

Home & Garden

Nine designers' tips for upping your decorating game

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By Jura Koncius

As you study vignettes on your bookmarked design blogs, flip through pages of shelter magazines and binge-watch HGTV shows, it's hard not to imagine certain design details transforming your own home.

Winter, when you spend more time indoors scrutinizing your four walls and your furniture assortment, is a good time to make a few changes to enhance your living quarters. Design professionals have a lot of tricks that can enliven rooms, whether it's to make the most of a small space or add a dimension to a larger one.

You can choose to break the rules or honor them. But everyone needs a little inspiration.

“Many people are paralyzed when it comes to making changes in their home, even small ones,” says Sheila Bridges, a New York designer. “People are freaked out by color. They want to have everything look perfect immediately. But decorating is really a process. The longer it takes or the more you slow down and enjoy that process of building and editing, the better your home will evolve.”

We asked Bridges and other top designers to share a best practice with us — ideas they are incorporating into their own work right now, as well as those that have stood the test of time.

Here are their emailed suggestions, suitable for pinning to your “Designer Secrets” inspiration board.

Look to your travels for texture

“My design aesthetic has always been intensely personal. As you look to update a room you’ve lived in for years, or if you’re starting fresh in a new home, begin by curating what you have. I like to bring together groupings of well-traveled objects, textiles, decorative accessories and furniture . . . things that represent the people who live there. Think hand-woven elements, thick textiles, objects that have patina and mix in with beautiful, neutral upholstery and furniture. A well-designed room is one that is layered and feels assembled over time.”

-Nate Berkus, New York

The designer and author launched his TV career on “Oprah” in 2002.

Choose a big mirror for big impact

“Whenever presented with a narrow, unadorned space or merely a blank wall, remember that a large mirror acts like adding a window to a room. This simple trick works because the reflection gives the perception of another space beyond, and as you move around, so does the view.”

-Patrick Sutton, Baltimore

The designer's work can be found in homes, hotels and restaurants, including Azumi and Loch Bar at Baltimore's Four Seasons hotel.

Think beyond recessed lights

“One of my go-to design techniques that I find adds a timeless touch to modern interiors is the use of flush-mounted lighting and wall-mounted sconces in lieu of a sea of recessed ceiling lights, which can often feel impersonal.”

-Thom Filicia, New York

The designer and author was the interiors expert in the Emmy-winning “Queer Eye for the Straight Guy.”

Hang your collections in a grid

“Almost anything becomes interesting when hung in a grid. We renovated our office from a grocery store into a storefront design firm on a truly shoestring budget, and we hung the mugs in a grid pattern. This provides both a tidy way of storing mugs and visual interest, at virtually no cost. Children’s rooms are great places for this. A child’s hobby, such as tennis, can inspire a fun wall covering. We once glued a grid of used tennis balls to a wall in a bedroom.”

-Carmel Greer, the District

The architect and designer's firm, District Design, is in the U Street corridor.

Max out your sofa length

“My go-to is loooooong sofas. Equally perfect for sprawling and napping as holding a gaggle of friends and family for cocktails or a buffet. I don’t watch much football, but great for a Super Bowl party, too!”

-Jamie Drake, New York

The designer for Michael Bloomberg and Madonna is the owner of Drake Design Associates, which after 30 years is joining forces with Caleb Anderson Design to become Drake + Anderson.

Build a gallery wall around the largest piece

“I usually start with the largest piece first; in this case, it is a large, antique convex mirror from Paris that I’ve had on my wall for more than a decade. The next step is to build around it with both vertical and horizontal pieces, small and large, mixing frames and colors until you have a composition you like. It’s always a good idea to lay everything out on the floor first. Just be careful not to step on anything valuable!”

-Sheila Bridges, New York

The Harlem-based designer for Bill Clinton also created the popular Harlem Toile de Jouy wallpaper.

Wallpaper the ceiling

“One of my favorite ways to combine wallpaper and passementerie is to paper the often-ignored ceiling and finish it with a tape trim, which adds such a surprising and luxurious detail. In this case, I used a wallpaper in a painted linen texture and added a small tape trim with faux nailheads around the edge of the ceiling where it meets the crown. Depending on the paper and trim that you use, it can be an affordable and easy way to dress up your ceiling or walls. I actually think a trim would be the perfect thing for dressing up a peelable wallpaper and making it extraordinary.”

-Michael Hampton, the District

The designer's projects include homes across the Washington area as well as in Santa Fe, N.M.; Napa Valley, Calif.; and Aspen, Colo.

Line your bookcases with fabric

“Lining the back of your bookcases with wall covering or fabric is a wonderful way to add depth, layering and richness to a room. This detail is visually unifying and helps bring together a disparate collection of objects and books. Also, adding a beautiful lining such as a grasscloth or velvet elevates your collection into something even more precious.”

-Jose Solis Betancourt and Paul Sherrill , the District

The pair have been partners in the firm Solis Betancourt & Sherrill since 1992 and co-authored "Essential Elegance."

Paint should complement the view

“In rooms where the view is paramount, the paint colors should blend with the exterior and be an extension of the exterior — in effect a seamless transition. This master bedroom has a very light gray blue ceiling to look like the sky and water. The wall color is a warm sand color that is a reflection of the sand on the beach just outside the windows. Also, the overall color palette and fabrics are in unison with the view and environment, not in competition.”

-Erin Paige Pitts, Gibson Island, Md., and Delray Beach, Fla.

A coastal-design specialist, she has worked on projects across the country.

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Chat Thursday at 11 a.m. Andrea Magno, a color and design expert at Benjamin Moore, joins staff writer Jura Koncius for our weekly online Q&A on decorating and household advice.
