

# HOME & GARDEN

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Photos by CHRIS STEWART / The Chronicle

**After:** The bedroom had a "metallic deco" makeover with a cascade of shimmering bronze fabric and three shades of suede-colored walls. Flea market chairs were reupholstered, their legs painted black.

## Almost-instant makeovers

In tough times, decorators help people make the best of what they have

By Diana Kapp  
SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

**I**t was 11 a.m. Monday, and her in-laws were descending in less than 48 hours. The busy Greenbrae working mother of three wasn't doing any of the things you would expect. No fitful vacuuming of dust bunnies, no turning of couch pillows to hide coffee stains, no hurried hanging of photos, no dashes to the flower store.

Instead, she picked up the phone and dialed a one-day decorator.

When Sharon Low arrived, arms full of fresh-cut flowers and apple wood, it was as if the House Beau-

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**Before:** Plain green walls surrounded an ordinary dresser and a sleigh bed in a Novato bedroom.

### DIY tip



**Fresh flowers:** Freshen up any room with an orchid, interesting plant or fresh-cut flowers. Also, re-potting a tired plant will give it new life.

# Same rooms, fresh looks

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tiful fairy had landed. In four hours, while the Marin investment consultant returned calls to clients, Low gave the living room a major makeover. Goodbye tricycle and toy-train parking lot. In its place, an inviting adult living room emerged. Artfully arranged family photos gleamed from the newly polished mantelpiece; festively tied apple-wood bundles peeked from the fireplace; and the newly positioned sofa beckoned with piles of pillows. A sad plant looked proud in a new rattan pot.

Ironically, calling in an instant decorator — a term that sounds straight out of “Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous” — is the frugal design trend of the times. Rather than blow a wad on tony designers who may spend \$30,000 of their client's dough before entering the home, people are hiring one-day decorators to transform their homes — working with what the clients already have.

One-day decorators — also called fluffers, stylists and arrangers — work by the hour, usually taking on one or two rooms at a time. For \$75 to \$125 per hour, in about half a day, they move furniture, rehang art, paint a colorful accent wall, arrange a hodgepodge of keepsakes into a collection, enliven a tired sofa with a draping of fun fabric. Some take everything out of the room and start again (generally insisting that clients leave during the process); others act more like consultants, reeling off a hundred low- or no-cost suggestions to later implement yourself.

This sister concept to staging (having a stylist overhaul your house in hopes of increasing the sale price) is not new, but it has taken off in these tight times. “Our business has exploded since 2000,”

says Lisa Billings, president of the Interior Arrangement & Decorating Association in Dallas. “We were training 12 decorators a year — now it's over 100,” she says.

In the Bay Area, dozens of instant decorators, with more hanging a shingle every month, are keeping very busy.

The smoldering economy and post-Sept. 11 lifestyle changes are driving this trend. Says Cyrina Quinlan of Transform Your Home in San Rafael, “People want to nest. They are staying closer to home — not traveling. They want to feel good. And, of course, they want more bang for their buck.”

In the ultimate sign of the times, one arranger has gone even further to cast this service as recession-appropriate. Jackie Greenberg recently began promoting her Belvedere

Sara Hunt Malone, Distinctive Nest, San Rafael, (415) 883-3017.



Photos by DEANNE FITZMAURICE / The Chronicle

**After:** A new rug, a trunk to hold the toys and a bench, both from the bedroom, along with rehung artwork, pull the room together.

firm Interior Spaces as a “downsizing design service.” When you move from a 2,500-square-foot house into a 1,200-square-foot townhouse, she'll help you deal with your mass of furniture.

And designers at the high end also recognize that fluffing fits the times. Local haute designers, including John Wheatman & Associates, are doing a fair number of “push and pulls” — literally pushing and pulling existing furniture around to redesign a room. Some, like Wheatman, view this approach as simply practical — the way all good design should be. Others are seeing larger projects shrink in midstream.

A Jordan Park couple, for instance, were planning a major redo of their home when he lost his job — and their decorating budget along with it. Instead of buying all new living room furniture and renovating the kitchen, San Francisco interior designer Kathleen Navarra — asked to knock a couple of zeros off her budget — suggested simply painting the rooms and replacing the kitchen cabinet knobs.

