any project—and for good reason. After spending weeks or months tweaking renderings, sampling swatches, or scouring the best design stores for that perfect piece of furniture, install day is the opportunity to put it all together and turn your vision board into a reality. What could possibly go wrong? Well, it turns out, a lot.

“Seeing everything we have designed, drawn, planned, and executed finally in its forever space is a complete joy,” designer Kendall Wilkinson explains. “However, getting there can sometimes be a wild ride. So many unforeseen things pop up no matter how much time and energy you spend planning.”

From forgetting your bag of go-to tools to dealing with a broken elevator, it's all too common for install day to run not as smoothly as you planned. The good news is that it doesn't *have* to be that way. By learning about common install-day mistakes ahead of time, you can sidestep any classic gaffes and focus on the project at hand.

To help, several top designers share the most common install mistakes they've made—and how to prevent them in the first place. With any luck, these cautionary tales will help you in making this important day seamless and stress-free.

Mistake 1: Putting too much trust in your renderings

Though there are certain mathematical formulas and tricks designers use to determine furniture layouts, but designer Kelly Martin says it's important not to take your renderings *too* literally.

“Although [a piece of furniture] fits in the plans in theory, it might feel slightly different when you're in the space,” she explains. “It could be because of the light or the way a room feels, which is something a computer program like CAD cannot detect. I had a fairly large sectional placed in a room according to the drawings and, when I went for the install, it just didn't feel right in relation to the TV.”

Instead, Martin says it's important to be physically present on install day and adjust where needed. “I like to improvise a little during installations to make sure placement doesn't feel too sterile,” she adds. “It's important to consider how the clients will be using the space and tweak it slightly if necessary.”

Mistake 2: Overlooking the measurements of a key feature

After spending so much time focusing on a space, it's likely you'll know an area's square footage and dimensions by heart. But did you measure every nook and cranny? Rodney Lawrence recommends measuring every curve and entryway *before* you make any purchases. “Nothing is worse than the day of an installation finding out that something cannot get in the home, or once in the home cannot get to the intended location,” he says. “Sometimes we even go as far as making full-scale mock-ups to ensure we are good with tight squeezes.”

Mistake 3: Breaking your clients' COVID protocol

Though it's been over two years since the global pandemic rocked the design world, COVID-19 continues to change how designers proceed with new and existing projects. Naturally, install day is no exception. Whether there's a surge from a new variant or a client wants some extra peace of mind, it's important to gauge your customer's comfort level with having multiple people in their space.

“[One time,] a couple of our installers showed up without masks and others kept taking them off,” Molly Torres Portnof of Date Interiors says. “Now, we have a COVID-19 checklist we send prior to the install, so we're all on the same page before we're in front of the clients.”

Speaking of the pandemic, clients' hybrid work routines might turn your install day into a longer multiphase process. “Some clients are opting for a two-part install with months in between,” Traci Connell says. “While [it's] not our preferred method, we can't hold their furniture as ransom!”

For a happy medium, the Dallas-based designer compromises with a two-part install, provided her team can decorate full rooms at a time. “If a room install is incomplete, the client may start analyzing individual items instead of seeing the big picture,” she adds.

Mistake 4: Running out of accessories

As the saying goes, the devil lies in the details—just ask Melanie Hay, who has had to run out multiple times during installs to pick up extra accessories. Her advice? Order at least double the amount of decor you think you'll need and return the rest. “If a space is not properly accessorized with art, objects, books, toss cushions, throws, vases, pottery, and florals, it always falls flat,” the Canadian designer explains. “[With accessorizing], the end result is a richer, more layered, and curated space that feels truly finished.”

Hay adds that styling a home is an artful process—one that requires time and diligence—and encourages designers to build enough time into their install schedule to properly decorate a project. As a rule of thumb, Hay carves out one day per floor for styling.

Mistake 5: Missing a key tool or piece of hardware

Of course, home decor isn't the only category designers should stock up on for install day. For Janelle Hughes and Kim Williams, principal designers of KJ Design and Mortar Styling LLC, it's important to have a surplus of tools. Topping their list of must-haves: extra hardware for window treatments.

“The hardware that often comes packaged with curtain rods is not strong enough to hold the weight of certain fabrics, and nothing is more frustrating than having to patch and sand drywall holes on freshly painted walls,” the duo shares. “We recommend that designers always keep extra hardware handy in their toolbox, as well as inspect the maximum weight of curtain rods against the weight of curtain panels.”

Mistake 6: Realizing too late that a finish is wrong

Very few things can wreak havoc on install day like realizing an armchair arrived in the wrong colorway—or worse, damaged. That's exactly why it's important to double-check all pieces before the big day. “Check your furnishings yourself, with your own eyes—or one of your staff's eyes—to make sure it's the correct item, color, finish, and so on,” designer Rachel Cannon advises. “Your receiver is mainly checking for damage and may not know that nailheads should be brass instead of nickel.”

Whether you're looking for accuracy or damage, it's a good idea to analyze your furniture and accessories sooner rather than later. That way, you can return items well within their warranty periods.

Mistake 7: Your merchandise hasn't arrived in time

As designer Kristina Phillips puts it, “Install day has become very different from prepandemic times—back when everything would be delivered in one fell swoop.” From supply-chain issues to that perfect sectional being back-ordered, delays are inevitable. Instead of creating an airtight schedule leading up to install day, create some wiggle room to accommodate delays. “Gone are the days when I could order everything by January and have delivery in May,” Allison Babcock adds. “Most custom items are running 24 to 30 weeks, and then you have to allow for shipping.” To help fine-tune timing—and set reasonable expectations—Babcock adds eight weeks of padding to her schedule.

Mistake 8: Rushing install day itself

When a project nears its close, it's all too tempting for both clients and designers to push forward with install day even if everything isn't completely ready. But why rush the process when you can take your time and get the project done right?

“I suggest waiting until all the tradespeople have completed their tasks, and the house is cleaned, before bringing your clients' expensive furnishings, art, decor, and other valuables into the house,” Jeremy Graef, owner of Connate Design, shares. “It is important to be transparent and realistic with clients, letting them know their one-of-a-kind and personal home goods can be damaged or ruined if tradespeople are still working in the home.”

Instead of shoving a design project past the finish line, it's a good idea to communicate any delays with your clients first. As the saying goes, slow and steady wins the race.