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IF YOUR JET'S CABIN IS LARGE, ITS DESIGNER'S IMAGINATION SHOULD BE, TOO

by Kirby J. Harrison

CUSTOMER EXPECTATIONS are the driving force in any aircraft interior design, and it seems the bigger the airplane, the greater the expectations. And there's no shortage of designers who can think as big as necessary.

At RWR Designs in Plano, Texas, founder and CEO Richard Roseman has been doing narrow- and widebody executive/VIP interior designs for nearly two decades. He counts many of his customers as old friends, as they've used RWR multiple times over the years. "They know what they want," he said, "and it's incumbent on us to get them what they want."

That can be anything from a minimalist design with clean, simple lines to teak flooring to one-off faux-finish countertops. In fact, said Roseman, virtually everything RWR does is one-off because that's the way the customer typically wants it.

In terms of social embarrassment, said one designer, having a friend board your airplane and remark, "Hey! Bob's got the same thing in his new Airbus," is on a par with two women showing up at the Academy Awards wearing the same dress.

"It has to have a one-off appearance," said Roseman, "and it has to be one off."

At the same time, said Sean Eisner, president and founder of Infusion Design, "The cabin is becoming more functional and more lifestyle-related; an extension of the individual, rather than an effort to impress others." The Bonner Springs, Kan.-based firm has been designing aircraft interiors for 11 years and, according to Eisner, "We've always taken the approach that an integration of all the elements of the cabin is critical." While each element—exotic veneers, leather for the seats, blended silk-and-wool custom carpet—may be unique, they must complement rather than fight one another.

"Typically, there's never enough space," said New York
cabin designer Edese Doret. “I talked with a potential BBJ2 client who came in with a huge list and quickly ran out of room. Another client wanted so much that we began borrowing from one space in order to open up another.” As for style, “customers have moved from overstated opulence to more understated elegance,” Elsner said.

Roseman agreed, saying clients are opting for more modern, cleaner designs, “almost a minimalist approach.”

Doret recently created an executive/VIP interior that was a collection of elements that at first seemed mismatched: both contemporary and classic lighting, very modern beds and chairs in the stateroom; tile mosaic walls and flooring in the private lavatory/shower; and a lot of loose furnishings. But Doret recalled that it all seemed to come together in a style one client dubbed “California modern.”

Designers also seem to be moving toward the addition of a small number of luxurious chairs made for comfort and style that are not certified to be occupied during takeoff and landing. “It’s not an option on smaller business jets,” said Roseman, “but on widebody airplanes, it’s becoming popular.”

Roseman added that his firm has seen a growing interest in a faux finish that isn’t wood, granite, lapis or marble, but still looks organic. “We have a South American who is a true artist and designs four or five possibilities,” he said.

“The customer picks the one he likes, the work is done and the design is destroyed, never to be replicated.”

A well-designed cabin, noted Roseman, should produce a “wow” response when passengers see it for the first time. Subsequent responses should result from a series of discoveries—things like a hidden magazine rack, a table in an unexpected place, a widescreen monitor that appears magically out of the bulkhead or a subtle shift in the color of the downwash cabin lighting.

Asked what kinds of customers have given him the most satisfaction, Elsner replied, “The people who let us stretch our wings.”

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