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A Vision of Beauty

* Decorating your house yourself? Designers advise having a plan before you start--and think less color, more texture, good lighting.

By MARNELL JAMESON, SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

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SEE CORRECTION APPENDED

Why is it that the antique armoire that looked so fabulous in the furniture showroom becomes a sorry spectacle once home? Or that beguiling swatch of botanical print fabric turns into a jungle of despair once it's on your living room sofa?

Anyone who's made such a gaffe realizes that the world of home decorating is one where only fools and pros rush in. Others stand paralyzed on unadorned thresholds, knowing that unlike a fashion faux pas, which you can shed at the end of the day, decorating mistakes tend to be big, expensive, long-lasting and utterly deflating.

As real estate picks up along with consumer confidence, many Southlanders are finding themselves either in new digs or fixing up the ones they have. And though the selection of merchandise has never been better, optimism flags when consumers find that buying something as simple as a new chair becomes a perplexing tangle of style, fabric, fill, stain and size.

To minimize the mystery, we asked some leading interior designers what exactly do-it-yourself home decorators don't get, and how they can rectify their ignorance. The first words out of most of their mouths were scale, scale, scale, followed by concept, color and composition. Chief among their advice was less color, more texture, and by all means get the light right.

"The biggest problem people have is they haven't thought through the process and function of each room," says L.A. designer Gary Gibson, whose clients include Paula Abdul. "Don't get locked into your home's format. I've made living rooms dining rooms and dining rooms living rooms. Throw

away borders and design with your needs in mind."

Amateurs also trip up when their rooms become obstacle courses, says Newport Beach designer Sheila Perrone. "In Design 101 you draw a floor plan with arrows to indicate traffic flow. Don't make people walk into the backs of furniture or maneuver around pieces to get through a room."

"The first question that pops into my head when I walk into a room that's not professionally done is: Why did they lay the room out that way?" says Beverly Hills designer Luis Ortega, known for his contemporary architectural designs. "I'm always looking to make the layout simpler, to make the approach more welcoming. I want to take away color, pattern and the number of pieces."

One way to test a layout before buying the wrong furniture is to make a poor man's floor plan, says West Hollywood designer Kevin Kolanowski. Simply cut pieces of newspaper in the shapes of the furniture you're considering, lay them on the floor, and walk around to see if the furniture fits and works with other pieces.

Height and visual weight are other considerations of scale. Tom Allardyce, of L.A.'s Hendrix / Allardyce, who has created dream homes for Kenny G, and Sugar Ray Leonard, likes to see furniture varied to fit the proportions of the architecture. "A room where the furniture is all one height lacks interest and intimacy." He especially likes higher-backed sofas, 35 to 38 inches, as opposed to standard 30- to 32-inch sofa heights.

L.A. designer Reg Adams, who's created residential ambience for Marlo Thomas and Chevy Chase, offers this rule of scale: If you have 8-foot ceilings don't use a high-backed dining room chair; likewise, if you live in a small California bungalow, don't buy a huge sofa.

And if you are stuck with a sofa that is the wrong size, all is not lost. Designer Sheri Schlessinger says if you have a 10-foot-long wall and a 9-foot couch, put an oversized painting behind and a series of graduated tea tables in front to give the illusion of depth. If you have the same wall with a 6-foot couch, put a screen behind it, add a big tree and a couple of end tables.

When a room feels lopsided because all the visual weight is on one side, Dolly Chapman, a design veteran who teaches in UCLA Extension's interior design program, suggests adding a piece of furniture to the light side, a large wall hanging or pieces in darker colors to pull the eye over and even out of the room.

Fundamentally, a clear concept is what people most lack, laments Frank Newell, interior designer for Jodie Foster and also an instructor at UCLA's program. "People often have great taste. They get the right sofa and carpet, but they can't marry the many objects in a home to realize a look."

That's where the eye of the designer comes in, says Adams. "In a living room, you might have 20 to 30 pieces. Each piece has to relate. Whether traditional, contemporary or eclectic, they have to be comfortable together." But, if it's any comfort, the best rooms aren't perfect--"there's an art to being slightly off on purpose," says Ortega.

Slightly.

Allardyce concurs and says one sign of an amateur is someone who makes everything match, "A room looks better when colors don't match but blend. A room should look as if it evolved over time."

Santa Barbara designer Doug Bartoli says many novices can't understand they're not after perfection but ambience: "A great room is not about match, but about the essence that happens when things get put together."

Start with the backgrounds, says Gibson--flooring, window and wall treatments--then move in. Don't start with a blue sofa, then get stuck. Keep backgrounds low in contrast by using similar, harmonious tones. Change glaring white walls by painting them wheat or another light, neutral color, then cover your floors in materials slightly darker than walls. Add color and accent with accessories.

Schlessinger takes it from there. If you keep the backgrounds and upholstered pieces neutral, you can buy what you love in antiques, rugs and paintings. When you do invest in these pieces, go slowly to buy as much quality as you can afford. Whatever you do, they all implore, don't buy a cheap rug.

Visualizing how a wonderful piece of art, sculpture or rug will look once home is tough for most, says Schlessinger, who notes, "People don't realize that many better home furnishing stores will let customers take pieces home to try before buying."

And if you're wavering between something bright or muted, opt for the lighter object. "If I could give one piece of advice it would be: half as bright," says L.A.-based Mark Enos, who leans toward the contemporary. "And the larger something is, the lighter it should be."

Adams agrees. "Stay away from anything too vivid, but once you pick a

color, say beige, don't be afraid to play with its intensity."

If you want to be bold, go tactile. "Texture is one of the major paints in the decorator's box, yet people don't do enough with it," says Enos. "Texture speaks to us. Shiny says fancy. Dull or heavily textured says casual."

And don't be afraid to change the shape of things. "If you have a lot of rectilinear pieces in a room," says Gibson, "throw in an oval coffee table or a round rug but don't overdo it."

Lighting adds the crowning glow, says Santa Monica designer Krista Everage. Everage uses overhead lighting to pinpoint what she wants highlighted--the fireplace, art, the coffee table--then adds ambient light from wall sconces, and table and floor lamps, and many candles to make magic.

These considerations can overwhelm the average home improver; the good news, say experts, is that achieving a great look on your own has never been easier. "People can go to Pottery Barn, Pier One or Z Gallery, get great knockoff stuff and wind up with great ambience," says Bartoli. "The Banana Republic has some silver candlesticks I would put in a \$2-million dollar home in two seconds."

Still, there's that eye thing. "Anyone can get the backgrounds right and upholster the furniture in neutrals," says Gibson, "but I can't tell you how high to hang a chandelier. You just know."

PHOTO: "A room where the furniture is all one height lacks interest and intimacy," says designer Tom Allardyce. This room features a high-backed sofa, chairs of varying heights and blended colors.

PHOTOGRAPHER: Hendrix Allardyce

PHOTO: An entry hall by Everage Design Alliance shows a good use of texture, line and scale to layer a very tall space. The large wall mirror expands space horizontally, balancing the ceiling height.

PHOTOGRAPHER: Everage Design Alliance

PHOTO: "In a living room, you might have 20 to 30 pieces. Each piece has to relate," says Reg Adams, who created Chevy Chase's living room, above.

PHOTO: "Throw away borders and design with your needs in mind," says designer Adams, who also advises: "stay away from anything too vivid."

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--- START OF CORRECTION ---

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Type of Material: Correction

Home design--A caption accompanying Monday's article on decorating tips should have attributed to designer Gary Gibson the comment, "Throw away borders and design with your needs in mind." The living room with the glass-top table in the photo was designed by Gibson.

--- END OF CORRECTION ---