

For Your Clients: Big Ideas for Small Spaces

By Jean Patteson

RISMEDIA, July 30, 2010--(MCT)--As we exit the era of the McMansion and begin to embrace the concept of the "big-enough" home, we need to rethink some of our interior-design ideas.

Whether your home is a house, condo or apartment, if you're making do with reduced square-footage, you're likely wondering how to make boxy rooms look bigger and function effectively.

A new design guide on HGTV showcases a variety of small spaces, showing how designers use color, furniture placement, special installations and other devices to create the illusion of spaciousness. In the process, they explode a number of long-standing decorating truisms. Among them: Avoid bold patterns, large furniture and knick-knacks; embrace mirrors and white walls.

Orlando, Fla., interior designer Debbie Sheaf agreed that white walls are not always the answer to visually expanding small rooms. "Select a contrasting color such as topaz or coral, that will cast a glow while keeping cabinets and ceiling white to reflect light," she advises.

The HGTV experts offer a different approach to using color to make a room appear larger: Paint walls and ceiling the same favorite shade so the eye doesn't stop at the ceiling line.

Letting in as much natural light as possible makes rooms seem airier, says Sheaf. "Skylights capture light and make a room appear larger. Glass blocks can take the place of a window, providing privacy without blocking light."

And when designing window treatments, "The less you cover, the more light will flood in and the larger your small space will seem," she says. "Choose a sheer fabric, or blinds or shades that expose the entire window when drawn up or aside."

Mirrors, which reflect light, can make a small room seem bigger. But what if you don't want to turn a room into a hall of mirrors?

Turn it into a mini-art gallery instead, surrounding yourself with paintings you love, suggests HGTV consultant Roderick Shade.

Banning knick-knacks from a small room will make it appear more spacious — but also more sterile and less homey. Instead, edit your collectibles carefully and display them in just one or two places, not scattered throughout the whole room, advise the HGTV experts. A group of similar objects, or different objects of the same color, creates a "visual destination" in a room and avoids a sense of stifling clutter.

Conventional wisdom suggests that bold, busy patterns cramp the style of a small space. On the other hand, "Big bold prints on the walls and lots of pattern in a small space really distract you from the size of the area," says HGTV consultant April Sheldon.

The key to making this work is to vary the scale of the patterns, she says. If the rug has a large-scale pattern, for example, contrast that with wallpaper or draperies in a petite print.

Finally, while small furniture takes up less space and makes a room feel more open, it may not be as comfortable as larger pieces. The trade-off: Make do with fewer large pieces.

And do consider built-ins, says Sheaf. Murphy beds, bookshelves, window seats and shallow cabinets save space while providing storage and adding design interest.

MAKE SMALL ROOMS LOOK BIGGER

HGTV's guide to decorating small spaces includes these tips:

- Determine your priorities**, making rooms fit your needs and lifestyle. If a desk is more important than a dining table, for example, eat at the kitchen counter or coffee table.
- Furniture using clear materials** such as Lucite and glass give the impression of openness while delivering function.
- Lamps placed at different heights brighten** small rooms and make them seem larger.
- Round tables, rugs and pillows**, and chairs and sofas with curves help small rooms feel less boxy.
- Floating shelves** instead of cabinets add storage but look airy and chic.

(c) 2010, The Orlando Sentinel (Fla.).

Distributed by McClatchy-Tribune Information Services.