

# THE *Decorator's* TAKE

Interior talk with  
the professionals

*It's the classic question raised by those about to embark on the dubious journey of decorating a home: hire a decorator or fly solo? For those of us with questionable talent on the home decorating front (no comment from yours truly), it's almost a no-brainer. But for those who do show some promise, the decision is a bit trickier. Why spend the money? Will it cost a fortune? Won't a decorator just impose her own aesthetic sense on me?*

*To answer some of these questions, and provide you, dear reader, with a good idea of just what goes on in the mind of an interior decorator, we've consulted with some of the best talent out there. The decorators we've polled took the time out of their intensely busy (though no doubt rewarding) schedules to provide you with insight that will allow you a closer look into the exciting world of interior design*

*You're welcome!*

## THE DECORATORS:

**Dassy Schwartz:** Le Mode  
Décor, Lakewood, New Jersey.

**Hadassah Avraham:**  
Elbat Design and Décor,  
Brooklyn, New York.

**Susan Strauss:** Susan  
Strauss Design, Lakewood,  
New Jersey.

**Ruchy Klein:** Rachel Klein  
Interiors, Monsey, New York.

## WHAT ARE SOME WAYS TO MAKE A HOME FEEL SPECIAL YET STAY WITHIN A LOW BUDGET?

>> **Ruchy:** Before you begin decorating, make sure the rooms are clean and neat. The walls must be in good repair, the seating free of rips and stains, and no rubbed-out floors. If you can't afford to replace the furniture think about adding slipcovers or throw rugs to cover up the worn-out spots. Once that is done, you can set about injecting some personality into your room. Paint an accent wall in a different color, or try stenciling a pattern, like a chevron, on one wall. Display a pretty vase or colored glass bottles on shelves. Hang a striking light fixture, maybe a decorative lamp shade. Hanging a grouping of black and white photographs in chic black frames is always a great way to add some character and warmth. Don't be afraid to show your personality!

>> **Susan:** Shopping at stores like HomeGoods, Marshalls, and Ikea can give you a wide variety of up-to-date trends and styles without breaking the bank. Refinishing an old piece of furniture is a wonderful way to transform the

look of a room, by painting it or reupholstering it with a fresh new hue of beautiful fabric. A dated kitchen can be easily brought back to life on a budget by painting over the existing cabinets and replacing the hardware with something with a modern vibe.

>> **Hadassah:** To make a home feel special, you don't need to spend lots of money — just spend it well. I tell clients not to be afraid to bring in personal touches, like accents in a favorite color or with artwork that really speaks to them. Also, it is not necessary to throw out everything when you want an updated look. Sometimes a few new throw pillows, an area rug, a new paint color or new window treatments can transform a room magically! If you are handy or are willing to try something new, you can update your old furniture by repainting, refinishing, reupholstering or adding a slipcover.

>> **Dassy:** The “homework” I do behind the scenes is what yields the greatest savings and affordability for my clients. Finding that perfect fixture, tile or art work from some charming yet affordable off-the-beaten-path source is what yields the greatest savings for my clients.

## IS IT POSSIBLE TO CREATE AN UP-TO-DATE DÉCOR SCHEME THAT IS STILL TIMELESS AND CLASSIC?

>> **Dassy:** I always tell my clients to follow the “big/little rule.” Timeless and classic when it comes to the big things, while infusing the little things with great taste, creativity and, most importantly, the individuality of the client.

>> **Susan:** Timeless homes are usually a conglomeration of neutral colors that exude effortless class. So the answer to your question is yes. Decorating a home with neutrals and accenting with a pop of color is the most efficient way to create an up-to-date yet classic décor scheme. That way, when the current colors and trends fade, all that needs to be done is change out the accents and update them with new ones.

>> **Ruchy:** I generally recommend that all big purchases should be in neutral colors. Accent with trendy colors; this way you are not stuck with a shade that looks dated in a couple of years. This applies to your kitchen cabinets, granite and tiles as well. Try to keep the lines of your furniture and light fixtures classic, not overly ornate or very modern. If you absolutely love something, go ahead and buy it, but be aware that you will probably get tired of it after a few years.

>> **Hadassah:** Contemporary décor does not necessarily mean ultra-modern lines or a monochromatic palette. A room can look current and be full of antiques or have influences from different eras. For example, you can update Louis XV dining chairs by giving them a light oak finish, or even a silver-leafed one, and upholster with a contemporary, unfussy fabric. Pair with a new mirrored sideboard, vintage brass chandelier, accents of blue-and-white porcelain, orchid floral arrangements, and a herringbone floor, and you have a chic, contemporary, yet timeless look!



