

The Five Most Frequently Made Decorating Mistakes

I HAVE BEEN AN INTERIOR AND ARCHITECTURAL DESIGNER FOR NEARLY 20 YEARS, AND during that time, I have gone on literally thousands of home consultations. I have seen people who overdecorate and don't know when to stop, as well as people who are frozen with indecision and never really start. Decorating and remodeling can be overwhelming to many people; a stroll through the showrooms of the Pacific Design Center in West Hollywood will verify that. So many styles! So many fabrics! What to buy? What if I make a mistake? Well, people do make mistakes, and I see most of them. The sad part is that it would have cost less to do it right once than to do it wrong and later fix it. And living with the mistake is often worse than the money wasted.

Avoid the pitfalls of home design by looking out for these commonly made decorating disasters.

BY GAIL CLARIDGE

HOME & LIFESTYLES

So often even well-initiated projects fall short of excitement due to fear of flying. Commonly held decorating myths include "You can't go wrong with beige carpet" and "Deep colors are depressing and make a room look small." (They can also make a room look cozy—ask Ralph Lauren.)

In revisiting some of the homes I have designed over the years, I am always delighted to see how well the decorating has held up. Often homes done 10 years ago look as if they

were done yesterday. The main reason being timeless—not faddish—design. I have never had clients sorry that they spent a little more for higher quality, but I have seen clients who were sorry they didn't. Investing in fine furniture really pays off. It doesn't go out of style, and it holds up for years. Antiques are a good example. I am writing this article sitting in a 150-year-old English Windsor chair that is still as good today as it was when it was first made.

So that you can avoid some of the many pitfalls in decorating your home, I have com-

plied five of what I feel are the most commonly made mistakes in residential design.

M I S T A K E 1 **Working Without a Plan**

The most common mistake, beginning a design project without a plan, is quite literally like setting out on a roadtrip to a distant location without a map or any idea of how to get there. The likelihood of becoming lost at some point is almost assured. With this in mind, it is surprising that some people have never considered using a designer. When asked why, they say "I can't afford it." In reality, however, the reasonable price you pay a designer will come back to you many times over.

First, a well-planned and attractive interior will ultimately increase the value of your home. Should you decide to sell, it will also set your home apart from others and promote a quicker and more profitable sale.

Secondly, a well-thought-out plan will also help reduce or eliminate the emotional anxiety and monetary risk that accompanies an unguided design endeavor. A designer is like an insurance policy.

And thirdly, if you have your own sources, you may simply retain a designer for the plan and then follow it yourself. But the trick is knowing what to buy, what not to buy and where to buy it.

A plan should include a furniture layout, choice of style, colors and fabrics and a basic budget projection for each room. This allows you to decide what your priorities are and what things you can wait on. In most cases, purchasing through a designer costs less overall because you do not pay for mistakes you would have made on your own.

M I S T A K E 2 **Being Unrealistic in Your Decorating**

It's one thing to decorate your first home and quite another to be staring at the 5,000 square feet of blank white walls and the 30-foot vaulted ceilings of your second or third home, wondering why your old furniture looks like dollhouse furniture all of a sudden.

In designing the interior of a home, it is crucial to understand the needs of your family. A successful design is one that responds to and serves the needs of its users. Unfortunately, I have seen many homes done unrealistically.

