

Successful Homebuilding and Remodeling

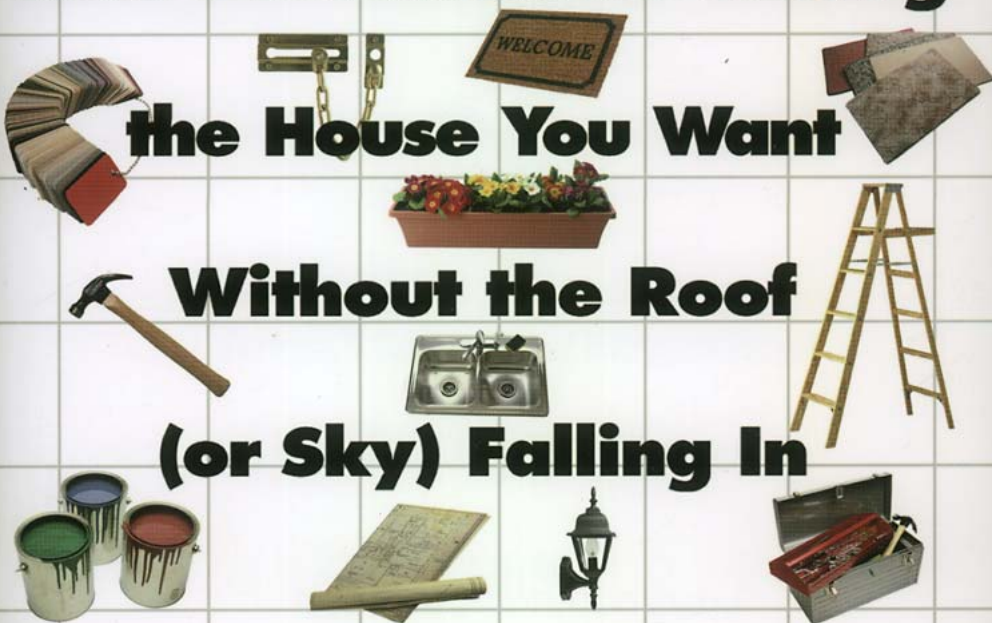
Real-Life Advice for Getting

the House You Want

Without the Roof

(or Sky) Falling In

Barbara B. Buchholz and Margaret Crane



inherited through the years and simply want to paint rooms and hang curtains to attain a homey, loved look?

Whatever your goal, you may need some help to get from point "A" to point "B" as you deliberate the incredible number of choices available.

LESLIE STERN (Chicago, Illinois)

Decorator Leslie Stern bought an old wooden mantel at a renovation store for a client's home, had it refinished and installed granite on it to match their entranceway. She also added a piece of black metal around their firebox and asked the marble man to clean it up. He did, and the blue granite was magnificent. "I struck gold. It was gorgeous, a find."

First decide whether you can tackle the project on your own. Unlike years past, you may be able to because there are so many more retail resources available today. You needn't buy from the wholesale sources that once provided most of the home furnishings through the middlepersons of decorators and architects. Today, you can find fabrics, pillows, and more at department stores with home furnishings departments like Bloomingdale's, which are often staffed by trained designers; at specialized boutiques and stores such as Pier 1 Imports and Pottery Barn; on TV; on the Internet; and through the mail because a slew of home furnishings catalogs such as Ballard's and Spiegel make ordering from home easy and stylish. However, you must have the interest and the time.

If you feel insecure about your taste or are simply overwhelmed by all the choices, you, of course, can choose the time-tested route and hire a decorator. Two big advantages of using one today are (1) they are much more flexible about payment arrangements, and (2) they can help you avoid costly mistakes. "Designers are trained to come up with functional spaces that may also be more aesthetically pleasing, and a good one will save you money," says Chicago designer Leslie Stern.

SPECIAL DECORATING NEEDS—UNIVERSAL DESIGN

Whether you're young, middle-aged, or elderly, you should consider adding Universal Design features to any rooms you're redecorating or remodeling. All of us hope to grow old and we may prefer to stay put rather than move to a retirement community. And in the present, we also periodically injure ourselves—

throw out our back, wrench a knee, impair vision—which makes navigating tougher. If you include certain features in your home in advance, you'll be able to get around easier and possibly avoid hiring professional caregivers, should you take ill.

