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WHAT THE PROS KNOW

EXPERTS SOLVE DESIGN PROBLEMS ALL THE TIME. HERE ARE THEIR SOLUTIONS FOR SIX OF THEM.

By Barbara Ballinger

How do I use color when it terrifies me?

Thomas Jayne, principal, Thomas Jayne Studio Inc., New York. Color can transport a room in a big way, especially if you can't afford a lot of furniture. I tell clients a great paint job will set furniture off well, but an inexpensive paint job will make great furniture look cheap. For those who are very nervous, I suggest using a shade that's half as bright since light doubles the color, so it's less overwhelming. To test the color, paint a large piece of foam core, place it on different walls and study it at different times of the day and night. Use a flat paint that won't show imperfections. 212-838-9080, thomasjaynestudio.com.

Josette Buisson, artistic director, Pittsburgh Paints, Pittsburgh. Beige and white are often default colors because people don't know what else to use. People need to find the color that fits their individual taste, lifestyle and mood and understand that color is the least expensive way to get a huge bang for their buck. A great way to do so is to use our company's Color Sense Game on www.voiceofcolor.com. After they visualize different color possibilities, we suggest they use our sample pots of color, which are just enough to cover a 2-foot-by-2-foot wall area. They should do so with a few colors they like and in different areas of the room, since light changes the color. pittsburghpaints.com.

Max Strang, principal, Max Strang Architecture, Miami. We chop up maps randomly and apply them to walls as wallpaper. These wallpapers can be as colorful as clients want and still retain their great abstract quality. 305-569-0068, strangarchitects.com.

Merilee Elliott, president, Merilee Elliott Interiors, Chicago. The computer is one of the best tools to help me communicate with clients about color choices and help them instantly "get" how color can change their rooms. I use the Benjamin Moore Web site, www.benjaminmoore.com, which allows me to work up a paint scheme for walls, millwork and the ceiling with the client watching. I come up with choices and do an online presentation. After we've selected color possibilities, I paint big swatches on their walls so they can try the possibilities. 312-222-1313, merilee.com.

Tim Creveling, owner, Watercolor Walls Inc., paint manufacturer, Seattle. My company's tagline is, "Life's too short for white walls." My product looks more like a watercolor wash on walls, is more relaxing to the eye and easier for people to accept if they're afraid

of using color and don't want it so jarring. 206-329-4984, watercolorwalls.com and cloudwash.com.

How do I arrange a small room?

Duo Dickinson, owner, Duo Dickinson Architect, Madison, Conn., and author of "The House You Build" (The Taunton Press, 2004). The biggest problem homeowners have is that they forget that a small room can only have one focal point—a TV, fireplace, portrait of Aunt Bertha or view outdoors. They need to organize furnishings around that focal point rather than try for several focal points. Otherwise, everything will seem dissipated. They also shouldn't be afraid to group furniture closer together than what they traditionally have done because it adds to the single focal point and makes the room seem larger. 203-245-0093, duodickinson.com.

Richard Shapiro, owner, Richard Shapiro Antiques and Works of Art, antiques and design gallery, Los Angeles. When decorating a small room, I suggest gravitating toward a few high-quality and oversized items such as a very good sofa and chairs, a dramatic mirror, a beautiful chandelier, one great piece of art and a simple floor covering such as sisal or sea grass. The palette should be monochromatic and pale. It's a common mistake to downscale objects, thinking it will make the area look more spacious; the opposite is true. If you follow this rule, everything won't become old and tired-looking. 310-275-6700, rshapiroantiques.com.

Shane Reilly, president, Shane Reilly Interiors, New York and San Francisco. I like to use a color block with large areas of single colors, then break up the large areas with a bit of pattern to create depth. First your eye sees the pattern, then the large blocks of color behind it. It will look like there's more space in the room than if you use all solids. 415-602-4454, shanereilly.com.

Sarah Susanka, architect, Susanka Studios, Raleigh, N.C., and co-author of "Inside the Not So Big House" (The Taunton Press). The key is to get furnishings proportional to the room. The biggest challenge is that furniture has gotten so much bigger, as have many houses. My advice is to measure your room carefully before you buy so you don't bring in furnishings that are too large. If you have a small living room, you may not be able to use a 7-foot sofa and might be better off with a love seat. I don't agree with those who think you should use larger but fewer pieces of furniture because I think that makes the room look smaller. Also, make choices gradually. Add a sofa, then a chair and see how the room feels and looks, which I call "test driving the room" to avoid getting stuck with too many items. Where you put the furnishings also affects how the room looks. If you put some pieces in the corner, you'll have more floor area and the room will seem larger. notsobighouse.com and susanka.com.

