

THE HOME YOU OWN

5 things architects and designers regret about their own homes

Professionals share the mistakes they've made designing their own spaces — and the lessons they've learned

By Michelle Brunner

December 6, 2023 at 6:00 a.m. EST



After waiting a few years and gaining valuable experience, designer Annie Elliott redecorated her living room, shown here, and she loves it now. (Angie Seckinger)

The process of home improvement is a constant learning curve, where every misstep holds a cautionary tale for future renovations. My own homes have been rife with such lessons. Take the deep walnut stain of our old kitchen's hardwood floor. The dark finish contrasted beautifully with our vintage white cabinets. What I hadn't considered: how it would magnify every cracker crumb and speck of dust. Every time I reached for the Swiffer, I rued my impractical choice and wished I could go back in time for a do-over.

There's some comfort in knowing I'm not alone — even design professionals occasionally feel the pangs of remorse over an errant renovation decision or decorative choice. Here architects and interior designers reveal the things they wish they'd done differently in their own homes and the lessons learned from their experiences.

1 Lesson: Sometimes it pays to stretch your budget

When it was time to replace the porch of her historic Annapolis, Md. home many years ago, architect Cathy Purple Cherry opted for painted wood when she would have preferred stone. Her reason? “It was money — end of story,” she admits. “Back then, the cost difference between the two materials was around \$20,000, which was a tremendous amount.”

While making the choice to bank that money was wise in the moment, Cherry regrets it in hindsight. “It's come back to bite us because we're constantly dealing with maintenance on that wood porch.” She estimates that she's probably spent more than \$30,000 on repainting and upkeep over the years. “In the end, keeping the wood porch has cost us more than if we had just done the stone porch from the outset,” she says.

2 Lesson: Take the time to investigate switching to electric

Sarah Snouffer of Third Street Architecture made sure to include an electric induction range in the renovation of her Washington, D.C. rowhouse kitchen, but she regrets not quitting gas completely. At the time, her subcontractors recommended sticking with gas in other parts of the home, and with a baby on the way, she didn't have the time or energy to question it. She now wonders if that was the right call: “I wish we would have had the capacity and the foresight to have looked at the alternatives,” she says.



When she renovated her kitchen, architect Sarah Snouffer installed an induction range, which she loves. Now she wishes she had completely converted from gas to electric. (Christy Kosnic)

Michael Winn of Winn Design & Build admits that if he were building his home today, he would likely make the jump from gas to electric. “There are two real reasons why I would prefer to move away from these combustible appliances in the house: indoor air quality and sustainability,” he says.

Replacing existing gas furnaces and water heaters with electric ones can be costly and complicated upfront, but long-term, they’ll operate more efficiently and emit less pollution.

The Inflation Reduction Act can help with tax credits and rebates for energy-efficient improvements made before 2032.

3 Lesson: Insulate for sound when you have the chance

Anyone who's ever tiptoed in slow-mo across creaky floorboards to avoid waking a sleeping baby knows the value of a quiet house. After the birth of her first son, Snouffer regretted not taking the extra step of insulating for sound between the bathroom and the nursery in her row home. "Getting up early and sneaking in a shower was always a gamble," she says. "In hindsight, it would have been unbelievably cheap to put some bags of insulation in the walls when they were already open, but we were time-pressed and needed to finish the renovation."

Having learned from that experience, the architect didn't hesitate to add sound insulation when she redid her kitchen, which is directly under the nursery. "Now if the little one needs to go to bed early, we can still hang out in the kitchen and the noise is muffled," she says.



The company FeltRight makes acoustic tiles which can help dampen sound in your home. (Courtesy of FeltRight)

Winn also wishes he'd taken more sound-dampening measures inside his home — he's got two music-loving kids, one who plays instruments and another who studies dance. "Having a dedicated space that we could have isolated from the rest of the house would have been beneficial for everyone," he says.

For clients seeking a quieter home, he recommends sound-deadening drywall called QuietRock, acoustical sealant for around outlets and switches, and acoustical putty, which you wrap around the box in the wall behind your outlets. But he's quick to note that less invasive measures can help, too. "Anything you can do to add a dense, absorbent surface can help to deaden the sound and keep it from traveling through the house," he says. That includes decorative elements such as draperies, floor and wall coverings, which tend to absorb and diffuse sound. For instance, the company Felt Right makes wall-mounted sound-dampening tiles that skew mid-century modern in appearance and feel more like a piece of statement art than a noise-reduction solution.

4 Lesson: Rethink concrete countertops

Too many gin and tonics have the potential to ruin an evening, but a countertop? Such was the case for designer Annie Elliott. While renovating the kitchen of her first condo, she opted for gray concrete countertops, but the material acquired a stain immediately after she and her husband toasted the end of the renovation with a celebratory cocktail.

"The countertops had been sealed, but literally on the first night, my husband left a lime wedge sitting on the counter and by morning there was a perfect black moon-shaped stain that never went away," she says. If Elliott were designing the space today, she says she would choose a solid-surface engineered stone, such as quartz, which is virtually impervious to stains. "Now I look at it as a learning experience, but back then that etch bothered me every time I went into the kitchen," she says.

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Lesson: Have a clear design plan and don't rush it

For Houston designer Lauren Wills Grover, the prospect of having a dedicated workspace in her old Brooklyn apartment was so thrilling that she went all in on the home office concept, a decision she regretted every time she had houseguests. “In retrospect, I wish I had thought about how nice it would be to have a place for my dad to sleep that wasn't my sofa,” she says.

Simple moves such as adding a daybed with a trundle and incorporating closed cabinetry to hide work clutter would have made the office function more efficiently. “If you have a smaller room, it can be tricky to try to fit everything in, but I think there are some creative options in terms of combining dual functions in the same space,” she says. “The key is to think about how the room might evolve and not to rush it.”



Annie Elliott's former living room design, which she jokingly describes as a stage set for “Scarface.”
(Annie Elliott)

Elliott admits she made a similar misstep setting up her living room when she first moved into her current home. “We were coming from a condo and had nothing,” she says. Filled with the excitement of furnishing a new home, she bought items with no real plan — at the time, she hadn’t yet embarked on her design career. After settling on crimson walls, she combined a black and white upholstered sofa with Swedish safari chairs and a Flokati rug. Looking back, she jokingly describes the space as looking like a stage set for “Scarface.”

“It was definitely dramatic, but it wasn’t me,” she says. “It didn’t have enough functional seating and the room had nothing to do with any other room in the house.” Years later when she decided to redo the space, she approached the project as if she were the client, formulating a plan based on the room’s functional needs, seating requirements and overall mood. The result? “It’s been eight years, and I still really love it.”

Michelle Brunner is a writer in D.C. who covers interior design and culture.