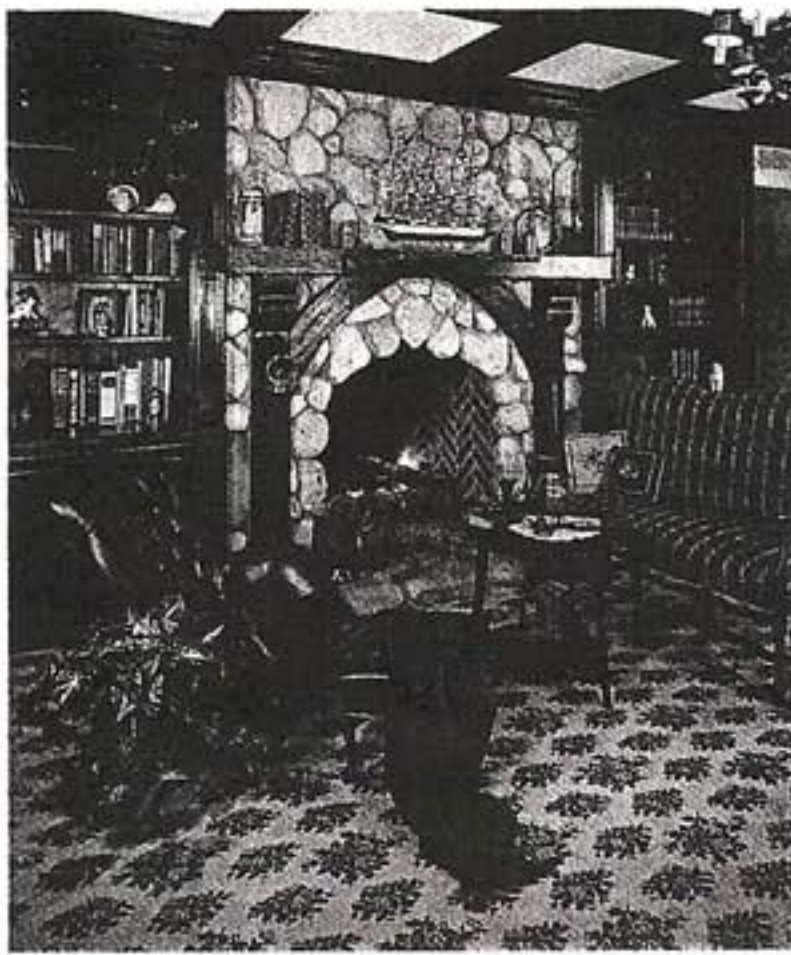
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For instance, a family with toddlers and coffee tables with sharp corners don't mix. Or I remember one homeowner with a family including three teenage boys who decided to decorated his home with white carpet and French Provincial furnishings. Needless to say, the result was a disaster. Not only were the boys uncomfortable and afraid to sit on the delicately scaled furnishings, but they were also afraid to walk on the white carpet. In short, the design did not respond to, or serve, the needs of the family. Contrary to popular belief, family members will not readily change their habits in response to new upholstery fabrics. To think so is "unrealistic."

M I S T A K E 3

Not Using Your Home to its Fullest Potential

Your home is a 24-hour-a-day functioning environment for you and your family. If you are like most people, a majority of your "home time" is spent in a casual way—eating, socializing and relaxing. If you truly count the number of times you entertain on a large scale, more



than likely it is only two or three times a year. Why then is it such a common occurrence that people designate vastly disproportionate amounts of living space and money to the creation of spaces for that "grand party" or once-a-year houseguest? Why let those two or three days a year dictate how your family lives for the rest of the year. If you

have plenty of room, great, but if you don't, then what?

I've seen large families crammed into a small family room trying to watch television. Though the room may not have enough seating, enough light or too small a TV, family members walk past the large formal living room that no one uses day after day to hang out in the informal family room. Try to make your home function for you! Function does not have to eliminate beauty. In fact, careful planning and forethought can produce excellent, attractive spaces that can serve multiple purposes.

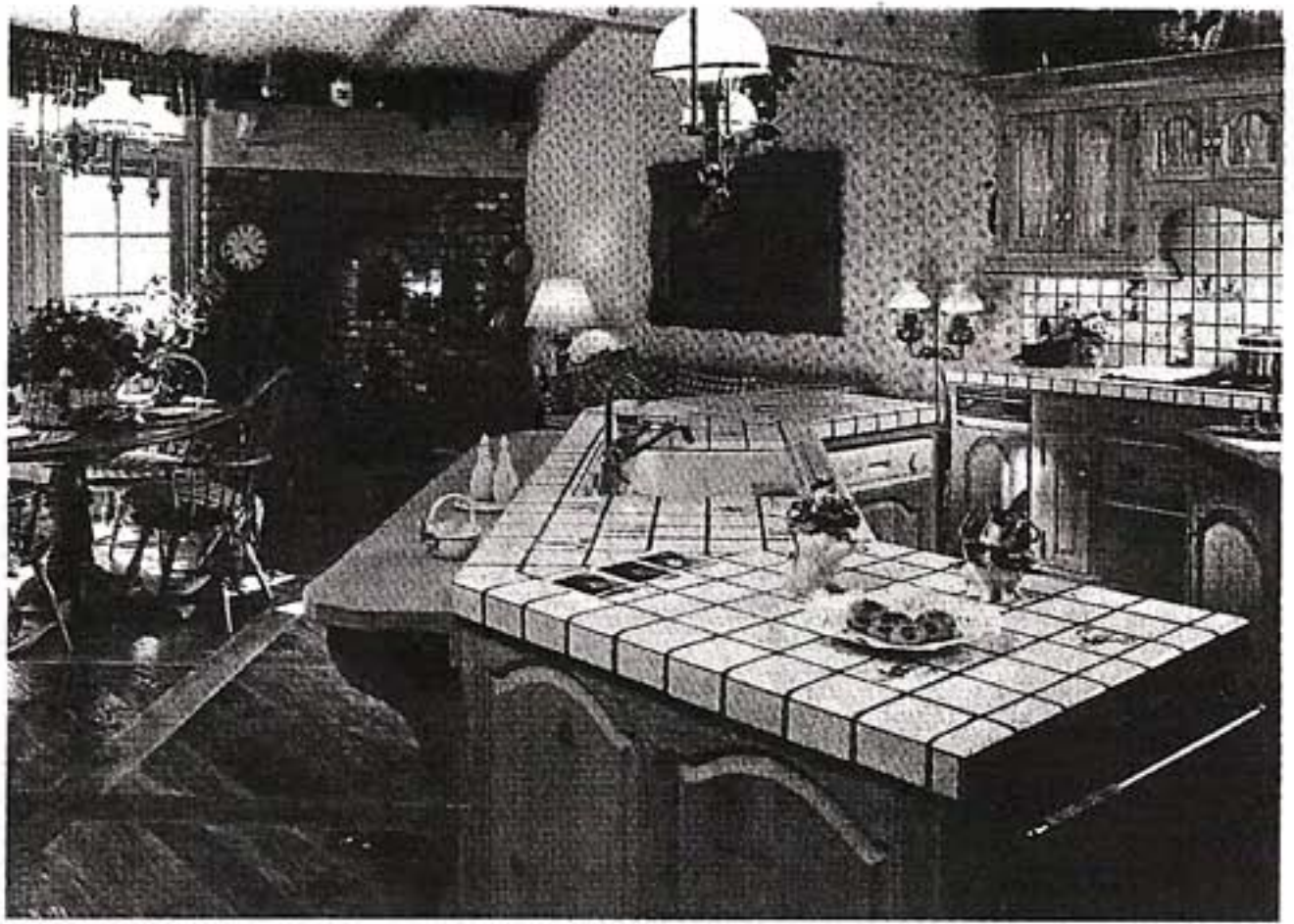
As a designer, I have actually witnessed a shift in the way people entertain. Even beyond the casual borders of Southern California, cozy elegant buffets are replacing large sit-down dinners. This may be partially due to convenience, but it's also due to the added personal interaction that more relaxed dining offers. At most large parties, everyone's in the kitchen anyways—how ironic!