## WHAT ARE SOME OF THE MOST COMMON DECORATING MISTAKES?

>> **Dassy:** The worst mistake a customer can make is to be afraid to inject her own taste and personality in her home, and settle for "something like that picture in the magazine or my friend's house." My responsibility as a designer is to design something that is timeless and beautiful, but uniquely "you" so that clients will truly enjoy not only "the" home, but "their" home.

>> **Susan:** Some clients would rather follow a short-lived trend rather than choose pieces they really like. On the flip side, clients may invest in a piece they aesthetically love without taking into consideration the item's comfort (or lack of it). While aesthetics are of top priority, they must be matched by the same sense of practicality.

>> **Ruchy:** People think that everything needs to match (often using the same colors and fabrics), but in reality, it's much more interesting to mix and match fabrics and finishes, and combine different furniture pieces. Another common mistake I see is that people tend to hang paintings and sconces at the wrong height and distance from each other. These should be hung at eye-level so that they can be properly appreciated. The sconces should be close enough to the wall hanging to have a cohesive look.

>> **Hadassah:** I believe it is a mistake to copy a look and even a paint color from someone else. I always advise people to look for inspiration and gather pictures and swatches. It's best to have a taste and style you like and feel good about. I don't advise making choices just because something is trending today, or because it seems like everyone else is doing it. Also, paint colors differ house to house because of lighting, both natural and electric. You have to test colors on walls and view at different times, and with the type of lighting that's going to be installed once the room is done.

## WHAT'S THE MINIMUM AMOUNT OF TIME A CLIENT SHOULD ALLOT FOR WORKING WITH A DECORATOR? HOW CAN ONE MAXIMIZE THAT TIME?

>> **Hadassah:** Depending on the scope of work, a normal, thorough consultation can last between 90 minutes and two hours. This can cover the basics of a whole house redesign, or just choosing colors for a 1,500-square-foot house. A designer spends time creating design options when choosing flooring, fixtures or the like. How quickly the client makes those decisions often determines how quickly a job progresses.

>> **Ruchy:** That depends on the project, but I'd say the minimum for a small project is two hours. Small projects can include choosing paint colors, furniture placement in a room, or purchasing of an item like a couch or dinette set. In order to maximize the time, have all your questions and ideas ready, and bring samples, swatches and paint books with you. Minimize disturbances like crying children or phone calls.

>> **Susan:** In order to evaluate the proper amount of time needed for a project we must look at the project scale and the client's needs. To maximize the time spent with a decorator, prepare for the appointment by researching options and visiting stores to get a sense of what you like.

>> **Dassy:** Clients get their "biggest bang for their buck" by being prepared and doing some of their own research before meeting with me. This allows clients to "find" their own basic taste, which will minimize the selections, thus saving much time and money.



## CAN WORKING WITH A DECORATOR ACTUALLY SAVE MONEY FOR A CLIENT?

>> **Ruchy:** Of course! She can save you from making costly mistakes. If you paint a room the wrong color, or order a couch in a shade that you end up hating, then you end up paying twice. Additionally, a decorator is usually a savvy shopper with many connections, and knows where the good buys are.

>> **Dassy:** The painstaking research we do for our sources — and ultimately the relationships forged with the entire gamut of suppliers and installers — results in the ability to attain quality craftsmanship at affordable prices. That is all passed along to the client.

>> **Susan:** As designers we work alongside vendors and suppliers on a daily basis. We take on the responsibility of vetting out which vendors are most reliable, supply quality products and are well priced. Recently, a client wanted a beautiful staircase, which was complicated to install due to the elements involved. I priced out a company I'd worked with previously that had supplied quality work. The client, however, chose to work with a lower-priced company I wasn't familiar with. The stairs were installed improperly. After an immense amount of aggravation, the client had to rip out the staircase and go back to square one.

>> **Hadassah:** If a client is unsure of her taste or style, or has a hard time making decisions, hiring a designer is money well spent. When making big changes to a room or redecorating an entire house, no one wants to waste time or money on a mistake.



## WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN A CLIENT'S TASTE IS IN OPPOSITION TO YOURS?

>> **Susan:** When a client has opposing taste to what naturally I would be leaning toward, I will let her know why I recommend what I'm proposing. Generally, that conversation will put the client at ease and bring her on board with the proposal. However, if that explanation does not satisfy the client, I will do my best to incorporate her taste and veer more toward her specifications.

>> **Hadassah:** I see it as an opportunity to help create a beautiful home in a different way. I don't impose my taste, but my sense of quality, and I see if I can educate them to just think a little outside of their comfort zone. Often clients are pleasantly surprised to see new ideas that are different than what they are used to.

>> **Dassy:** Clearly my role is not to infuse every project with my taste. The exhilarating challenge is to have the client's taste look timeless and beautiful. With hard work and much warmth and patience, the outcome is usually uniquely wonderful.