For example, install light switches no higher than three feet above the floor. Make aisles wide enough and be sure there's a five-foot turning radius for wheelchairs. Doorways should be 36 inches wide to accommodate wheelchairs. If you have the space in a house or multilevel condo to accommodate it, and your budget permits, consider installing an elevator. But make it wide enough for a wheelchair to move in and out.

Many of these design features are also practical for families with young children because you want to protect them, too, from getting scalded with hot water or slipping on slick bathtub tiles, advises designer Stern, who frequently designs homes and apartments that meet the American Disabilities Act standards for Universal Design.

Flooring

Throughout the house, select appropriate flooring materials if someone is physically impaired or wheelchair-bound—hardwood or smooth stones, ceramic, or marble tiles. You don't want anything rough or slick that can cause a person to trip or slip. There are four basic types of wood flooring: (1) plank flooring that is wider, (2) strip flooring that ranges in width, (3) block flooring that is constructed from preassembled wood in different patterns such as parquet flooring made from preassembled units of small slats of wood in different patterns, and (4) end grain blocks that are solid pieces of wood that are very durable and resistant to oils, chemicals, and indentation and are used for industrial floors.

Carpeting

Room carpeting should have a firm cushion or backing, or no cushion and a level loop, textured loop, level cut pile, or level cut/uncut pile texture with a maximum pile height of 1/2-inch. Stair carpeting should have a tight pile or loop. Check by taking a carpet sample and bending it. If the fibers separate and "smile," the carpet is not dense enough to be installed on stairs.

Building Components

Building components should also be carefully conceived to eliminate accidents. Bookshelves should be 14 inches deep to accommodate different size books and have one-inch thick shelves properly supported so they do not bow or bend and cause books to tumble off, particularly when there is a long span. In a wet area such as a kitchen and bathroom, lighting takes on even greater importance and planning.

Kitchen

Make aisles wide enough for two people to navigate and for a wheelchair to get around. There should be a minimum of 40 inches between counters and all opposing back cabinets, appliances, or walls, except in a U-shaped kitchen, which should have a minimum of 60 inches of turning space. Consider antiscald faucets so that they won't burn the user, and opt for levers rather than pull styles. Also put levers instead of knobs on cabinet fronts. For easy opening, mount the door pulls or levels on wall cabinets as close to the bottom of the cabinet doors as possible. On the base cabinets mount them as close to the top of the doors as possible.

Counters

Have sufficient counter space to rest hot casseroles and pots, particularly next to your range or oven. If someone in the family is in a wheelchair, be sure countertops are no higher than 34 inches or consider having different counter heights, from a low of 28 inches (measured from the finished floor) to a high of 36 inches. Also, consider leaving a space open underneath the sink so a wheelchair can roll under the sink giving the person easy access.

Placement of Appliances

Allot 30 to 48 inches of clear floor space to allow a forward approach to a sink. Raise up the dishwasher so a wheelchair-bound person can empty the dishes. Consider the separate drawer-type refrigerators, which can be installed at easy-to-reach heights and an oven with controls on the front panel, which are easier to get at. Choose roll-out shelves when possible because they're also easier to reach.

Bathrooms

Be sure doors to the bathroom open out in case someone is injured and collapses. Put the vanity no higher than 34 inches from the finished floor and again leave an open area underneath the sink for easy wheelchair access. Install grab bars 33 to 36 inches above the floor. Even if nobody in the house uses a wheelchair, grab bars are useful for getting in and out of a tub and by a toilet for sitting down and standing up. Install a seat in the shower for occasional sitting while shaving, or if someone in the house uses a wheelchair, and be sure there's no threshold barrier to cross. Again, be sure you've used levers, not knobs, on cabinet fronts and faucets, and place the levers so they can be reached from a wheelchair.

Lighting

Ceiling lighting can be used for accents, task or overall illumination, and should be placed where it is needed most to illuminate dark areas. Lighting is critical for the tub and shower areas, by the mirrors and for the room overall. Lighting on both sides of the mirror is preferred over one light source mounted above the mirror as it can cast shadows on the face.

