

Need to Know

# So You Want to Publish Your Own Coffee Table Book. Now What?

Get the scoop on the process, from pitch to publication, from some of today's major designers-authors

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Illustration by Stephanie Jones

Having your work published in a dedicated monograph can feel like the ultimate way to advance (and affirm) your career. Whether it documents your firm's recent projects, or includes your take on a particular design subject, a book can generate exposure to

your practice as well as clients—and create some enviable coffee-table eye candy. But where to start? An experienced editor and five established designers (all with recent and upcoming books) share their advice, from when to pitch and how to get organized.

## **Wait for the right time.**

“Everyone wants to write a book because it serves as a great calling card,” says Carleton Varney, president and owner of Dorothy Draper & Company, “But it has to be the right time in your career.” Though the veteran decorator has authored many books over the years, his latest—*Rooms to Remember: A Designer's Tour of Mackinac Island's Grand Hotel* (Shannongrove Press)—was 40 years in the making and chronicles the firm’s involvement with the famous Michigan resort.

Designers also need to have a backlog of high-level work that they can draw from, several authors advise. “Wait until you have enough projects worthy of a book that will show what you do best. Don’t push it,” says architectural and interior designer Tom Scheerer, who released his second book, *Tom Scheerer: More Decorating* (Vendome Press), in September.

But even if *you* think you’re ready, a publisher might not always think the same. “We are looking for designers who are established in their field, with a good amount of work to show,” says Kathleen Jayes, senior editor at Rizzoli, one of the most esteemed publishers of design books. “We look for designers who are recognized as noteworthy by the industry.”

Designers should have strong portfolios, of course, but also be well published in design magazines; awards and experience on the lecture circuit are helpful, too, notes Jayes. If you're still working toward these goals, consider hiring a public relations firm.

## Get the concept and pitch right.

“The topic really has to feel right, and it has to feel like you,” says Doug Hoerr, cofounder of Hoerr Schaudt Landscape Architects, who recently published *Movement and Meaning: The Landscapes of Hoerr Schaudt* (The Monacelli Press). Conversely, of course, the book has to have broader appeal. “We are always thinking about why a reader would want to buy the book,” says Jayes. “What need does it fill for them?”

How you get that story in front of editors and publishers also matters. Having a literary agent can help with access, contracts, and pitch development, but it isn't always necessary. When developing books at Rizzoli, Jayes looks for “a short pitch letter that grabs my attention.” Preferably, she says, a one-page description of the book concept, a biography, press clippings, and images from multiple projects. (Check out Rizzoli's submission guidelines for more details.)

## Understand your timeline.

“It is never the perfect time to write a book,” says Hoerr. “You're always going to be busy.” The solution is to organize tasks and teams like you would any other work project, he says. Timelines for completing a book vary, but most illustrated books will take at least one year to complete.

“Conceiving a book can quickly become a second job, and it is important not to let that come at the expense of your, or your client's, needs,” adds Varney. “Coming up with the big picture idea is easy, and always a treat,” he continues. “The hardest part is actually having the discipline to sit down and actually write it.”

To streamline the process, textile designer Lisa Fine, whose new book, *Near & Far: Interiors I Love* (Vendome Press), delves into the sources of her inspiration, advises maintaining close relationships with photographers and editors. “Without that

compatibility and respect, the project could be overwhelming,” she says.

## **Be ready to make the investment.**

While every publishing deal is different, a designer-author should expect to handle some expenses out of pocket. Photography, writers, fact-checkers, and other services are unlikely to be covered by a publisher.

These costs, in addition to advances and royalties, "are negotiated on a project-by-project basis," explains Jacqueline Decter, an editor at Vendome Press, "depending on our appraisal of the commercial merits of the project, such as originality, quality of materials, publicity, and marketing."

Photography, of course, is typically one of the biggest associated costs, and even firms with solid archives will frequently return to projects “to capture moments that had never been seen before,” says Achille Salvagni, whose monograph, *Achille Salvagni* (Rizzoli), arrived on shelves this fall. Many designers suggest including these expenses as part of a firm's public relations and marketing budget.

## **Consider the copy.**

While some designers are comfortable putting pen to paper, others prefer to leave it to a professional, hiring either a ghostwriter, author, journalist, or critic with whom they work closely. For Varney, for example, who spent years writing a syndicated news column, “Writing comes very naturally to me, and I tend to do it every day.”

Hoerr, on the other hand, hired Douglas Brenner, an author who was “already fluent in architectural language,” which was critical to the process, he says. Likewise, Salvagni worked with design writer Pilar Viladas in several rounds of interviews to produce the text for his tome. “That teamwork is what really made this book a successful and satisfying endeavor,” he explains.

## **When it comes to photography, think ahead. Way ahead.**

As noted, photography is typically a major expense in producing a book, and all of the designers AD PRO spoke with, along with Jayes, stressed just how important it is for designers to capture their projects as a matter of course. “Invest in photography from the very start. I'm constantly shocked at how few people spend money on great photography until they want to do a book,” advises Hoerr. “It would be very hard to come up with a book without great photography.”

“Our office generally has a large inventory of projects and images,” explains Varney. “I have all of our projects photographed for our use, and the Grand Hotel is a project we have been photographing for years. With each new introduction, refresh, or renovation, we captured it all.”

“The very first task for my book, once we all agreed on the concept, was to go through my work and start looking for images that would accompany the themes,” says Salvagni. Managing and arranging for additional detail photography, he notes, was one of the most time-consuming aspects of the project.

## **It may be published, but the work isn't over.**

Even after your book is published, you still need to get it into people's hands. That means a commitment to promoting the book—from book tours to lectures to magazine interviews. “Basically the more exposure the better,” says Fine. Having a strong preexisting social media following is “a must” for such exposure, adds Jayes. In order for a book to succeed, she says, “It's critical that people know how to connect with their audience.”