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KITCHEN

AND BATH IDEAS

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Q: Our 20-year-old kitchen and bathrooms need overhauling. What is the cost of hiring a designer? And more important, what are the costs of *not* hiring one?

—DIANE CLEMENTS,
DURHAM, NORTH CAROLINA

A: Home improvement projects, especially kitchen and bath remodels, can be expensive. But cutting corners can cost more down the road. So be honest with yourself: How skilled are you, and what's best left in the hands of a professional?

"The cost of hiring a designer is relative to the time required for design development, product research, and coordination with the client, contractors, and outside consultants," says Heather Higgins, a New York-based designer. "After the first consultation, a seasoned designer should be able to provide an estimate for their design fee to complete your project."

Higgins also reminds homeowners that designers purchase materials at a discounted rate, which helps offset their fees. And that makes it less expensive in the end to get the polished look homeowners expect when they bring a designer on board.

Tackling a project without a designer can be emotionally and financially risky. Designers not only help you hone the vision by showing you the latest trends and materials, but they also keep the project on schedule and on budget. If your

DIY project goes awry, you'll have to live with those glaring mistakes every day until you can afford to hire a professional to fix it for you.

Still trust your DIY prowess? These resources can help you out along the way: * *Designinabag.com* delivers professionally coordinated design concepts—including cabinet, countertop, tile, and paint samples—right to your door based on your color palette and design preferences. * "From Sand Castles to Dream Houses: A Planner for Building or Remodeling Your Home" is a weekend warrior's guide to product selection, procedure, and contractor management. Author Sheri Koones shows how to stay organized, in charge, and on budget from start to finish.

When it comes to home-improvement projects, it's hard to put a price tag on peace of mind and a good night's sleep. For a little extra cost, you'll be thrilled to have a designer in your corner.

Q: We're about to remodel our entire home, and we want to install radiant floor heating throughout. Will that work in our kitchen if we're going to use hardwood?

—KAY MANSKE, HUBERTUS, WISCONSIN

A: Radiant heating systems distribute heat directly to the surface under which it's installed—your floor, in this case. Heat then radiates from the warm surface and into the room. The U.S. Department of Energy says it's more efficient than forced-air heating (no leaky ducts robbing

rooms of warm air). The lack of moving air is also good for those with severe allergies. Flooring materials such as ceramic, porcelain, and natural stone tile play well with radiant heat, but Haley Hougan, president of Dallas-based HD Remodeling, says hardwood is a beast of its own. "It's always best to follow manufacturer specifications," she says. "Some specifically say their hardwood should not be used with radiant heat." If the wood's moisture content exceeds 6 percent, Hougan says, you risk the wood cupping and shrinking. "Installing hardwood over radiant heat requires letting the wood dry out until it's close to the 6 percent range," Hougan says. She also recommends choosing a plank that is 2 ¼ inches wide or skinnier and using engineered wood instead of hardwood ("But still check with the manufacturer," she warns). If you're still unsure, always seek a professional's advice. Visit nari.org to find a certified remodeler in your area.

Q: What's your thought on having a ceiling fan in a kitchen? Is it functional? Fashionable? I want to install one, but I've never come across one in homes or in a magazine.

—DAWN BAUER, ADDEL, IOWA

A: It's not a common practice, but Detroit-based designer Gerry Snapke says it's not a rule breaker. "Ceiling height is a determining factor," he says. "If it's 8 feet or shorter, it's definitely not functional." Kitchens lucky enough to have a vaulted or cathedral ceiling could especially benefit from such an installation. "It's a good way to move the air that gets trapped up there," Snapke says. The idea of rushing air may sound appealing, but others associate that with swirling dust. And who wants a coating of dust on their food? "Grease particles that escape your

range hood can collect on the fan,” Snapke says. “And then dust clings to the grease, which could make for quite a messy situation.”

When it comes to aesthetic, Snapke says personal style trumps all: “If you love it and it’s the perfect accent to your kitchen decor, why not? Don’t worry, we won’t call the fashion police.”

Q: We want to paint our kitchen cabinets a dark chocolate or black, but we’re afraid it will look too dark. How do I embrace this contrast while still creating a light and airy look?

—EMILY BAHAR, LAUREL, MARYLAND

A: Using dark cabinetry does not necessarily make a kitchen dark. It can actually create a very chic and sophisticated look. If there are enough windows to flood your space with natural light, Miami-based designer Jessica Boudreaux says that should prevent your kitchen from being too dark. However, the other materials and colors in the space will also affect the overall look. “Try contrasting the dark cabinetry with a light countertop, such as quartz or statuary marble—depending on your style and budget,” she says. The darkest part of the kitchen is the recessed area between the wall cabinets and countertop, so Boudreaux advises lining the backsplash with a high-gloss tile, such as glass: “The luster will reflect light from your windows and other sources to help illuminate the kitchen.” This brings us to lighting, which is just as important for function as it is for aesthetics. Do you have ample task lighting over your work areas and ambient lighting throughout? “Don’t forget undercabinet lighting,” Boudreaux says. “It sets the backsplash aglow.” No matter the color of your cabinetry, good lighting is crucial to creating a bright space.

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