THE TRANSFORMATION FROM HOUSE TO HOME

Sometimes the smallest details and accessories can make all the difference in turning your generic all-white boxy condo or home into a personalized abode. And often these tricks needn't be terribly expensive. Following are 100 suggestions. Remember to take your time when making the transformation from house to home. And most important, have fun.

1. Buy a mailbox that says something about one of your favorite interests—a boat, a dog, a flag, a rose garden.
2. Order stationary imprinted with your name and new address.
3. Give your home a name and have a plaque made.
4. Have an indoor house-raising with your best friends each bringing part of a potluck supper or favorite tool or utensil. Eat on the floor on blankets if you don't yet have tables and chairs.
5. Line all kitchen cabinets with pretty shelf paper.
6. Buy new spices and line up the jars alphabetically.

7. Buy a new doormat/welcome mat with a great design.
8. Hang some artwork and photographs in a new arrangement.
9. Buy pretty soaps, hand towels, and potpourri for a powder room or "company" bathroom.
10. Treat yourself to fresh flowers for your front hall or a favorite table once a week or once a month.
11. Have a favorite chaise or ottoman, a good light, and an afghan where you can curl up and read.
12. Reorganize your closets and throw out anything you haven't used in the last two years. Donate items to a favorite charity.
13. Plant a tree and watch it grow as the years tick by.
14. Plant your favorite perennials and annuals.
15. Dig and plant raised vegetable beds in your backyard, then make gazpacho soup or a great salad from what you've grown.
16. Put in an underground sprinkling system to water those flowers and vegetables.
17. Put some topiary plants in large clay pots by your front door.
18. Host the family Thanksgiving, Christmas, or Passover and use all your best china, silver, and serving dishes. Try to make at least one holiday an annual tradition.
19. Throw a block party to meet your new neighbors.
20. Set out a table in the hall with a place for mail, a stand for umbrellas, and a bench or seat for putting on boots.
21. Order nice hangers with your monogram for a guest closet.
22. Have an artist do a drawing or painting of your house or a favorite room.
23. Paint one room a favorite color that you've never used before and don't forget to paint the ceiling and bookshelves as well. You may want to make them different shades.
24. Hang a border around the ceiling for a charming but inexpensive touch.
25. Get a dog to protect your new house and add some life to it. You'll explore the neighborhood more often that way.
26. Needlepoint some pillows with scenes or pictures reminiscent of your childhood home. It will add character to your rooms.
27. Change the pillows on your main sofa and chairs periodically.
28. Make it a habit to rearrange objects on your coffee and end tables.
29. Put a phone, pad, pretty jar with pencils and pens, and some books in your living room so you use the room rather than treat it as a museum or company room.

30. If you never use your dining room, consider turning it into a library or den by placing the table at one end and having some bookshelves or seating installed at the other end.
31. Put up a big bulletin board in the kitchen for everyone to leave messages and tack up mementos.
32. Try to have fresh aromas regularly emanate from your kitchen so it smells like your mother or grandmother's home.
33. Polish your family silver so it's ready to use and then put in away in Pacific cloth to keep it from tarnishing.
34. Hang a rogue's gallery of family pictures in a long hallway or place you pass daily.
35. Order new monogrammed towels and sheets.
36. Put in window seats to create a cozy nook where you can sit or stash children's toys and odds and ends.
37. Set up an area for trophies, awards, and medals and everyone in the family wins.
38. Set aside a space for a CD player and your music collection, as well as any musical instruments.
39. Put in an intercom or sound system so you can pipe your music throughout the house.
40. Organize your basement with new shelves, whitewash walls, and set up a place with emergency equipment such as a flashlight, candles, fire extinguisher, and hammer.
41. Replace doorknobs and hardware with colorful whimsical ones.
42. Restock your pantry with soup stock, beans, legumes, pastas, bouillon, canned tomatoes, hot chocolate and marshmallows, and other staples needed for emergency meals.
43. Buy new pots and pans, if you haven't done so in years.
44. Buy a new set of everyday dishes, if you haven't done so in years or if yours are broken and chipped. Try to mix and match colors and patterns.
45. Buy photo albums and catalog old pictures of your former homes.
46. Remove old carpeting if hardwood floors are underneath. Consider staining the floor a pretty, softer shade, or painting or pickling it.
47. Put in an extra large bathtub or whirlpool for those stressful moments. Add an aromatic candle and plant on one edge and be sure you have big fluffy towels and bathrobes. For a real splurge: add a heated towel rack.
48. Buy a big screen television or an extra big TV so you can host the next election night or Super Bowl party.

