

ASK THE DESIGNER: Match your lifestyle

How to design your room to match your lifestyle

By Jean Bisnaire

Niche Decor

'We've had an empty living room in our house for a couple of years now, and this year our goal is to give it life. I'd like to create a casual, yet elegant room to entertain in. What's your advice on starting this process?'

Being faced with an empty space can be daunting and overwhelming for many. You may have the perfect colour scheme in mind, but aren't sure how to incorporate it into your space. Many clients come to me at Niche Decor with similar challenges and the first question that comes to mind is always, 'What exactly will you be using this room for?'

You already know you'll be using it for entertaining and that is a great start. Now I would ask, 'Do you want a formal or casual look and feel? Deciding on this will give you a sense of whether to create drama and contrast, or keep it soft and tranquil. Your lifestyle priorities will help create this room's new story. Who will be using the space? How many at a time and how often? Knowing the answer to these questions will help set the tone for how you're going to start the decorating process.'

The next thing to consider is your 'style.' Many people know what they love, but can't identify a particular style because there are so many variables at play in every space we inhabit. Do you lean toward the traditional or do you respond to more modern elements as you flip through magazines or enter a restaurant? What kind of music do you listen to? What style of food do you enjoy?

Your interests in other areas can often determine your design style. My advice to those of you who don't have a clear idea of what they want is to create their own inspiration book. Start collecting images from magazines that appeal to you or use online sites such as Houzz.com or Pinterest to create albums. What colours or style of furniture are you drawn to? Are the rooms casual or formal?

By collecting your own inspirational images, you'll start to see a pattern and a repetition of styles, colours, and materials that pique your interest. Suddenly, you'll notice that your vision is beginning to take shape. Once that's out of the way, you'll want to think about the various pieces. Is there something you would like to keep in the room or incorporate into the overall design? Is there an existing antique, a piece of art, or an area rug you want to build around? Is there a collection you have that you'd like to showcase?

I once worked with a couple whose passion was art collection, but they were stumped as to how to incorporate it into their decor.

They wanted to go more modern in their living room without having to replace the art which had traditional frames.

This gave me a snapshot of their needs and a greenlight to incorporate clean statement pieces that would unify the two styles. We had Bergere chairs refinished and upholstered in modern fabric, paired with a modern chrome and glass coffee table. The result was a modern and clean environment without detracting from the traditional elements of what they already had.

If you don't have a starting point, you may want to consider picking a piece of art, area rug, fabric or wallpaper to help build your room around. Any one of these selections can easily give you elements that will set the tone for your new room. Pull colours from any of these pieces to build your story. You can create rhythm through repetition of colour and pattern: for example a soft painting can be complemented by soft textiles and curved, organic forms.

My most popular advice is to always play it safe and basic with the largest and most expensive pieces, usually the sofa and dining furniture. Choosing a simple, good quality fabric on a well built, comfortable sofa or set of chairs means you've invested in pieces that can withstand the test of time and endure refurbishing if and when the time comes. A good, classic sofa can be moved, recovered, and re-incorporated over the many phases of your living arrangements and is worth budgeting for.

As always, don't take this process too seriously. This should be a great experience that results in a room you absolutely love, not something patched together out of a catalogue or with items you found willy-nilly on sale at various 'box' stores. With a little thought and planning, you'll create a space you can be proud of, one that suits you and your family's lifestyle.

It's your story. Let the room showcase you, your interests, and your vision. Feel free to send me your comments or questions to askjean@nichedecor.ca.