

Making room in the 'House of Havoc'

Perfection is impossible, but some havoc can be controlled

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MARNI JAMESON understands the need people have for keeping orderly homes. What she doesn't understand is why we make it so hard on ourselves.

Jameson, author of the newly published "House of Havoc" (Da Capo, \$16.95), says the urge to organize is probably greater today than in the past.

"It reflects what's happening in society," Jameson says. "As society has gotten more intense, we have more stuff coming at us all the time. We feel that we're losing the locus of control. We feel that if we can just "... get that toothpaste drawer under control, then we might have a shot at the rest."

But in the meantime, we drive ourselves crazy buying scores of books and gadgets that promise to get our homes in tiptop shape in a few easy steps. We read glossy magazine spreads on how our homes are supposed to look and weep over the stained carpet and tattered sofa.

And even if we manage to get the sock drawer straightened out, the spices arranged in alphabetical order and the living room perfectly styled, life steps in and ruins all that perfection.

Impossible dream

Jameson says we can't give up on finding order, but we have to be more realistic about it.

"There will never be an end in sight," Jameson says.

But what can be attained, Jameson says, is a livable space — a place designed and organized around the needs of everyone.

"One of my daughters is at the barn all the time," Jameson says. "She comes in with manure on her boots and smelling like horses. You have to create a home for the people who live there."

That means establishing order where you can and letting the rest be. In Jameson's house, she has imposed order where she can, such as establishing places for keys, mail and remote controls. And she uses drawer organizers. Lots of drawer organizers, which she has anointed as one organizing product that really makes a difference.

You won't find white carpet and silk chairs in her home, but you will find stylish yet sturdy and

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durable furniture that will hold up to life.

"You're never going to conquer havoc," she says. "So you meet it halfway."

It is something she learned not long after marriage and children. When she was single, her home was in perfect order and designed to suit her style and needs. But children dismantle your life one brick at a time, she says. They consume time like it was chocolate.

Before you know it, you're skipping styling your hair and jamming on a hat. Then it's fast food and quick meals. Keeping a perfect house becomes a perfect dream.

Experience counts

Jameson, who writes the "At Home" column that appears weekly in the Home & Garden section, doesn't consider herself an expert on home organization. The impetus for the book came from her own desire to find a way to coexist with her unorganized family.

Her first book, "The House Always Wins" (Da Capo, \$25), is about moving into a home and making it your own. "House of Havoc" is about living well and living beautifully in that home. Her next book, tentatively planned for next year, will be on dealing with holidays.

Jameson's career as home columnist began in 2000. She was freelancing for the Los Angeles Times and was asked to write a column for the Orange County Register's upscale magazine, Orange County Home. The editor was looking for something to counter the privileged tone, so Jameson wrote about decorating on a budget.

Her expertise came from hands-on experience — she decorated three homes from scratch. She also had been a reporter covering home design, and she tagged along with every decorator and architect that she could, questioning them on why they chose one thing over another.

The writer

As for the writing thing, Jameson studied journalism, and she eventually started her own public relations company in Los Angeles.

When she and her husband relocated to the Denver area, the Orange County Register decided it would have to drop her column, as she was no longer an actual resident of the county she was supposed to be writing about.

Jameson then was able to syndicate her column, but when the syndicate fell on hard times, it dropped dozens of columns and Jameson was one of them.

"I figured I could either cut my wrists and lie in traffic or become self-syndicated."

A friendly voice

Jameson approaches her columns from the perspective of the everywoman because, she says, that's what she is. She has an eye for design and color, and she interviews the experts and disperses her knowledge.

She describes herself as a bridge between the reader and the interior design world.

"I'm just the girl-next-door who is two steps ahead

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of you," Jameson says. "I'm here to tell you what I've learned from the experts and what I know."

Her approach is the antithesis of many how-to books that are filled with suggestions that look great on paper and fail miserably in practice.

"Some of them work, but some are just stupid," Jameson says of the advice books she's read. "Like the advice to get rid of a pair of pants when you buy a new pair. Who could do that? It's just not practical."

Good advice

Much of the advice also requires more time than any of us have, not only to get the home organized but to keep it that way. Jameson's book sifts through the impractical to find the reasonable. And she also throws in ideas for making the best of what you've got.

Many people, Jameson says, have become hesitant to put a lot into a house that has been becoming less valuable with every market fluctuation. We often buy nice things, but keep them under lock and key, afraid that they will be damaged. But that's not living, Jameson says.

She recommends using the good china and the crystal, of surrounding yourself with the things that you love and that make you happy.

Work in progress

Jameson admits that there are rooms in her house that she'd rather not show people. A "teen bonus" room intended for her daughters to have a place to watch television and hangout, has become a catchall

that is "just a mess." But there are rooms in her house that she would proudly declare finished.

"I gave up a long time ago on trying to beat some clock," Jameson says. "I'm in a home I love, and I'm taking my time."

Marni's Tips

Creating a beautiful home and living beautifully are two different things. The first is an artistic skill, the second a philosophy. Anyone can adopt a live-better philosophy by making a few lifestyle changes. Here are some of Jamieson's top havoc-busting habits: Create sanity-saving systems you can realistically maintain. If you live with others (THEM!), you live with havoc. The trick is to find that sweet spot between what organizing experts suggest and behaviors that won't give everyone you live with shingles. Have a plan for managing toys, mail, laundry, paperwork, and other daily detritus. Don't just wing it. Divide and conquer. When I discovered that to manage havoc, I only needed to get a grip on five areas -- time, stuff, space, meals and housekeeping -- getting my house under control suddenly seemed doable. Get a grip on one area at a time. Maintenance is the easy part. Honest. Choose beautiful furnishings you can live with. Don't buy a white linen sofa or an antique silk settee if you have kids and pets. Spare yourself headaches and high blood pressure by picking dirt-friendly flooring, sturdy print fabrics, patterned area rugs, slipcovers, already distressed furniture, and other slob-proof furnishings, and let everyone relax. Buy the right stuff the first time. Everyone talks about de-cluttering, but even better is to not clutter in the first place.

For starters, don't jam your cupboards with household goods you don't love to use, like sheets that don't fit or feel fabulous, towels that fade or aren't thirsty, dishes that look dated. Do your homework. I grilled the experts and learned how to buy heavenly bedding, yummy

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