49. Make a wish list for your home and buy one item each year.
50. Call your parents, grandparents, siblings, or oldest friends and invite them for dinner to see your new home.
51. Recover a worn-out chair with an interesting finish or fabric rather than discarding it.
52. Erect a picket fence around the backyard where your dog may run and add to it a wire basket with flowers.
53. Build a deck; maybe add a hot tub.
54. Build a gazebo and place a table and chairs in it for outdoor dining.
55. Add a screened porch for cooling off on hot, buggy, summer evenings.
56. Buy a new self-cleaning gas grill for outdoor cooking and entertaining. Purchase new cooking tools and a grill for fish.
57. Put up wind chimes for pleasant sounds and sights.
58. Build or buy a birdhouse and/or birdbath or fountain.
59. Blacktop the driveway if it is cracking and trim the drive with pretty slate or brick.
60. Put up a hammock between two big trees.
61. Reuse a piece of indoor furniture for another purpose such as a hutch for a TV, or armoire for a bar.
62. Replace old ceiling fans with newer more attractive ones that cool rooms and save energy.
63. Replace windows with sliding glass or French doors so you use your outdoors more often.
64. Add molding to a living room or master bedroom to give it more charm.
65. Put a Franklin stove in a family room or bedroom to add warmth and a focal point.
66. To dress up breakfast room chairs, add pretty pads with floppy ties.
67. Replace the showerhead with powerful nozzles that give you a shower massage.
68. Organize the garage with the help of a plastic shoe holder and stash garden tools, sports equipment, and cleaning supplies in each pocket.
69. During warm weather, fill the fireplace with large baskets of dried flowers.
70. Start a collection and group items together such as baskets, inexpensive vintage pitchers, or childhood marbles.
71. Put out jars of your favorite candies or nuts in pretty glass bowls so people tend to congregate in the rooms where they're located.

72. Light up your home with a greenhouse window in the kitchen and grow herbs and spices there.
73. Put in a skylight in a kitchen or breakfast room. (Avoid it in a bedroom unless you don't mind sunlight streaming in at 5 AM on a summer morning.)
74. Put reminders of the past throughout the house such as some vintage crockery on shelves or handpainted plates on the walls.
75. Spray paint white kitchen cabinets a color, perhaps a soft green, or spray paint dingy whites a crisp, clean white. Change can be a boon.
76. Sharpen your knives and purchase a new one.
77. Buy one great new appliance such as a potato ricer to make great mashed potatoes.
78. Freshen your kitchen with new countertops, possibly a pretty new laminate color, granite, or stainless if you want to splurge.
79. Remove stair carpeting, stain the floorboards underneath, and add a runner.
80. Buy a pedestal for the entrance hall on which you place artwork, a small tray for letters, or a vase for flowers.
81. Replace a standard bathroom window with glass block to create a charming '50s look and gain more privacy at the same time.
82. Take out a shower curtain and replace it with an all-glass door for a contemporary look.
83. Convert one room of the basement into a playroom, home office, or exercise room.
84. Transform the space under the basement stairs into a wine closet.
85. Add a greenhouse and learn to garden year-round. Start with something simple, work up to orchids.
86. Build a treehouse for the kids—or for you and your spouse.
87. Keep a journal in which you document your move or remodeling with good notes, diagrams, and photos. You might even videotape any renovation or building showing it before and after.
88. If you have a large lot, buy a riding lawnmower; and if your garage can't accommodate it, buy a small shed.
89. Plant the wonderful garden you've always wanted—as long as it will work in your climate—such as a rose garden or wildflower garden.
90. Set up an area for good, organized files. Buy new file cabinets, folders, and tabs, and throw out any old paperwork you no longer need.

