

## HOME TRUTHS

# Lost in space?

Then it's time to hire an interior decorator. Here's how  
By Julie Cazzin

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ave you tried hir-

ing an interior designer or decorator lately? If so, you may have noticed an odd phenomenon—they're all busy. Karl Lohnes, style editor of *Style at Home* magazine in Toronto, says the hiring binge is the result of growing frustration among busy, working couples. Many of these couples have tried to decorate themselves but found that the challenge of creating a beautiful living space is more time-consuming and stress-inducing than they had expected.

Many of those busy home owners now want a professional to take the responsibility off their shoulders and get the job done, pronto. "The do-it-yourself phenomenon has pros and cons," says Lohnes, who adds that his own interior design business has grown tenfold in the past five years. "But what I'm noticing lately is that people are tired of not having a guarantee that their project will look good in the end. With a designer, when it's done, it's done for good."

Morey and Jennifer Chaplick, married entrepreneurs in Toronto, can vouch for the benefits of hiring a designer. Back in



Sarah Richardson of HGTV's *design inc.* says it's critical to understand a decorator's style before you hire one

the 1980s, they had owned a home for four years. They would sporadically make attempts to decorate it, but they were too busy with work to ever finish the job. One day, they visited a local furniture store where they loved to shop and asked a store clerk to recommend some interior designers. Over the next few months they met three experts before hiring one. "Before using interior designers," says Morey, who has since used three other designers, "we used to have a house full of unfinished rooms. It was survivable, but it just didn't feel like a complete home."

If you're suffering from the same problem and want some professional aid, it's important to understand some crucial

distinctions. Start with the difference between a decorator and a designer. Decorators are unaccredited and can be anyone from salespeople at furniture stores to someone who simply figures that he or she has a flair for color and design. Registered interior designers, in contrast, have graduated from an accredited program at a community college, worked in the design field for four years, and passed an exam.

Which type of consultant is right for you? Decorators are cheaper and can be excellent value if you're looking for a second opinion on cosmetic changes, such as paint colors or drape styles. You can find decorators listed in your local Yellow Pages or by inquiring at your local paint or furniture shop. Count on paying around \$150 for a two-hour consultation.

Marianne Yoannou, a Toronto housewife, turned to a local decorator when she decided to repaint her TV room. The ▶

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decorator enthusiastically recommended cranberry red to give the room some warmth. "It's not a color I would have come up with on my own," says Yoannou, "but it turned out to be my family's favorite room. It just had a warmth the other rooms don't."

If your needs are more ambitious—if you're knocking out walls, putting in windows or refurnishing your whole house in a particular style—you should seek the expertise of an interior designer. Ask friends or family for recommendations. Or visit the Interior Designers of Canada (IDC) website at [www.interiordesigncanada.org](http://www.interiordesigncanada.org) and click on Directory & Links. You'll find a registry of provincial associations, each of which either lists designers or will recommend one to you.

Once you've settled on a short list, book an interview with each designer

and ask him or her to show you a portfolio. "Make sure you see examples of their work," says Sarah Richardson, host of HGTV's *design inc.* "And make sure to get references from previous clients, then check those references."

How much should you count on spending? Lohnes, the editor and designer, recommends you set aside at least 15% of your home's value for a complete, top-to-bottom redo. So if your home is worth \$400,000, count on shelling out \$60,000 or so. "Some people think they can redo a room for \$5,000 because they've seen it on TV," says Lohnes. "But remember—you have to add about the same amount for labor. You can do it yourself if you want to save some money, but you'll get a much better job if a professional does it."

Before beginning, you should nail

down how the designer will be paid. Designers can charge by the hour, the job or by a percentage of overall costs. Many designers use a "cost plus" system, meaning the designer buys materials, furnishings and even services such as carpentry and electrical work at cost and sells them to you at a markup—often about 30%.

Don't be afraid to suggest a different fee arrangement. Morey Chaplick avoids paying designers by the hour since that provides too much incentive to stretch a job out. Instead, he negotiates the designer's entire fee before they begin a job. "That prevents you from being nickel and dimed to death," he says. "There's a built-in fee for their services and that's it." As well, he recommends you put a cap on what you want to spend in total for furnishings, materials and services. "These are creative people. You don't want to overpay for their overenthusiasm."

Get both the fee arrangement and spending cap in writing. Your written agreement should also specify who will actually be doing the design work. One of the most common gripes among clients is that the designer they've met disappears once the contract is signed and hands over the assignment to a junior associate. "Sometimes they'll tell you a junior will be working on your home and sometimes not," says Chaplick. "The big design firms are especially prone to not disclosing this. So always ask up front."

What happens if halfway through the project you decide things aren't working out? Have a full and frank discussion with the designer. If he or she can remedy the problem, great. If not, fire them. "Believe me," says Toronto interior designer Ed Rosing, "at that point, the interior designer probably wants out of the project as much as the homeowner."

In most cases, you're likely to find a consultant to be a bountiful source of inspiration. Just ask Yoannou. She was so pleased with her first experience with a decorator that she's now taking on a much bigger project. "I'm using a decorator to refurnish my whole house. New carpets, new furniture, new drapes. I'm not good at making all those decisions. But with the decorator, it all gets done so effortlessly." **M**