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Homes

Chic on a shoestring

Low-cost ways to make your home's decor sing

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EDMONTON--Ever been in a space that looks expensive, but doesn't seem so well put together?

It can happen -- a reflection of the truism that money doesn't automatically mean good design.

To flip that truism around, there is absolutely no rule dictating that good design has to cost the moon -- as in the world of fashion, there are many less-expensive (but no less snazzy) options available to those whose budgets don't encompass haute couture.

Students enrolled in NAIT's Interior Design Technology Program are learning the ins and outs of interior design. As students they're on tighter budgets than many, and they shared some tips about creating chic decor on a shoestring budget.

Re-use, recycle

Dawn Clementi, who's particularly interested in sustainability and healthy building procedures and practices, likes to incorporate recycled items in her home. Her low-slung dining table is an industrial flange that has been chopped off and sits on another, smaller flange underneath. Flanked by recovered "backjack" chairs, it's a strong, funky statement.

"I also like to use tin cans, the oversized ones. Take the labels off, clean them up, and they look pretty all lined up, especially if you have three or more," she says. "You can put chopsticks in, or you could have them on your desk, or put plants in them. I like the quality metal gives, it's very clean and contemporary."

Rather than throwing out a well-seasoned (but now sadly cracked) Crock-Pot, she has repurposed it as an attractive vegetable container/visual arrangement. Rather than installing overhead lighting, which she detests, Clementi made her own star-shaped structure out of bendable willow and wrapped it with white mini-lights. "Things lit from behind also set more of a mood," she advises.

Storage doesn't have to be boring

Most of us have a tangled ball of winter scarves in our front hall closet. Clementi, a scarf aficionado, rolls up her many scarves and stashes them in away in a cloth unit that hangs from the closet rail. Now it has esthetic as well as functional qualities. "Even with simple things," she says, "paying them attention, they take on a whole life of their own."

Do your homework and shop for quality

"If you don't have a huge budget, shop sales," advises Anthea Lakis, a student who enjoys retail and residential design. Keeping colours, style and theme in mind makes choosing easier, she finds

Lakis spent a lot of time at Edmonton's Scandia furniture over the summer, scouting out that store's furniture lines. "We were checking out where the prices were, the quality, the colours, then just waiting till they dropped the price," says Lakis. "I managed to find a really good deal on a floor model with matching loveseat and couch. It just meant waiting a couple of months."

She opted for dark brown leather in a classic style that won't go out of fashion too soon, in a size that's not overpowering for her condo living room.

"I put my place together in stages and I knew what I was looking for. Just shopping around, if I saw something and it was a good price I'd get it. When you know the style, as you're picking stuff up, it's unified -- you don't have this scattering of stuff you don't know what to do with."

The living/dining area in her condo centres around an African theme, with Greek focal points.

"I cheaped out totally on the window treatment," says Lakis, whose delightful window is made of fabric from IKEA and Fabricland, finished off with \$2 finials. Her coffee table and end table were also found on sale. Her dining-room table came from Edmonton-based Revolve; she opted for dining stools rather than chairs with backs as they save space.

Do it yourself

It goes without saying that this is one of the very biggest ways to save money, says Joelle Rygus. "Anything you can do. If it's painting a room, do it yourself or get friends to help. Frame your own picture. I recovered my headboard rather than buying one. I got a simple wooden headboard, attached it to my old brass headboard, covered it with batting and staple-gunned fabric on. It was simple and definitely cheaper than buying a new one."

Refinishing the old

NAIT student Christina Wierenga loves making ugly things look better.

"So I'm a big fan of things like spray paint, decoupage, refinishing the old. Those are my hobbies aside from interior design and space planning," she says. "I like to take old furniture and reupholster and refinish it."

One of her best makeovers to date is an old desk she found that had a black laminate top and chrome legs. "I cleaned it with PSP, spray-painted it all and it's very modern now -- chrome, black and hammer-finished spray paint. It looks very sleek, and turns something heavy, really nasty-looking and that reminds you of school into something very modern and industrial looking."

Decoupage isn't just for small boxes, either, she points out. Wierenga made Christmas presents for her girlfriends by having glass cut into coasters (\$10 for 40 coasters), which she then personalized with decoupage using puzzle pieces

Sidestepping retail

Looking for not-so-pricey furniture, appliances, window coverings? Student Leigh Blackburn advises shoppers to check out Direct Buy, a company that sells furniture at manufacturers' cost. To get the furniture at these prices you have to pay for a membership, such as Costco. "If you're interested you can go onto the website (www.directbuy.com). You can also get a guest pass if you want to check out what they do," she says. "It's a way to save money and get really good quality items. Quite a few interior designers are members

and get furniture that way."

Here are some more tips from the Internet, which offers lots of information on budget decorating.

- * Moulding is an inexpensive way to add richness to a room, especially if you buy Oriented Strand Board (OSB) rather than wood; ceiling medallions made of plastic are cheap and look like plaster;
- * Rather than doing a complete wainscoting job, opt for a chair rail and paint the bottom half of the wall a different colour, or add a wallpaper border;
- * Don't forget that slipcovers can be an affordable option rather than buying new; paired with some new pillows, they can offer a completely different look;
- * Purchase unfinished furniture and finish it yourself;
- * Don't be afraid of dollar stores, second-hand stores or garage sales -- amid all the junk you can often find gems.

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