



By following a few principles of design, anyone can create beautiful rooms that suit both the house and the people who live in it.

Listening ^{to} your house

An interior designer shares six lessons that apply to any home

BY MARIA LAPIANA

LESSON ONE

Be still & listen

Nora Murphy had the luxury of walking through an empty house, and that made it easier to hear what it was saying. She was able to consider things like the flow through rooms because there was no furniture to walk around. And she could observe the quality of light as it streamed onto the wide pine floors because it wasn't blocked by drapes.

Her decision to pare down her decorating style was influenced by the clean, architectural lines in her antique house. Nothing distracted her from the symmetry of the divided-light windows in front, the fireplace that warmed the house even without a fire, and the curved walls in an alcove that begged for a piano.

Most of our homes aren't empty. They're filled with our habits and our stuff. They're noisy, so it's not easy to imagine them any way other than the way they are. "You have to try to see past the stuff," says Nora. "Take away in order to add."

To rethink a room that's already decorated, do what you can to clear accessories away. Empty it completely if you can. But at the very least, take things off tables, walls, and windows. "You'd be surprised at what you might hear and notice if you take the clutter away," says Nora.

This saltbox won Nora Murphy's heart before she ever stepped inside.



This is a story about a woman in love with her house. It's also about your house. Your sister's. And your best friend's. It's about intuition, and some fundamental principles of design. And it's about how we all can learn to love our houses a little more.

Nora Murphy wasn't looking for a house. At least she didn't think she was.

Nora was perfectly content in the cozy, ivy-covered cottage she shared with her husband, Rick, and young son, Conor. After all, she'd spent 10 years decorating that intimate and romantic old home. She is an interior designer who was inclined toward a layered look, so she'd upholstered the living room walls in Scottish tartan wool. Her sofa was slipcovered in a tea-stained English floral print; her dining room table was skirted to the floor, and she'd filled the house with needlepoint, oil paintings, and English Staffordshire. The place was exactly the way she wanted it. And yet, one late-summer morning in 2001, none of that seemed to matter.

Nora was driving down a familiar country road when she glanced over at a farmhouse and saw a for-sale sign out front. "I'd driven by the house hundreds of times, and I always loved the way it looked," says Nora. "I always thought the people who lived in it were so lucky."

What happened next is something of a blur, but she remembers going to look at the 1767 house and feeling terribly guilty about it. "I know this sounds crazy, but I felt like I was cheating on my house," she says, and yet: "I just knew it was right for us. And I needed to convince Rick so he'd feel the same way."

Nora made her case, but it took months to close the deal. Then a curious thing happened as soon as they moved in: The house started talking to Nora.

"I was walking through the rooms, and I experienced something. There was a purity of moment that's hard to describe," she says. "I sensed the history of the house." She emptied her head of all her plans and decided to listen. "What I heard was that this house didn't want to be covered up."

"It has beautiful, simple bones, and it needed simple, straightforward furnishings." She observed a distinct quality of light as it washed over the rooms, and she shuddered to think of those windows covered by anything at all. She knew she needed to rethink her design plan, but that would require buying a few things.

"I told Rick this was the house of my dreams," Nora says. "I told him I just had to listen and do it right."

She never looked back.

In decorating her new old home, Nora says she acted deliberately, with intuition, an open mind—and a few basic principles of design. "I live in an old house, but what I did can work wherever you live, in any style of home," she says.

Maria LaPiana is associate editor.



LESSON TWO

Think big

A harvest table sits at the center of the warm dining room, surrounded by comfortable new Windsor chairs and bench.

There are rooms that require big-picture thinking. Nora's dining room is one of them. "Here was this room that the previous owners used as a living room," she says, "but it was long, it had this great light, and the wonderful fireplace. It immediately made me imagine a great keeping room, a gathering place."

Because Nora and Rick like to entertain friends and family over dinner, she knew the first thing she needed was a long harvest table. Once she found it, the foundation for her room was laid, and she set out to surround it with things that were "simple, understated, classic, and tailored."

"Everything in here is functional and it complements the bones of the room," she says. Nora used a khaki-color paint that changes as the light moves through the room during the day. Black is the punctuation mark; the reproduction Windsor chairs, the chandelier, and even the piano in the adjoining alcove are sculptural—and black.

When considering a room in its entirety, a proper foundation is essential, whether it's a dining table, a sofa, or a bed. Then think about walls, floors, and ceilings. After that, choose the furnishings and accessories that will complete the room.

