Designs for life

Interior designer to the stars **JO HAMILTON** *shares her expert answers to the décor questions she's most commonly asked by clients*

WHERE DO I START?

For me, a home is about the people who live there and as such it should tell the story of those people. Think about what defines you as a person, couple or family and go on the hunt for a piece that you feel really sums you up. Artwork, a feature rug or a fabric with three or more colours is a pretty good place to start, as it will give you a base to work from. Pull the colours out from the piece and use them in the accessories — cushions, a group of vases, etc, to create a scheme that will hang together perfectly.

PICTURE: MICHAEL FARRELL FURNITURE

What are the most *common design mistakes*?

Impulse buying is right at the top of the list for me. It's very easy to be blown off course by an unbeatable offer in the sales, only to discover once you get it home that it is a little too big, a little too strong in colour, or it simply doesn't suit the space. Good design is about making sure every piece hangs together perfectly and has its own special part to play in the overall scheme. Write a brief for yourself, collect colour samples and fabric swatches, measure your proposed furniture and take photos of all the pieces you're thinking of buying before you actually do. Then step back and look at everything together before heading for the shops. It's obvious — but foolproof — and it's the best way to make sure you don't make expensive mistakes. You know right from the off that your design will work.

I DON'T LIKE COLOUR MUCH, SO HOW CAN I KEEP MY DESIGN INTERESTING?

Colour is not the only way to add interest to a room — there are many other options. Layers of texture, natural woods, hand-washed linens, textured wallpapers and velvets will round the edges and make a room feel comfortable and warm. Patterns can also be interesting and will add weight, even in neutral shades. Try grouping a large, medium and small pattern together, to show the contrast and to create a mini feature in the room. Sculptural shapes are another great addition to a more neutral scheme. They give the eye something to play on and bring in an organic, fluid feel to the mix. Unusual lamp bases, mirrors and coffee tables make great features, so look for something with a little bit of movement and flow in it. Books have so much character and instantly make a room feel homely and warm. There's no reason why a lovely collection of old books can't form a central feature in a scheme. Bookcases either side of an open fire are particularly welcoming and give a relaxed symmetry, which can be very calming and inviting. Don't give up on colour entirely! Experiment with inky tones — they have a wonderfully rich and elegant quality that will sit back and will not take over.

PICTURE: DFS

HOW CAN I MAKE A SMALL ROOM FEEL BIGGER?

There are lots of ways to open up a room visually and to make it feel bigger. Of the many ways to achieve this, colour is the most powerful. Light, cool colours such as whites, greys, greens and blues appear to recede, thereby making walls seem further back. It is such a simple thing to do and yet so effective. Staying with colour, choose furniture in the same colour as the walls. This will make large pieces of furniture appear smaller and less intrusive — they will almost melt into the wall behind. Avoid too much contrast in colour — neutral, harmonious or monochromatic colour schemes work well.

Dark colours visually advance and close a space down, so keep the ceiling light in colour and make sure plenty of light is allowed to flood the ceiling to maximise a sense of space and height. Oversized and even standard-sized furniture will quickly overpower a small room. Reducing the scale of the furniture slightly will trick the eye into thinking the room is taller. Again, remembering that dark colours visually advance, make sure you don't allow dark shadows to appear in the corners of the room. Light all four corners with directional spotlights, table lamps, floor lamps — anything to lift the darker tones.

PICTURE: IKEA

Are there any *design no-nos*?

Short curtains — they are just awful! Think of curtains as you would a pair of beautiful shoes. A less expensive outfit will look like it is straight from a Paris runway with the right pair of shoes. In the same way, a good pair of curtains finishes an interior and gives an elegant polish. Curtains should run from floor to ceiling for a luxurious feel, and they should sit back from both sides of the window to allow the light to flood in. Another great tip is to interline your curtains. Interlining dresses up a cost-effective fabric, allowing it to drape elegantly and therefore making it appear more expensive.

Should I hide the TV?

I'm not a huge fan of designing a room around the television. Personally, I feel comfortable and elegant home design is about creating social spaces to enjoy with family and friends, so I'd much rather see two beautiful sofas facing each other than one big sofa facing a television. That said, most of us enjoy a cosy night in with a great film and there's nothing wrong with that, so there *are* other options. There is some very clever technology available now that allows the television to sit behind a canvas. The canvas rolls up at the click of a switch and it's impossible to tell it is anything other than a piece of art when the television is hidden. It's a very practical solution, but it's not the cheapest. A more cost effective option might be to hide the television behind cabinet doors, or set it into a unit with sliding doors that cover the television when it's not in use. Another thought, and this is one of my favourites, might be to consider a dropdown screen and a projector. It's one of the most practical answers to the issue and given that the screen can be as big as you like, it gives you a 'best of both' solution.

IS LIGHTING IMPORTANT?

Lighting is absolutely vital to the success of any scheme. We tend to leave the lighting plan to the end and actually it's one of the first things we should be thinking about. Successful lighting schemes use layers of light not just to physically light the space but also to bring in mood and personality. Ideally, a room should encompass four types of lighting: ambient (to blanket the room in light), task (focused on an particular area for cooking, reading or working), accent (to highlight architectural features or a piece of statement furniture) and mood (to create atmosphere and texture).

I LOVE COLOUR — HOW DO I GET IT RIGHT?

It's well worth investing in a colour wheel. They're pretty easy to get hold of in your local art shop or on the internet and will quickly become your best friend if you're worried about colour. Designers use various colour combinations, but monochromatic (using different depths of the same colour), harmonious (using three neighbouring colours) and complementary (using two of the exact opposite colours) schemes are the most common. Sticking to these basic rules, and not straying off into different schemes, means you are far less likely to run into problems or end up with mismatched colours in your designs.