

Interior Designer Diana Gourguechon was quoted in an article that was syndicated in newspapers across the country.



Reduce, Reuse, Repurpose - At a time when greater cost consciousness is needed, start by shopping at home first

Barbara Ballinger, CTW FEATURES

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With homes not selling now as briskly as a year or two ago, there's more reason to maximize enjoyment of surroundings until the market turns around and potential buyers emerge. But since spending a lot of money on an addition or remodeling project may not make financial sense, it behooves homeowners to get smart about how they can alter their homes at little or no cost. Three sure-fire ways to do so are by reducing, reusing and repurposing their existing rooms and furnishings. These ideas are hardly new, according to design pros who've advocated the approaches for years. Lauri Ward, author of "Downsizing Your Home with Style" (HarperCollins, 2008) and owner of the New York design firm Use What You Have Interiors, is among those who believe that homeowners should first shop at home. "I've been recommending these ideas for years - and through several recessions. They're also good for people who want to downsize and sort out what they don't want to take with them and repurpose their remaining pieces to fit better into their new smaller spaces," she says.

Reusing what you have and possibly altering dimensions or how they're used in a different way is also as good for the environment as for the wallet, says designer Diana Gourguechon of Interior Redesign in Evanston, Ill. "It's not only a financial decision to decorate with thrift in mind but an ethical, environmental and philosophical one. I'm interested in dispelling the notion that we live in a 'cast-off' society," she says. Here are designer suggestions for other smart and economical tips: Pare Stuff, Pare Mistakes

By reducing your furnishings and other "stuff," you can see and enjoy what you have more clearly and make fewer decorating mistakes. Once you've got extraneous stuff removed, Ward says it's important to avoid common decorating mistakes with what you keep. A big no-no, she says, is to avoid including furniture of different heights in the same room since it creates a roller-coaster visual effect. She also recommends leaving one wall free of art as a way to give eyes a place to rest and have some visual relief. The art that's removed can be used in another room. Gourguechon also cautions homeowners not to crowd the room with too much stuff when they're rearranging. When you start to feel everything's not breathing as much, stop adding more, she warns.

Alter What You Keep, Get a New Look

By reusing your possessions and accessories with some minor alterations or by reusing them in a slightly different way, you'll gain the look and feeling of having new objects. There are countless ways to make affordable minor changes, these experts say. Ward suggests taking a wall unit whose shelves are not filled and removing some of them so you have space for other purposes - possibly for a widescreen TV or a dry bar.

Tabletop groupings with too many objects and often-mismatched ones should also be pruned and reorganized for greater impact, she says. Sharon McCormick, a designer based in Durham, Ct., suggests remaking an armoire that no longer holds clothing into a freestanding office by drilling a hole for wires in its back, installing an inexpensive grommet for the wires to go through and pulling up a chair for desk work. The bottom of the armoire can be retrofitted to hold stacks of paper, a printer, fax machine and PC tower.

If that idea doesn't appeal, the armoire can be reused in a bathroom to store towels and toiletries. McCormick also has repurposed sofas and tables. She's cut down the sofas into love seats, which may cost a few hundred dollars but is still much cheaper than buying a new \$5,000 sofa. And she's turned dining and side tables into coffee tables with brass caps on feel for a more finished look. Trying either of these methods is also a good green practice, since you're not adding to a landfill.

Maximize Square Footage

By repurposing rooms that may have languished for whatever reason, you gain more square footage with minimal changes and cost. A dining room, which often is used only for holiday and special-occasion dinners, can become a library with some inexpensive built-in or freestanding bookshelves installed where a rarely used sideboard or hutch used to stand, says McCormick.

"A lot of book lovers don't have a dedicated room for their books. Books get scattered all over the house, and it can be difficult to find which closet you stored your old favorite books in," she says.

The dining table can also double when needed as a desk. A living room that's also barely used in many homes these days can become a much more needed home office or sitting room with furniture arranged for more conducive chatting, Ward says.

"Instead of an L-shaped sofa, which is uncomfortable for talking, she suggests a U-shaped arrangement or one sofa and two chairs.

And there are countless uses for children's rooms when kids have moved on to their own homes - as an exercise or hobby room or home office, each with a daybed, in case a child or guest stays overnight. Basements also offer limitless possibilities, particularly as home theaters since many lack natural light, which means less expense to camouflage and darken windows.

And when buying anything new to fill in, buy smarter by first checking what's available at second-hand and consignment shops, house sales and on the Web at sites like eBay and Craigslist. Gourguechon found handsome mosaic tiles online to replace one client's existing linoleum floor for a fraction of the retail price. "We paid at least 60 percent less than we would have at retail," she says.