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any style



Anyone can create pleasing vignettes like the one above showcasing an old cornmeal chest, or the cozy corner below that invites you to sit for a while.

LESSON THREE

Think small

Every house has a wall, corner, or alcove that yearns to be a star. Nora knows this instinctively, and one of the things she's done well is create vignettes, or small, deftly designed scenes, throughout her home.

A cornmeal chest in the hallway is at the heart of one such vignette. The distressed piece sits against a short wall just as you walk through the door the family uses most often. A whimsical antique advertising sign hangs on the wall over it, flanked by two metal sconces. A potted plant or a pumpkin may sit on the chest. Nora changes the elements of the vignette depending on the season and on the balance of colors and textures she finds pleasing.

Another of Nora's vignettes: A wing chair covered in quilted cotton, sitting next to a window between the dining room and the piano alcove. Add a side table with a topiary and a bold sconce on the wall—and the small, perfect corner is complete.

Anyone can create a vignette. First identify the space (it can't be too wide or all-encompassing). Think of it as a painting: Consider what will hang on the wall to give the painting a shape. Then add a third dimension to build the vignette out from the wall. Finally, consider textures, colors, and a mix of forms, remembering that in design, an odd number of objects generally works best.



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— Nora Murphy, homeowner



LESSON FOUR

Do the unexpected

Old meets new: An outsize contemporary vase sits in contrast to the island with its antique wood countertop.

Just because a house is old—or new—it doesn't mean that everything in it needs to date from a particular period. Nora's collections range from the 18th century to this year.

It can be refreshing to mix textures, too. Nora likes to fill a 19th-century brass milking pan with cool, sculptural seashells in warm weather, and fragrant potpourri in fall and winter.

In the kitchen, function prevails, but its beauty lies in the contradiction of old and new. In the center is an imposing island with a pine top and painted base (with lots of storage). The warm wood is echoed in the countertops and ancient beams overhead. What makes the old room feel fresh is the gleaming Viking six-burner stove that stands like a sentinel at the front of the island. The sleek stainless steel hood is flanked by 19th-century engravings of Scottish boys on horseback.

Advice for mixing things up: Forget what you think you know about how things go together. Forget what everyone says something is used for. Forget symmetry. Forget the way your mother used to decorate—and combine the things that surprise you most. Keep in mind that some combinations just won't work, but you'll never know unless you try.

LESSON SIX

Get away from it all

Some call it an “away space” or a haven. Nora calls it the parlor. The small room in the front of the house features a modest fireplace, four windows, and an awkward traffic pattern. “I love the way my house is open and light, how you can move easily from one room to another. But I also love how safe way this room makes me feel,” Nora says. It’s off the beaten path, in the quiet northwestern corner of the house.

Nora placed a desk in one corner and created a cozy nook in the other, close to the fireplace. She bought two cocoonlike wing chairs covered in a soft white-on-white crewel. Between them sits her tea table, and on the mantel, the oldest piece she owns, a pencil drawing from the late 17th century.

This room is Nora’s favorite in the house. It’s where she retreats to read, think, and refresh. “I know that not everyone has the luxury of a separate room, but you can create a space like this in the corner in your family room, or bedroom, or in a window seat in the hall,” she says.

“Keep your personal collections there, away from the rest of the house. Make a special little spot for yourself.” 

The parlor is the room Nora loves best of all.



LESSON FIVE

Use your treasures

Nora loves lots of beautiful, old things, but because she wanted her home to be spare, she had to play favorites. Selecting only a few pieces meant letting go of things that had been around for a long time. She did it by being honest with herself and keeping only the things she truly loved.

She advises you to do the same: Look around your own home and be truthful. Are you holding on to anything you don’t particularly like just because it’s been in your family for years? Or because it’s valuable? Or because it was a bargain?

Take a deep breath...and edit yourself, says Nora.

And remember: The more you love something, the more important it is to find a place for it in your home. When you display the things you’re emotionally attached to, your home takes on a warmth and personality that’s unique to you. That’s why Nora framed a painting her son made for her when she returned from a business trip last year. The bold poster—red tempera on butcher paper—may seem out of place in this refined home, but it’s Nora’s single most treasured possession.

“Of all the things I own,” she says, “that’s the one piece that’s going to the ‘home’ with me.”



Some of Nora’s favorite things: a 150-year-old bee skep from France (top); the painting her son made for her (top right); and an embroidered pillow (left) that reminds her to think creatively at all times.

