

Create a memorable splash in your home's decor with a custom-designed aquarium

By Avital Binshtock

Like no other design element, aquariums bring the ocean's beauty into your home, lending an aura and mystique to your decor that artwork could never match. If you invest the time, effort and money into creating a truly stunning aquarium for your coastal home, you'll be giving it an entirely new dimension.

Since your idea of a beautiful aquarium may be different than your neighbors', there are a few things to keep in mind when choosing the right company for your custom installation. For starters, get several bids, and ask each company to show you samples of their work. Each firm should have an extensive portfolio with photographs of past projects that will help you decide if the company's style matches your vision.

Evaluate several bids, but don't base your decision solely on price. Custom built-in aquariums are expensive, and there's no such thing as a discount source. No matter what you're told, nearly all good aquarium stores use the same mark-up on the products they sell. For that reason, experienced custom aquarium designers will usually submit bids that are relatively close in price.

Also, don't forget that the aquarium should be designed around the life it will support, not the other way around. An aquarium is successful when the animals living in it are in an aquatic environment that duplicates their natural habitat as closely as possible. A fish or invertebrate that lives in one habitat may not survive well in another. Therefore, it is important to first choose the livestock an aquarium will hold before designing the aquarium.

Following are several top companies to consider for your aquarium installation:

AQUA-TERRA STUDIOS

Southern Californians know the ocean, but no one knows how to frame its beauty quite like Los Angeles-based Aqua-Terra Studios. Founder Richard Bilow is a fusion-form artist who touts aquarium design as a form of artistic expression. "To understand my work, it is important to know that the concept of aquariums as fine art is the key driving force behind my creations," says Bilow. His sculptural and architectural aquarium and terrarium environments feature creative media like blown glass, volcanic rock, concrete, steel—even African tree roots. Miami Heat basketball star Shaquille O'Neal is a fan of Bilow's museum-quality work, which is featured prominently in his home. Bilow has also created one-of-a-kind artistic aquariums for major companies and restaurants, including those run by Wolfgang Puck and designed by Barbara Lazaroff. For more information, call (310) 314-2216 or visit www.rbilow.com.



Above: Aquatic artist Richard Bilow created the above installation for Shaquille O'Neal using hot-glass forming techniques. **Above right:** Sculptured glass seascapes are one of Bilow's trademarks.