91. Organize the books on your bookshelf so you can find them easily—group cookbooks, travel books, fiction, and nonfiction. Categorize them on your computer. Then, buy one new book for every family member.
92. Have a good friend or family member to lunch on a Saturday or Sunday once a month or every other month. In nice weather, eat outdoors.
93. Take a walk in your neighborhood daily by yourself or with a family member. Make it a routine, no matter what.
94. Buy a new vacuum cleaner, if you haven't done so for years. Use it and your new house will look cleaner.
95. Have all the windows in your house washed at least twice a year—in the fall and in the spring. You'll enjoy your rooms and outdoors more.
96. Have a nice family dinner once a month, using your best china, silverware, and crystal.
97. Replace the blinds in at least one room each year, switch from old-fashioned skinny metal blinds to newer, fatter wood blinds.
98. Put up an oversized blackboard in your kitchen on which you'll keep track of everyone's schedule, eliminating a lot of confusion and the perennial question, "What's for dinner?"
99. Stay home for a vacation and do all the things you never typically do—sleep late, don't make your bed, watch a movie in the morning, start a wonderful book, finish the book, go for a walk or bike ride in your area, play Scrabble or Monopoly with everyone in the family, and cook dinner together with everyone making a course.
100. Go away for a vacation. You'll be excited to come home again.



CONSTRUCTIVE TIPS

Questions to Ask to Ferret Out the Right Designer

Chicago designer Leslie Stern recommends interviewing several designers and asking each the following questions—preferably before your decorating project gets off the ground.

- How long have you been in business? What was your training?
- Do you have a portfolio and can you show me pictures of rooms?
- Can you define quality, in terms of upholstery, paint treatments, wallpaper hanging, and floor laying? I want to be sure we're on the same wavelength.
- Can you take me to see some projects you've done? Can you also provide me with the names and phone numbers of prior clients I can call for references?
- Where have you gained most of your experience—decorating new homes or older ones? Have you been involved with the intricacies of remodeling and building codes? Is there a particular style in which you specialize?
- Are you willing to work as part of a team with my architect, contractor, or builder from the get-go?
- Are you willing to reuse my existing furniture? Or, am I expected to buy almost everything new? (Go through your home with the designer and see how he reacts to what you already have. If he says you'll have to dispose of everything, rather than work around what you already have, that designer may not be for you.)
- Will you share your trade sources, including your painter, floor layer, paperhanger, electrician, and contractor? Or do you expect me to furnish my own work crew? Will you supervise them or simply provide their names and phone numbers? How often will you show up to supervise the project and can we put this into the contract?



CONSTRUCTIVE TIPS (continued)

- Do you limit the number of trips we can make to decorating showrooms or the number of samples you'll show me if I don't like any of your selections?
- How do you feel if I find some furnishings or samples on my own and want to buy them without you?
- How do you deal with any problems that arise—upholstery that's not tight enough, wallpaper that comes in damaged, painting that's not smooth and professional looking?
- How do you charge and when do you expect payments to be made? All up front or a percentage at the beginning and the rest at the end?
- Do you have a minimum dollar amount I'm expected to pay for my room(s) or project? (Some top New York designers are said not to take on jobs below \$20,000 per room.)
- What is your policy about returning my phone calls?
- Will you have me sign a contract or will we work with a verbal agreement?

Payment arrangements are probably the stickiest part of the decorator-client relationship because many designers have traditionally worked in secretive ways—charging an undisclosed percentage over their markup and not revealing the wholesale price. But many are now much more open and flexible because they have to be for competitive reasons and because of the increasing number of retail options available. The following are a number of common arrangements:

- A percentage over the net price from the supplier or vendor. That percentage may run from 10 percent at the low end to 40 percent at the upper end.
- An hourly rate, which can range anywhere from \$50 to \$300. Usually, the client then buys the furnishings.



CONSTRUCTIVE TIPS (continued)

- A combination of an hourly rate and a percentage.
- A day rate for arranging an owner's existing furniture and accessories, which could run anywhere from \$250 to \$1,250, depending on the length of time and number of rooms rearranged.
- A percentage of the total cost of the job.
- A per-room fee, often \$500 for a tiny room or bathroom, and \$5,000 for a large room.