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Big Bang for the Buck

Small updates that can transform your home

By Lis King

The heady days of over-the-top remodeling, easy credit and sure-fire returns on projects are over, but according to the U.S. Census Bureau, we're ready to improve our homes again. In modest ways, mind you. Money is still tight, and homeowners aren't entirely confident that the housing slump has bottomed out.

The good news is that there are plenty of affordable projects that'll make your home feel and look better, and designers claim you may even be able to improve your home without spending any money at all.

"Often, we do home improvements simply because we're bored with our surroundings," explains designer Mark Polo of Boonton. "Moving the furniture and accessories around could be the change we crave, and remember to edit, edit, edit. We're an acquisition-minded society, and a cluttered room is never attractive.

"Sometimes homeowners face seemingly unsolvable dilemmas," continues Polo. "Cavernous rooms, unmanageable collections, odd traffic flow and off-center fireplaces are typical examples. Buying new furniture won't solve those problems. Instead you might hire a professional designer to help you. Handing over a home to an objective

outsider for a few hours could save thousands of dollars otherwise spent on new furnishings. The "re-designer" will mix and match items from several spots in the house, group accessories for impact, and re-hang artwork. In the process, the homeowner is re-introduced to under-used spaces and learns to limit display items to a few favorites or to rotate accessories."

KITCHEN MAKEOVERS

In her own kitchen, designer Pat Valentine Ziv of Mountainside demonstrated that small, frugal updates can bring big results. The kitchen was too traditional for Pat's taste and the cooktop, a worn butcherblock section and the outdated microwave had to be replaced. She gave the cabinets a serious cleaning and treated them to handles in a graphite metal finish, augmented the existing Corian countertop with two sections in a contrasting color and chose a strong-colored wall and ceiling paint. This produced the sharp contemporary look she craved.

Replacing cabinet hardware is one of the most effective kitchen upgrade, agrees designer Antoinette Fraser, owner of St. Clair Kitchen & Home in South Orange. She also likes changing faucets.

Above, open shelves are great additions to kitchens. Design by St. Clair Kitchen & Home

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Woodwork

Furniture

Lighting

Carpets

Window
Treatments

Original Art

Accessories

Fabric

Dinnerware



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Photograph by James Weber



Above, Bring on the paint for an instant lift. Even painting just one or two walls can make all the difference. Courtesy of Benjamin Moore Paints

“They’re to the kitchen what jewelry is to a dress,” she says. “And you needn’t buy the most expensive faucets out there. You can get a circa \$200 knockoff of a \$1,500 original. And remember that a wood-paneled appliance is less expensive — and easier to maintain — than a stainless steel one.”

If you must replace cabinets, Fraser wants you to know that products from small manufacturers are less expensive, and if you’re offered the option of plywood versus particleboard sides, go with the latter. Particleboard is actually stronger and heavier than plywood, she explains.

BUDGET IDEAS

Polo recommends open shelves in kitchens, and elsewhere, for great impact at little cost.

“Support simple planks on purchased brackets and use the shelves to display good-looking, favorite items, china in the kitchen, a row of potted herbs or whatever else gladdens your heart. In other rooms, such shelves could display collections.”

He also likes lighting as a major make-over tool “Pendant lighting over an island can give a kitchen a dramatic lift,” he says, “and a favorite designer trick is up-lighting. Put an exotic plant — say a Bird of Paradise — in a corner of a room and highlight it with up-lighting. The effect is fantastic.”

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A FAMILY-OWNED BUSINESS

Designer Darlene Molnar of Forked River thinks bookcases make practically any room look great. "Books are very chic," she comments. One of her favorite budget tricks is faking a headboard for a bed. "Install a curtain rod on the wall behind the bed and hang pillows from it," she explains.

Mirrors are high on designer Nina Karamallis' list of big-bang-for-the-buck items. Co-owner of British Home Emporium in Madison, she touts the way a beautiful mirror reflects light and adds depth to a room.

