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ASK AN *interior designer*

Looking to update your scheme? Need some professional design advice? Jo Hamilton answers your most frequently asked questions

Where should I start when putting together a room design?

Think about how you want the room to feel and write a brief for yourself, choosing colours and textures to complement it. Reds, oranges and yellows will make a room feel bright, but it's important to balance warmer colours with cooler textures such as glass and steel. Blues and greens can be calming, but also feel cold, so it's good to balance this with layered fabrics and soft furnishings. It's helpful to prepare a sample board showing your ideas for furniture, fabrics, papers and paints. Once everything is laid out, it's easier to see what works and what doesn't and avoid expensive mistakes.

WHAT ARE THE MOST COMMON MISTAKES?

Impulse buying has to be one of the biggest errors, particularly when shops drop their prices during the sales. It's easy to think you've picked up a bargain only to discover that what you've purchased just doesn't suit the space when you get it home. To avoid this, make sure you work within a tight colour palette and plan carefully to ensure the finished scheme works as a whole. When you're shopping, it can be helpful to take with you any colour swatches and fabric samples that you've already decided on.

How can you tell good design from bad design?

The trick is to spend as much as you can afford on the key elements. Quality flooring, luxury window treatments and a couple of beautiful pieces of furniture will set the backdrop for an elegant scheme. Floorboards go up in price the wider they get; opt for the largest ones that your budget permits. Curtains look wonderful interlined and running floor to ceiling. One or two high-quality pieces of furniture – perhaps a reupholstered antique chair, or a sculptural chandelier – will put any scheme on the right path.

The dos & don'ts for using colour

Understanding how colours work can have a huge impact on which tones you choose to use for a particular situation. Warm colours (reds, oranges and yellows) and cool colours (blues, greens and purples) will have very different effects on your environment. Warm or dark shades visually advance, while cool or light colours recede. You can use this to play with the proportions of a room; a long narrow space will feel much more square if the two shorter walls are painted in a dark colour. High ceilings can be visually lowered with dark, warm hues and likewise low ceilings heightened with pale or cool colours. →



WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO SOMEONE WANTING TO CREATE A UNIQUE INTERIOR?

Commissioning bespoke furniture is the ideal way to create a totally original look and it's not as expensive as you might think. It allows you to get exactly what you want and can bring in personality at the same time. There are some extremely talented craftspeople in the UK and some of the smaller, family-run companies will be able to work within your budget. Depending on finishes, a dining table might cost you between £500 and £5,000, so there's plenty of scope to get what you want.

Are there any particular colour trends to watch out for?

This year's contemporary interiors are all about creativity and a bit of fun. One key trend is bright geometrics; fashion catwalks are brimming with them, and this has filtered into interiors through gorgeous prints and striking shapes. This look works best against a neutral background – try plain white or soft grey – and with simple, softly shaped furniture that has a retro edge. Go for big splashes of colour on armchairs and sofas, with printed cushions to break up the colour blocks. Oranges, apple greens, citrus yellows and reds are all strong colours this year.

How do I make a small space feel bigger?

Monochromatic schemes are great for small rooms and lighter colours – greys and off-whites – work particularly well. Keep your furniture the same colour as the walls and choose pieces that allow you to see as much of the floor as possible. Large-format tiles, laid diagonally, will make a room feel more spacious, as will hiding away trinkets and ensuring that you don't collect too much clutter.

Handmade tiles, from £4.82 each, all Fired Earth (0845 366 0400; firedearth.com)

▼ Beat pendant lights in brass in black lacquer, from £255 each, Tom Dixon at Heal's (0870 024 0780; heals.co.uk)

Do you have one ultimate design tip?

Lighting, lighting, lighting! It's so often an afterthought when it should be one of the first things that you consider. Even the most beautifully designed interior will fall flat if it's not properly lit. To create a successful scheme, you should consider the different ways the room will be used and create a layer of light to suit each scenario. Ambient light, which is general background lighting, provides a backdrop that you can build the other layers on. Task lighting offers targeted light for cooking, reading, working, etc, while accent lighting picks out features within a room and adds atmosphere. Putting each layer on it's own dimmable circuit will allow you to change the ambiance of the room instantly.

I love the industrial look – what's the best way to create it?

Industrial chic uses reclaimed, functional pieces at the heart of the scheme, celebrating the craftsmanship of utilitarian design. Exposed structural elements, such as bare-brick walls, polished cement floors and RSJs, are all welcome components in this look. The style works best with sleek, one-off designer pieces – artwork, lighting and furniture – set against brightly coloured accessories. Look for over-sized metal lighting, a scrubbed wood or old metal table for your dining area (these can be picked up cheaply at auction houses) and old storage units. Finish the look with one or two designer pieces or quirky accessories, such as a giant Anglepoise lamp in fashionable tangerine orange, to add a hit of colour. **GD**

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