>> **Ruchy:** I appreciate many different styles, so I can work with people of varying taste. I feel every look can be beautiful if it's pulled together correctly. As long as the look is cohesive and the style and colors blend, I can make it work. If I feel that an item is a bad choice I will let my client know and suggest some options that are a good compromise and that we both love. I never force my choices on my clients.



## HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE IDEAL CLIENT?

>> **Hadassah:** The ideal client has a clear budget, is trusting and appreciative, and is a quick decision-maker.

>> **Ruchy:** If the client doesn't trust the decorator and second guesses everything she says, that makes it hard to accomplish anything. It's important to have an approximate budget in mind, so that everyone is clear on the goals and how to get the most out of the project.

>> **Susan:** The perfect client is one who gives me free rein. When there are no creative barriers and the vision can come to life, the project always exceeds expectations in the end.

>> **Dassy:** There is no such thing as "perfect" and that's what makes designing so fun and challenging. However, someone who knows and is true to herself does make it a bit simpler. If clients know, and are realistic about, their budget, their own true taste, and relatively confident in their decisions, then it's a simple and harmonious "one-on-one" session and the results will show.

## WHAT WAS THE MOST CHALLENGING OR MEMORABLE PROJECT YOU'VE TACKLED?

>> **Susan:** I worked on office headquarters for a Fortune 500 company that insisted on working with a shoestring budget. The executives wanted the space to look super impressive, professional, modern and cutting edge — while keeping the costs to an absolute minimum.

>> **Hadassah:** I had a client who was a clinically compulsive hoarder. It was close to impossible to make even slight improvements because there was so much clutter and mess. It was sad, really, that I couldn't do more than help her rearrange things and choose paint colors for walls you almost couldn't see!

>> **Dassy:** I did a huge amount of research for a café I designed in Lakewood named KAVA. They wanted warm and rustic, yet sleek and modern, practical, affordable — and nothing Lakewood had ever seen! It was quite the challenge, but with a lot of hard work and luck it came out wonderful, and the client was thrilled.

>> **Ruchy:** About eight years ago, a woman I knew vaguely called me. When she introduced herself on the phone, my first thought was that she wanted to "nosh" ideas and take advantage of me. Instead, she hired me to design. She had full trust in me. And while we worked together, we developed a great relationship! Now we laugh at how we became friends. Never make assumptions about people without really getting to know them!

## WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE ROOM TO DECORATE?

>> **Susan:** The truth is, when decorating is a passion, the job is a favorite, not a specific room. Overall, I enjoy each step of the project and the task of overcoming the challenges they present. However, the feeling of finally putting the finishing touches on a project and standing back and admiring how all the meticulous details came together is by far a favorite of mine.

>> **Hadassah:** My favorite room is one that does not have to be limited. I like to create casually elegant, classic and worldly rooms that say something personal about a client. I can do that in a living room, dining room or kitchen just the same. I like to do the unexpected in rooms, like add artwork and table lamps to the kitchen, hang family heirloom plates as art on the walls in the dining or living room, and address and accentuate the fifth wall: the ceiling!

>> **Dassy:** Any room where the client says "I want this room to be ME." Combining a person's unique tastes and beautiful décor are the most fun and rewarding part of being a designer.

>> **Ruchy:** I love any room that has a unique feature, like interesting architecture, pretty windows or an exciting ceiling. Those are the rooms that end up having a lot of character. But I enjoy the challenge of making an ordinary room look special.

## WHAT DO YOU DO IF A COUPLE WHO HAS HIRED YOU HAS OPPOSING TASTES (E.G. A HUSBAND WHO LIKES MODERN DÉCOR VERSUS A WIFE WHO PREFERS TRADITIONAL)?

>> **Susan:** The profession of interior design requires you to be a "people person," playing the balancing game of pleasing all parties at hand and fulfilling all project objectives by meeting somewhere in between.

>> **Ruchy:** I listen carefully to both. Often, they are not necessarily opposing, and you can find a common ground. Usually I work with one, and they discuss it when I'm not around and come to a conclusion. In many instances, one spouse is the one that takes over and makes the decisions. I try to make everyone feel comfortable, and not intimidated, so that they feel free to voice their opinions.

>> **Hadassah:** I often find that there is one spouse with a more dominant taste. If a wife has to constantly go back and "check with her husband" before deciding something, I try to work with them when they are together. I like to mix styles and explain that it can be done tastefully, if they will trust me and give in to each other a little.

>> **Dassy:** Without trying to sound like a therapist, I always tell spouses with polar-opposite tastes that to achieve a warm, beautiful and harmonious home and décor, there will have to be a little give and take. The goal is that both spouses love their own choices and are OK with their spouse's choices. With the occasional miracle, they will sometimes even love the same thing! ●