Any new ideas for the bathroom?

Janice Rohan, owner, Park Avenue Design, St. Louis. Use a scale that's surprising, such as a large-size print wallpaper in a small powder room, a fabulous sconce and a very special vanity, such as a vessel bowl. 314-863-0095.

Suzanne Pickett Martinson, author, "The New Southwest Home: Innovative Ideas for Every Room" (Northland Publishing), Paradise Valley, Ariz. Adding a fireplace in a bathroom where there's room creates an extra sense of warmth and intimacy. A comfortable chair to lounge if there's also space adds a sense of relaxation and makes the bathroom more sacred. A chandelier and artworks can be unexpected delights. These details show you care for your guests.

Lisa Lichtenberger, owner, LJI Design Inc. LLC, Dutchess County, N.Y. To enhance a guest bathroom, be sure there's a large enough counter space so they can spread out their toiletries. Make the shower area large enough so they feel good showering. Add nice lights and put all on dimmers with switches. 845-878-3798.

Robin V. Bell, senior designer, McMillen Inc., New York. Splurge, splurge, splurge! All appointments should be top quality and inviting-begging to be used. Include a handsome hanging shelf on the wall in a mahogany Georgian or Regency period or something modern in steel, glass or plastic. Well thought out, flattering lighting is a must. Install restats (dimmers) wherever possible and be sure to keep utilitarian lights and decorative lights on independent switches-one for practicality and one for romantic effects. Punctuate walls with an unexpected piece of art such as an autograph, original cartoon, archival photo or lithograph. Medicine cabinet mirrors should be replaced with an antique mahogany or contemporary piece. Vanity pulls and hardware can be eccentric and should not be the same finish as the plumbing. 212-753-5600.

Alexandra Karram, president, Alexandra Karram Interiors Inc., Boca Raton, Fla. I LOVE chandeliers in a bathroom. Paint, molding and glass tile are always nice. Wall-mounted faucets and vessel sinks are new and beautiful. 561-447-7711.

Jose Sol's Betancourt, principal, Solis Betancourt, design firm, Washington, D.C. A boring bathroom with a wall-to-wall plate glass mirror can be dressed up by installing a beautifully carved wooden framed mirror suspended with a silk cording attached from crown molding. 202-659-8732, solisbetancourt.com.

Stuart Cohen, principal, Stuart Cohen and Julie Hacker Architects, Evanston, Ill. We pay special attention to wall tile and where it starts and stops. Wainscoting can go up to the height of a vanity, windows or doors. Don't spend money on the most expensive wall tile or use tile in fussy patterns. You can find nice tile at inexpensive places. But do buy the best faucets, tub fillers and shower heads you can afford; they're like beautiful jewelry you wear with a simple dress. This gives your room a sense of simplicity and visual organization. We also recommend mirroring an entire wall rather than just putting a medicine cabinet in place. You can mount sconces above the mirror or directly on the mirror. 847-328-2500, cohen-hacker.com.

How can I give a ceiling impact?

Richard Shapiro, owner, Richard Shapiro, Antiques and Works of Art, Los Angeles. Many times people think the way to raise a ceiling visually is to paint it lighter than the rest of the room or give it a lick of white paint. Actually, painting it a few shades darker makes it look higher. When there's little natural light and the room is used mostly at night, you can paint it almost black. Select a light fixture that makes a statement, such as an Italian or French design from the 1940s. I've found wonderful lights shaped like fruit clusters, such as pears in amber and red colors. 310-275-6700, www.rshapiroantiques.com.

William Caligari, owner, William Caligari Interiors/Architecture, architecture and design firm, Great Barrington, Mass. Simple drywall details in the ceiling, spaced 24 to 30 inches away from the walls, give the effect of an expensive, high-end plastered ceiling like you find in the mansions in Newport, R.I. This is an inexpensive treatment that makes a ceiling look higher. 413-528-3556, williamcaligari.com.

Alice Busch, president/founder, Great Falls Distinctive Interiors Inc., Chantilly, Va. Create circles from molding. The area of the ceiling will determine the radius of each circle and whether you have two, three or four. Another idea: Create a tented ceiling with iridescent fabric that you gather, which creates a romantic, surprising effect when people walk in. Be careful when selecting your fabric. The larger the room, the heavier the fabric can be; otherwise it may overwhelm the space. A third idea: Add a prefabricated dome, with a diameter from 24 inches to 8 feet, depending on the size and height of the room. Many are available in polyfoam or plaster. 703-759-4848, gfdii.com.

