

Dealing With Design Dilemmas Affordably

With so much inventory on the market and buyers remaining picky, sellers need more aces up their sleeves. You've already helped them price their house right, perfected its curb appeal, and decluttered and staged it, but it's still not attracting nibbles. Time to go to plan B: Camouflaging architectural and decorating dilemmas affordably.

For example, if a tiny powder room has dated fixtures, worn linoleum flooring, and no charm, suggest they redo it, since the cost to transform the tiny space will prove a good return on their investment, possibly under \$3,000, for a white toilet and pedestal sink, hardwood flooring restrained under the tile, a quality paint job, new towel and toilet bars, and new light fixtures.

Here are other ways to make a home look its best, attract kudos, and get bids:

1. Raise curb appeal: Though pristine curb appeal should be at the top of your to-do list, sometimes mowing a lawn, pruning shrubs, and removing dead branches isn't enough, says landscape architect Eric Ringhofer of Green Guys Landscape in St. Louis. Tell sellers to go to the next level by weeding; edging flower beds; mulching; planting colorful flora (but not too much); and illuminating walks, trees, and the front door with low-voltage lamps. Simplicity should be the mantra, Ringhofer says. He also suggests some white flowers since they're more visible in the dark than others.

2. Improve the “wow!” factor of the entry: Entry foyer blahs can be as off-putting as no foyer at all. This space should be as impressive to buyers as the front of the house does. “It's the curb appeal beyond the curb appeal,” says Douglas Heddings, president of The Heddings Property Group in New York. “You want to continue the positive impressions made when people first see a property,” adds Jeff Sulkin of Calida Design Studio in Los Angeles. Even if there's nothing architecturally interesting, add a focal point with inexpensive photos in matching black or pale wood frames, installed in a row at eye level or stacked, says designer Kimba Hills of Rumba Style in Santa Monica, Calif. Or, if the area is large enough, hang just one powerful 20-by-30-inch enlarged photo, says Montclair, N.J.-based photographer George Diebold. He also advises renting art from an artist or gallery if a purchase isn't doable.

3. Downgrade from pricey brands: If dated kitchen appliances are the rub, suggest buyers replace one or two, and go with quality but not designer name brands to save, says designer Cheryl Kees Clendenon of In Detail Interiors in Pensacola, Fla. “They can still buy good equipment with stainless steel fronts, but without the same expensive pedigree. And they can cut the number of appliances — perhaps one speed oven that doubles as a microwave rather than two separate ones,” she says.

4. When in doubt, paint: An easy, affordable way to change a room quickly and economically is by painting it. A different color can make a space look larger, warmer, brighter, taller, or simply more distinctive. Paint also camouflages defects, such as a tired brick fireplace. And though many home owners think exteriors and interiors should be white, off-white, or beige, the new grays, blue-grays, and pale celadons or sages can make facades and walls more memorable

in a crowded field, says color expert Amy Wax, author of *Can't Fail Color Schemes, Kitchens & Baths*. And when possible, buy low- or no-VOC paint for healthfulness and the environment.

5. Improve connections: Today's more casual entertaining style has made people crave rooms that flow together. Taking down part of a wall or cutting out an opening between a kitchen and family room lets areas work better together and makes small spaces seem larger, says Josh Collins of Prespro.com, a preservation and repair company in Charlotte, N.C.

6. Add cool hardware: When doors, cabinets, and drawers are unattractive and can't be replaced or painted, new hardware in interesting shapes and hip finishes can provide a focus. Chrome, brushed nickel, and oil-rubbed bronze are the new "it" choices, beating out brass and wrought iron, Clendenon says. Advise sellers that they don't have to have the same hardware throughout their home and even in the same room, but should opt for similar scale or materials. Clendenon recommends checking out sites such as www.duverre.com, www.atlashomewares.com, and www.topknobs.com for more information.

7. Re-grout: Without remodeling a dated bathroom, sellers can give it a fresh look by sponging on a new color atop dirty grout lines. "It's an easy project and can change a room's look," says Leo Damian, Sulkin's partner.

8. Lower energy costs: Because of soaring energy bills that strain budgets, many buyers want to know from the get-go about the costs to heat and cool a potential purchase. Have sellers do their part by changing bulbs to more efficient LEDs; picking energy-efficient appliances, water heater, and furnace if those need replacing; buying water-saving toilets and faucets, too; and selecting window treatments that block cold air rather than just look pretty. If windows are old, drafty, and ugly and replacing all of them isn't affordable, advise sellers to switch those on the colder north side, says designer David Shove-Brown of Studio 3877 in Washington, D.C. Many changes still qualify for government tax credits.

9. Replace flooring: Worn, dirty carpeting is a huge turnoff and a major dust receptor. Rather than replace it with more carpeting, have sellers go with what's more in vogue — hardwood planks. Purchasing them doesn't have to involve great expense if they shop at stores like IKEA, Hills suggests. If hardwood isn't an option, consider inexpensive sea grass, a universal design mixer. "You can throw a rug on top for color and pattern," Hills says.

10. Change light fixtures: Besides paint, light alters a space dramatically and can make it seem larger, warmer, or lighter, depending on wattage and color. Fixtures also can make a difference at an affordable price. Trade old-fashioned Hollywood-style strips in bathrooms for sconces that cost less than \$150 at stores like Home Depot or sites like Lamps Plus, says designer Christopher Grubb of Arch-Interiors Design Group in Los Angeles.

11. Offer a smell: Buyers look with all their senses, not just their eyes, says real estate consultant **Kathy Braddock of Rutenberg Realty**. Even though it seems like a cliché, wonderful baking or candle aromas can do wonders to distract attention from a room's flaws, she says.

12. Offer a plan: When nothing short of remodeling a room works, sellers can hire a design pro to draw up a plan that eliminates a problem, says designer Judy Maier of Susan Fredman Design Group in Chicago. Architect Bruce Wright of SB Architects in San Francisco says drawings can be displayed along with the estimated price. Many designers and architects will perform this service for an hourly fee.

13. When all else fails, tell the bigger story: Though flaws can be a death knell for a sale, real estate agents can try to downplay them by touting the neighborhood's pluses in marketing materials — for instance, if it's a prized area and there isn't much competition. Perhaps it's known for award-winning schools, some significant cultural scene, or a major annual event, says Richard M. Gollis, principal with The Concord Group, a real estate consultancy. The best part about this approach? The main costs are your time and creativity!