M I S T A K E 4

Decorating Around A Mistake

When it comes to decorating around a mistake, the phrase "pennywise and pound foolish" rears its ugly head. For example, on a recent consultation I met a couple who had just purchased a 10-year-old home. The house's carpet was new, but the problem was it was pink, and they hated pink. Everything else about the house was great. After living with the pink carpet for two months, however, the couple actually considered keeping it and decorating around it, thus compounding the mistake. New carpet can be costly, but my recommendation was to change the carpet, keep the pad and save money somewhere else.

Another example in this area involves elements such as walls, windows, doors, tile and other design elements that may be considered "permanent" and therefore sacred or not to be touched. In believing this, many homeowners cheat themselves out of the opportunity to make very significant improvements at a relatively low cost. I removed a section of wall between a spare bedroom and kitchen, which gave the kitchen an eating area it never had and allowed us to enlarge the center island and add bar stools. Simply remov-



ing the wall allowed us to create a great new, large functional kitchen. Wall removal cost: \$1,000. Although I love fireplaces, their removal is sometimes a solution. If the fireplace takes up the only free wall in a room, you never use it and you need an entertainment center, this could be the solution for you.

M I S T A K E 5

Failure to Coordinate Interior and Exterior Designs

Landscaping to me is like the icing on the cake for a home. Unfortunately, for many, the icing doesn't go with the flavor of the cake.


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Over the years I have had to become part landscape architect in order to save the integrity of the homes I have designed. Recently, I received a frantic phone call from a client whose home I was working on. It was a beautiful country English manor house done in wonderful English tradition, complete with an authentic slate roof. My client was concerned that what her landscaper was about to plant was not what the house needed and thought perhaps I might be able to help. Needless to say, I put a quick stop to the palm trees that were about to go in.

Even when a yard starts out correct, in time it seems the gardeners have every bush trimmed into a perfect ball or square. Gardens should look natural, not manufactured. Gardening should be a blend of control and nurturing. Getting that rose vine to grow around the post or that vine to climb to the top of the gazebo takes time.

Coordinating your landscape and your home means knowing the architectural style of your home. Is it Southwestern, California ranch, English Tudor or Colonial? While cacti and palms are perfect for a Southwestern home, they are total incorrect for a Colonial residence.

Another area that is surprisingly often ignored is the true creative use of outdoor living space. Here in Southern California we are uniquely blessed with a delightful climate, and yet all too seldom do we utilize our yards as our home, when in reality they are one in the same. If I were to decorate a master bedroom in a chintz fabric covered with pink roses, I would not want to see orange gazanias outside the door. In short, any room with a window or a view has nature a part of its design scheme.

In spite of all the mistakes I have discussed in this article, decorating your home can be a very rewarding experience. It changes your life. I hopefully the tips I have shared with you will ease your fears and allow you to enter the wonderful world of design. 

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