Debbie Wiener, owner, Designing Solutions, design firm, Silver Spring, Md. In one client's home, the room had a sloped ceiling and needed to be cozier. We painted the ceiling a dark chocolate brown, walls a light gold color and molding pumpkin. We also installed half-round molding. Now it's a romantic bedroom with the scale all in balance. 301-445-6336, mydesigningsolutions.com.

Ellen Wortham, senior interior designer, June Roesslein Interiors, design firm, Chesterfield, Mo. If architectural features don't exist, use 1-inch to 2-inch flat molding, depending on the scale, and create a square on the ceiling. Paint the area darker in the center and lighter on the outer portion. This gives a flat ceiling depth. You can paint the moldings the trim color of the room and add crown molding. 636-394-1465, juneroessleininteriors.com.

Stuart Cohen, principal, Stuart Cohen and Julie Hacker Architects, Evanston, Ill. Ceilings shape spaces as significantly as walls; look at ceilings by Michelangelo or Frank Lloyd Wright.

Using wallpaper on a ceiling, as William Morris did, differentiates the ceiling as a separate plane from the side walls. 847-328-2500, cohen-hacker.com.

How can I make the entrance a scene-stealer?

Richard Landry, principal, Landry Design Group, architecture firm, Los Angeles, Height always creates impact, so if you can make the ceiling higher, do so. A stairway adds impact, especially if it has a sculptural quality and beautiful detailing. Skylights can add natural light and impact, too. Sometimes you can only make these changes by giving up some square footage on a second floor, but it's worth doing. If you can't open up the foyer this way, consider opening it up to rooms on either side rather than having rooms separated from one another, which is more the case in Eastern houses than those in California. 310-444-1404, landrydesigngroup.com.

Lee Bryan, owner, Lee Bryan Interior Design, Atlanta. I like to use mirrors to reflect space and create a mood for the rest of the art. I also like to have a shelf for owners to drop off stuff such as keys. Another way to wow them is with flowers, which always make a good impression, dress up the space and show you care. 404-817-3313, leebryanid.com.

Carmela Sanchez, principal, 2B1B, design firm, Chicago, You want to amaze and surprise your guests, so create a dramatic scene that provokes their curiosity, appeals to all their senses and sets the mood for your get-together. You don't get a second chance to make a first impression. Ways to appeal to all the senses are: piece of art dramatically illuminated, delicately scented candles, a table with a small fountain, and walls covered in a beautiful dark finish of red or mustard. 312-701-1011.

Robin V. Bell, senior designer, McMillen Inc., design firm, New York, Imagination rules. First and foremost, create a visual anchor. This can be a spectacular center table or console table or sculpture. Color can be fanciful. Front halls are a great place to use an overall bold pattern on walls. When selecting lights, especially lanterns, the general rule is to oversize. 212-753-5600.

What details do you pay great attention to?

Shane Reilly, president, Shane Reilly Inc., New York and San Francisco. Clean up everything. Hide cords, fluff pillows, take wrinkles out of rugs. Use black-out lined draperies in bedrooms and guest rooms. 415-602-4454, shanereilly.com.

Thomas Jayne, principal, Thomas Jayne Studio, design firm, New York. Cleaned and polished floors, everything in the best possible condition, playing up old versus new or natural versus manmade. I might juxtapose the skull of a cow against a giltwood German clock, for instance, or put a big seashell in a contemporary setting. 212-838-9080, thomasjaynestudio.com.

Jose Sol's Betancourt, principal, Solis Betancourt, design firm, Washington, D.C. Sparkling clean windows make any room look better. 202-659-8734, solisbetancourt.com.

Afiya Adams, partner, Aha Design, Chicago. We focus on wall treatments. If clients are scared of paint, we suggest a flat color and a different technique such as a faux finish. We also pay attention to furniture arrangements-whether you want an intimate setting for conversation or an open setting for entertainment. The third detail is art and accessories-sculpture, three-dimensional art, tassels on draperies. Most of our clients are well-traveled, so they want to show off something they've brought back. What we help them do makes the difference between a room full of furniture versus one that's eye-catching, harmonious and completed. 312-225-9294.

Barbara Ballinger writes about interiors.

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