

Marni Jameson

Virtual Decorating – Now There's an Idea

By Marni Jameson



When faced with decorating a room from scratch, what I need most is a running start. But I'm often stymied at the start line. I can either wing it myself, or hire a pro. In the first case, the results usually land someplace between timid and terrible. But I can't afford a professional for every room. Plus, interior designers are bad for my marriage. Mention interior designer and my husband becomes just like Steve Martin in "Father of the Bride." He hyperventilates and freezes the bank accounts.

So when a designer I've known for years asked me to test-drive an affordable online design service he was launching, designerathome.com, I perked up: You pick a room you want to decorate, answer a short online questionnaire about the room's purpose and your preferences, and send in room measurements, photos and \$250. Two weeks later, you get a design scheme, like paint-by-numbers for your room. You take the job from there.

A little voice inside said: *Things too good to be true usually are, especially virtual things.*

Good designers usually charge \$100 to \$150 an hour. A design scheme for a room, including furniture layout, colors and fabrics, can cost from \$1,000 to \$2500 -- just for the plan. Designers also get a 30% cut of all furniture and fabrics purchased. That rubs.

I agreed to give Designer at Home a try. Although many rooms in my house could use a makeover, I picked the upstairs bonus room because it looks the most vandalized. The 16 x 17 foot room sits near my girls' bedrooms. Done right, it could be the perfect place for them to hang out in pajamas, watch television, kickback with friends, and grow marijuana. At present it's a refuge for unclaimed furniture and tacky ribbons from their horse shows and gymnastic meets. So I gathered my what-have-I-got-to-lose attitude, and sent in photos and measurements.

Two weeks later, a smart-looking package arrived to my door containing three design boards: one had the furniture layout; two had numbered fabric samples and photos of suggested furniture. A number key explained how to apply each fabric. It loved it, but needed to consult the real clients.

"What about my horse ribbons?" my oldest asked.

"In the plan," I showed her a drawing DAH included for a more attractive ribbon display. She stuck her thumb up.

My youngest took one look at the three cubed stools to be covered in marigold, copper and

lime suede and said: "Swee-eet!"
I was off and running.

If you decide to give online design a try, here's what you can expect.

THE GOOD

Price. For \$250 you get a high-level design that would normally cost a lot more. (The folks at DAH have exceptional design credentials.)

Pace. Typically, once interior designers give you a plan, they fold their arms and tap their feet as if to say, "Hurry up already." I decorate in baby steps: paint one month, sofa the next, drapes the next. Mainly because whenever I have some decorating money saved, the dogs need emergency dental cleaning, and property taxes come due. DAH doesn't care how long you take.

Budget. I worried DAH would recommend expensive furniture. But the furniture suggestions were from modestly priced suppliers including Crate & Barrel and homedecorators.com. The plan also used what I had. In the questionnaire I said I wanted to keep the carpet and wood blinds, and, if possible, the pine armoire, but everything else could go. DAH incorporated not only the armoire, but also the pine writing table and glider chair (recovered).

Fabrics. Interior designers can buy fabrics sold only to the trade, which you and I can't buy directly. These are often nicer, and more custom than retail fabrics, but you pay the designer's mark up. DAH has arranged with Kenneth McDonald, a leading supplier of designer fabrics, for you to order fabric through Kenneth McDonald at substantial discount.

THE NOT-SO-GOOD

Headaches. These are all yours. Part of what you pay designers big bucks for is to see a project through. They ride herd on suppliers and contractors. With DAH this is your job. Although I would rather have headaches than mark ups, not everyone wants the hassle.

Common Touch. Because a designer never comes to your home, DAH won't provide the custom touches, like feline-themed fabric for cat lovers, that designers who visit in person can.

Details. Many will be left to you. For instance, DAH suggested some fun drape fabric, but gave me no picture of the drape treatment. I received a great wall color to highlight an accent wall, but no indication of which wall to accent.

Risk. You get one plan. Take it or leave it. DAH will answer a few questions by email, and will offer a minor revision. For instance, my scheme called for a leather sectional, a good indestructible choice for a teen rumpus room. But I have leather sofas in my family room, which DAH didn't know. I wanted something as durable but different. DAH sent a terrific faux suede replacement fabric.

Bottom Line: I can make a room look good, but not great. That's what designers bring to the table. And now to the Internet.

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