



WHY THIS SPACE WORKS

By MAURI ELBEL | Photography by PAUL BARDAGJY

LOVELY LIVING Designer's Top 10 Tips for a Living Room You Love

IF YOU'VE EVER WALKED INTO A LIVING ROOM TO FACE A SUPERFLUOUS AMOUNT OF FURNITURE OR FOUGHT THE URGE TO SHINE A FLASHLIGHT ON AN ORIGINAL PAINTING HIDDEN IN THE SHADOWS, YOU'VE SEEN FIRST-HAND EVIDENCE OF DESIGN GONE WRONG. WHILE THERE ARE NO HARD AND FAST RULES WHEN IT COMES TO DESIGNING YOUR LIVING SPACE, AUSTIN-BASED DESIGNER ROBIN COLTON SHARES SOME COMMON MISTAKES TO AVOID AND KEY CONCEPTS TO KEEP IN MIND. HIRING A PROFESSIONAL IS ALWAYS THE SAFEST BET — AN INTEGRAL STEP THAT CAN SAVE YOU TIME AND MONEY AND BRING YOU A LITTLE PEACE OF MIND DURING A DIZZYING PROCESS. BUT WHETHER YOU WORK WITH A DESIGNER OR BRAVE IT ON YOUR OWN, FOLLOWING COLTON'S EXPERT TIPS WILL KEEP YOU ON TRACK WHEN IT COMES TO CREATING A LIVING SPACE YOU WILL LOVE.

1. Don't over furnish

One of the most common mistakes people make is over-furnishing their living space. "Often novices will feel like every part of their space needs to be filled in order to feel designed and lived in," explains Colton. But before shopping for sofas, chairs, ottomans and accent benches which can unnecessarily crowd a space, she suggests sitting down and assessing the true needs of your space. "If you are a family of four and Saturday night movie night is a weekly ritual, then a big sectional sofa may be the right answer," she says. While there's no exact formula when it comes to deciding how much seating should be in a space, think about gearing it to your own lifestyle. The same principle applies to walls — Colton warns against covering every wall, nook and cranny. "The eye needs natural resting spaces and breathing room in order to feel comfortable and to really enjoy being in a space," she says.

2. Mix, don't match

Colton warns against buying a room full of furniture from the same source. "Big box stores are poised and ready for you to come in and purchase your entire home full of furnishings from them," she says. "They make it easy by setting up vignettes throughout that demonstrate how their furnishings can be used, and they create a mood and feel that appeals, making it seem like you cannot possibly achieve this in your own home without utilizing only their pieces." Rather than recreating what you see in a store or magazine, try to achieve a balance of scale and proportion in your space — Colton says that's the real key to making it feel collected, layered, and comfortable. "Don't be afraid to use a large item in a small space or to use a tall chair with a lower ceiling," says Colton. "This balance of styles, scale and proportions creates a space that is uniquely you and not the image a big box store is selling."

3. Use what makes you happy

It's a hard pill to swallow when you've spent money on a piece of furniture and it just doesn't jive with the rest of the room. "My first rule of thumb when bringing an item in or deciding to keep an item, whether it be a piece of furniture or art or a tchotchke they inherited, is to assess if they love it and if it makes them happy," says Colton. "Every time you walk into your space, it should feel lovely and fill you with a wonderful feeling. There should not be anything in your living space that makes you feel guilty, uncomfortable or stressed out."

4. Lighten up

What's the point of having beautiful fabrics and gorgeous



paintings if you can't see them properly? "Each space through your home should have full illumination," Colton advises. Whether incorporating recessed cans, chandeliers, pendants or lamps, think about ambient and task lighting and how it will serve the way you use the room. Reading a book on the sofa? Displaying an expensive piece of art? Colton suggests thinking through a room's uses and selecting and layering lighting throughout the room. "Dimmers on as many fixtures as possible are also one of the best investments you can make in your home," she says. "Not only does this save you money on your energy bill, but it gives you maximum flexibility for all occasions."

5. Keep your walls open

Placing furnishings along the walls of the room does not (as people often wrongly presume) open up the middle to make it feel more spacious. "This actually makes a space feel uninviting and



disjointed,” says Colton. “Really thinking through the planning of furnishing placement can help create lovely conversation pockets and intimate spaces that allow for interaction and comfort.” Instead, Colton suggests forming comfortable paths between your furnishings which allows for natural flow through the space. In smaller spaces, anchoring some of the furniture on the wall while floating accent pieces is a great solution.

6. Rules of the rug

Choose a rug that will anchor the room rather than look awkward because it’s too small for your space. “Rugs are an important aspect to any room,” acknowledges Colton. “They can add texture, color, pattern, warmth and a soft place for your feet at the end of a long day.” A rug that is too small for the room will only make it feel disjointed and uncomfortable. Make sure your rug is large enough to fit all legs of your furnishings or at least have the front two resting comfortably on it.

7. Design for real life

Rather than design for the lifestyle you are dreaming of, keep your space functional for the life you actually live. “If you entertain housefuls of toddlers and young children on a regular basis, or if you have dogs with muddy paws, then selecting a white linen sofa for your living room may not match your lifestyle,” says Colton. “Keep in mind that life happens and accidents happen, and plan ahead accordingly.” Fortunately indoor/outdoor fabric manufacturers are making strides in

the look and feel of their fabrics, says Colton, who suggests alternatives like placing a lovely outdoor velvet capable of withstanding elements on your living room sofa. Storage is another key component to be realistic about. “When I meet with clients they often have piles of books and papers lying around, toys scattered throughout, and their kids artwork piled up in the corner,” she says. “While re-designing a space is a great opportunity to take the time to move through an organization and purge process, please be realistic about what the future holds.” If you have a first-grader with an increasing gallery of art or you’re a voracious reader with an ever-increasing library of books, don’t overlook a good storage solution. Colton wisely points out you need to leave room to grow which will allow you to add to your collection over time.

8. Don’t spread your love

If you have a collection you love — be it rocks or travel mementos — create a focal wall in your living room rather than dispersing them throughout every room in your home which clutters your space and doesn’t allow your passion to be a unique focus. “Creating a gallery wall system in your entry that allows you to display all of your collected postcards not only creates a wonderful unique piece of art, but also tells the story of your travels and your life to all of your guests as soon as they enter your home,” says Colton. Culling through your collection to pull out the most important pieces allows them to shine and not be lost in the quantity of what you have, she adds.

9. Choose paint last

Colton always tells her clients the quantity of paint colors are endless; furnishings, artwork, draperies, rugs and hard finishes are not. “Paint should be the last thing chosen for a space, keeping in mind the colors of the rugs and fabrics to be used in the space,” says Colton. “Also, take your time moving through the paint selection process.” A paint color that looked great in a magazine or someone else’s home will not look the same with your lighting and furnishings, says Colton. Sampling colors in a large format is key — looking at every option and placing it around the space in both artificial and natural light, during the day and at night, is the only way to know if a color truly works, she says. “Also keep in mind that your paint color is the easiest thing to change when you get ready to sell your house so select colors that you love and feel good to you,” she says.

10. Don’t forget to accessorize

Oftentimes purchasing new furniture makes such a big difference from what a homeowner is used to that they feel satisfied, but Colton says investing in custom window treatments and accessories can do wonders to elevate a space. “Keep in mind that it’s just like getting dressed in the morning,” she says. “From the main pieces to the accent pieces, accessories, jewelry, bags and shoes, a room should also have this type of layered feeling.” Colton suggests replacing throw pillows that came with your sofa to bring in color, pattern and texture or layering treasures from your travels with books and flowers to create warmth. ❖

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