

# 5 key pieces to get right

Interior designer **JO HAMILTON** reveals the features that it's worth splashing out on in your home



PICTURE: ROCHE BOBOIS

**I**t's easy to while away an afternoon dreaming about your new living room, bathroom, bedroom or even an entire new home. The sofa you spotted in the magazine; the marble coffee table; those vintage wooden floorboards — they all bring a smile to your face, and your vision seems so simple to throw together. But then, to turn that dream into reality, you start doing your research and you soon realise that picture-perfect interior is precisely that because budget isn't an issue in glossy magazine-land.

Those lights, the sideboard, the console table, the wallpaper, the retro radiator, the cute little love seat, the antiques

mirror... everything looks great, but when it comes to it you can barely squeak the sofa into the upper reaches of your budget, let alone the rest.

It's one of the most difficult and least enjoyable tasks of creating an interior design, but it's also one of the most important — setting your budget, and sticking to it.

Many of my clients feel uncomfortable talking about budget during our first meeting because they don't want to propose a figure higher than necessary, but it's vital to understand expectations from the outset. I often say to them: "Imagine you've sent me out to buy you a pair of shoes. I need to know whether I'm going

to Christian Louboutin or Kurt Geiger." Both have their merits, but while the first of these implies a bigger budget, it is very rare to have unlimited funds, regardless of the wealth of the client.

So, knowing which few elements you should be willing to get your credit card out for is key if you want to make savings elsewhere without compromising the design. Here, in no particular order, are my five key areas that it's worth spending that little bit extra on.

**LIGHTING**  
No matter how much you spend on your interior, if it's not well lit then the colours and tones won't be rendered

clearly, there will be no accent areas, no architectural features will be picked out, and the scheme will ultimately fall flat. Successful lighting schemes use a range of different lighting types and, of course, it's important to get each one right.

Firstly, we need to light the space as a whole. Ambient light does the job here but it throws a blanket of light over the space without discretion. There are no highs or lows, everything is lit, so it's important to layer more interesting effects over the top to add interest — but we'll come to that in a moment.

Once in a while you still see a house where the ambient light is delivered solely through central pendants. They tend to

PICTURE: PETER BRISTOL



PICTURE: HILLARYS



throw out a dull yellow-tinged light, which subdues and flattens. Modern central pendants can still form a useful part of the lighting scheme though, and freed from the shackles of utilitarian duty to simply light a space effectively, they have the potential to add sculptural interest and beauty to a design. The addition of cleaner-toned spotlights or wall lights will help balance the yellow-based light, giving lift and freshness. Dimmers are always a good idea. They give you complete control over the output, allowing you to adjust the light depending on how much you want or need at any given point in the day.

Task lighting is precision-based light to aid specific tasks; working, reading, sewing, etc. Again, in the past, these lights have leant towards very functional forms but there is a wealth of fabulous designs to choose from if you take the time to hunt them out. Desk lamps, for instance, have been notoriously uninteresting but I'm finding more and more pieces out there that really excite me. One of my favourites at the moment is the stunning Thin Lamp range by Peter Bristol (*pictured above, peterbristol.net*). It is the perfect marriage of beautiful form and simple function.

Accent and mood lighting — my favourites — are where you can really start to have a fun! Accent lighting is not about the fittings themselves but about the sculptural shapes and architectural details the light picks out. Accent lighting could come from any light fitting that directs light to highlight a feature; a picture light and couple of simple, narrow-beam spot lights may be all you need, but they will make such a difference.

With mood lighting, the fitting is often very discrete or completely hidden. Its job is to soften and to warm. LED strips or

tape are the all-round-heroes here. While they lie in the shadows under furniture or shelving, their cosy-glow is certainly not hidden. They shine and lift, adding texture and depth.

Good lighting can carry a hefty price tag but it is the make-or-break of any successful interior, so definitely justifies that little extra in the budget.