Picking up on the public hesitation to loosen the purse strings for major improvements, manufacturers have responded with some unusual budget products. An intriguing one is "liquid stainless steel," a product that is brushed on an appliance to give it that high-end look, without the expense.

And what's a high-end look without some high-end sound to add to your enjoyment of the home — especially if the price tag is low? You can have a basic surround system for the family room for as little as \$200, says Ryan Herd of One Sound Choice in Pompton Lakes. You could also pipe music throughout the house, or outside, for a fairly reasonable cost.



Dress up porches and entrances with millwork, then paint it to complement the house. Courtesy of Benjamin Moore Paints

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TILE TO THE RESCUE

Everybody is in love with stone surfaces, but Fraser says that if you want to save money, porcelain look-alikes are excellent alternatives.

"There are porcelain tiles that mimic virtually every natural stone variety," she explains. "They look great, are easy to maintain and they'll save you a bundle."

If you want the real thing, Glenn Wyder, general manager of Mediterranean Tile & Marble in Fairfield and Bernardsville, says you can certainly afford tile if you limit its use to small areas.

"Stick to small projects with a lot of visibility," he explains. "A kitchen backsplash is a great example. You don't need a lot of product for this area, but it's on eye level, so the impact is great."

"Another place to satisfy your craving for natural tile is the fireplace," adds Wyder. "Here, too, you don't need much of the product, but since the fireplace is always the focal point of a room, this is a very effective remodel."

He points out that a tile medallion is an impressive way to spruce up a floor, and it costs a lot less if you choose a pre-designed pattern. Today's three top natural stone products are marble, limestone and travertine.



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One pop of color, in the form of a chair, or even a pillow, can transform a room. Courtesy of Mark Polo

BRING ON THE PAINT

Every designer under the sun agrees that the most effective home improvement device is color.

“Be it in the form of new paint on the walls, a bright-colored chair or something as simple as a few new pillows,” says Polo, “a pop of color can transform any room.”

“Copper was one of the colors I embraced when I redid my own home,” says Pat Valentine Ziv, “but I think I liked it best in bedding. It’s delicious. Another way I apply color to my home is with art. We have wonderful pieces brought home one at a time from trips to Israel. I rotate these paintings frequently. The jolts of color are especially exciting when they suddenly appear in a new place.”

A special color trick is offered by Karamallis. “When you paint a room one of the neutral hues, blend 10 percent of the wall color into the ceiling color,” she says. “It adds a special warmth to a room.”

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ARCHITECTURAL DETAILS

In recent years, homeowners have come to appreciate crown moldings and chair rails as an easy and affordable way to add elegance to rooms, but there are many more types of architectural trim that can banish blandness from a cookie-cutter room.

For example, companies such as Home Trimwork of Bordentown craft fireplace mantels, cornices, archways, balusters, handrails and built-in bookcases as well



A chair rail lends itself to different decorative treatments top and bottom. Here, it separates two color-coordinated wallpapers. Courtesy of York Wallcoverings

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as all manner of custom moldings to underscore a home's architectural style. The styles of crown moldings run from simple to ornate, and when a particular elegance is called for, several moldings may be combined.

Wood moldings and many other architectural details are now mimicked in plastic, which makes them especially affordable, and designers say that when they're painted it's impossible to tell plastic from the real thing.

EXTERIOR PIZZAZZ

Architectural details also offer exterior style. Think of adding scrollwork to gables or porches, or put columns by your front door, say designers. Shutters are an architectural add-on that enables the homeowner to ratchet up the exterior color scheme, and what's more welcoming than a front door painted a delicious color?

Window boxes planted with pretty flowers in summer and evergreens in winter are always eye catching, and now there are special versions that can straddle deck railings. Pots of flowers flanking the front door or marching up the front steps are sure to add lots of curb appeal.

Finally, don't forget outdoor lighting. Every landscape architect will tell you that this is the premier way to create outdoor drama. Use up-lighting to accent a beautiful specimen tree, for example, and spotlight your home's most attractive architectural features. Now that there are so many styles and varieties of solar lighting, you don't even have to worry about installation costs.