## 2 CURTAINS

Curtains, I often tell people, are like a good pair of shoes (shoes again!). You might not have the money to spend on an entire wardrobe from Milan, but a beautiful pair of shoes will make the right high-street outfit look elegant and expensive. Curtains do exactly the same job for an interior. Limp, ill-fitting curtains kill the whole look instantly. Plush, soft-fold, interlined drapes, on the other hand, polish and frame, gilding even the simplest interior with grace.

I don't have many golden rules in interior design, but half-length or short curtains should definitely be outlawed — there is never any reason or excuse that can explain them away! Curtains, in most cases, should be full-length — floor-to-ceiling. They should be lined and interlined (blackout lined in bedrooms) to add that thick, luxurious feel. The interlining is what gives the weighty-soft folds and all-in-all won't add a silly amount to the cost so it is well worth doing.

If budget is not an issue, it may also be worth considering electric window dressings, but it's certainly not essential for the look.

Some elements of your interiors may come and go with the seasons but your curtains really are an investment piece. A good pair will last you years.

## 3 RUGS

Rugs are important for many reasons. With the growing trend for open-plan living they provide the ideal opportunity to break the space up visually, creating smaller areas within the whole. A lovely big area rug provides a great framework to build the rest of the design around.

I'd always opt for generous proportions, so that the sofas, armchairs, coffee tables and so on, sit well within the perimeter. Clients often twitch a little when they learn that they've allocated extra funds to this fabulous feature piece only for it to be hidden under the furniture, but it really is worth it for what it adds to the room. The larger the rug the more decadent and luxurious it will feel and unfortunately, vice-versa.

Another big plus in favour of area rugs is colour. Rugs can sit back quietly or they can take centre stage, as the focal art piece in the room. A colourful vintage rug, for example, with elegant, classic furniture and dark, panelled walls, looks absolutely stunning and really allows the beauty of the rug to shine.

## 4 ART

Art is something very close to my heart, not least because there is nothing I love more than an afternoon of painting in my studio. Many of my clients love that I paint and draw and want to incorporate pieces I've done specially for them into their scheme. I really appreciate the work of other artists, though, and I understand how much the right piece will add to a scheme, so I'm always on the lookout for something special.

Art will often provide an anchor point from which an entire scheme can be based, and so, getting it right is of the utmost importance. Getting your art right doesn't mean you have to spend crazy money — there's a balance. I tend to encourage clients to spend on one really fabulous piece in a room and then to build around it with less expensive works. I see it as one main focal piece with the others complementing and adding dynamism to the main piece.

Some clients already have pieces of art that they adore and want to give pride of place in their new home. If this is you and you have your art already, you might well have your colour palette chosen for you. The key to success is to step back and look at what's going on in the artwork: which colours do you want to pull out and which do you want to sit back. By pulling out one or more of the colours you like and using them as an accent in the room you start to bring the two together.

If you are good with colour and you're feeling a bit fancy you could try pulling out colours that complement the palette in the artwork, rather than the colours themselves. A little play between the two can be really exciting.

## 5 COLOUR SCHEME

I struggle to discuss interiors without colour coming in. The word colour means something different to each of us. To some it's bright and obvious, to others it's a subtle tonal-play. For me it's either or both. Colour is a wonderful tool that we can use for our homes to ramp up the drama or to bring peace and calm.

It's important to have a clear view of where you're heading from the outset. Once you have your key pieces chosen it's always a good idea to lay pictures of them out together, so you can step back and see what's missing. Save a little of the budget for balance — a pop of colour here, a neutral texture there, and some accessories that give personality and individuality. The designs that worked in that glossy magazine were about the overview, how the colours, tones and shapes work together, the colour scheme as a whole.

*Jo Hamilton is an ambassador for House 2018, the high-end interiors event run by INM, publishers of the Irish Independent. She will be appearing on the Inspiration Stage at Dublin's RDS from May 25-27. See house-event.ie.*

**Next week: How to use grey in your home**