“Paint is the cheapest thing you can do,” says Navarra. By simply painting white walls an okra color, she transformed the place. “We can't believe it. We feel like we're on vacation in our house,” the couple told her.

In contrast to typical decorators, arrangers work from the premise that most people already own everything they need. The magic is in “creative reuse.”

In Joan Semling-Bostian's Fairfax home, arranger Sara Malone of Distinctive Nest gave a pastel book-



**Before:** Designer Jonathan Strahey was asked to make over this Cole Valley great room to function for the entire family. Children's toys and haphazard seating arrangements made it unfocused.



LIZ MANGELSDORF / The Chronicle

**Before:** Two conversation areas were awkward in this Sausalito living room “fluffed” by decorator Linda Banks.



GINA GAYLE / The Chronicle

**After:** Banks created one seating area, repositioned the desk and brought in art from other rooms.

case new life when she wired the back and turned it into a hanging display case for the 6-year-old daughter's tea sets. Then, mixing and matching linens and pillows between the adults' and kids' beds, she gave the bedrooms a fresh look. “I would have never thought of that,” says Semling-Bostian, who has used Malone on three occasions. “That's what happens when you see a house with fresh eyes.”

Because instant decorators use existing items doesn't mean they don't dramatically change a look. A common practice is remaking furniture and fixtures with paint, faux finishes and new fabric.

To create a country kitchen for Susan and Peter Grant, Kathleen Hallin of Kathleen Hallin Design painted the hood with a finish that looks like pounded copper, hung old curtains from copper rods from Home Depot, and refinished cabinet knobs with copper paint.

Even old sofas get transformed. “I'll have hideous high scrolled arms shaved down, change the pillow shape; add a skirt. Everyone would rather spend \$2,000 and end up with exactly what they want,” says Betsy Burnham Stern, a Los Angeles designer who does fluffs as well as big-budget jobs.

And there are other tricks of the trade all the arrangers seem to rely on: hanging mirrors to increase a room's openness; pulling sofas away from the wall to create a feeling of intimacy; and arranging knickknacks into distinct collections. Often, making more of a space is about simply using less. Hallin's rule of thumb: Every room can al-

## Fluffing on your own

If you'd rather “push and pull” on your own, here are some tips from arrangers around the bay.

**Create collections:** If you're into Buddhas, miniature bicycles or family photos, arrange them in like groupings. This way, they make a statement and don't look like clutter.

**Edit:** Take a some furniture out of the room. Open space increases flow and makes a room inviting.

**Shift the rug:** Turn the rug in a different direction to change the orientation and focal point of the room.

**Mirror, mirror:** Hang mirrors to create depth and openness.

**Build “nests”:** Create several small seating areas rather than focusing

all furniture around the fireplace or coffee table.

**Paint:** Even a single wall of color can transform a room — and it's easy to change if you don't like it.

**Mix up highs and lows:** Rooms look more interesting, and less cluttered, when furniture is at a variety of heights.

**Pilfer your own trash:** Go through your garage, attic or an unused room in search of treasures. Sometimes what didn't work in one place is perfect elsewhere.

— Diana Kapp

ways lose at least two pieces of furniture. “Dead space is a really good concept,” says Hallin. “I'm constantly reminding people that you don't need a table with every chair.” This is what really challenges clients, says Cyrina Quinlan. “We take everything we remove out of the house immediately. If we let it sit there overnight, they'd be picking back through it.”

Smart choices were at the heart of a job that Charles De Lisle of YourSpace Inc. did recently for an Oakland couple. After inheriting all the furniture of two uncles, they called on De Lisle for help. The two-day job started with unloading all the new furniture onto the front lawn. The challenge was what to use to keep their home feeling fresh despite so much traditional furniture. “It was basic-

ly a big editing job,” says De Lisle. Beyond being thrifty, fluffing has other appeals. It's fast, requires few decisions and, most important, yields a room with individual character. “Off-the-shelf stuff doesn't have meaning,” says Caryl Kurtzman of Kurtzman & Associates in Belvedere, explaining why arranging makes so much sense. “What creates flavor and meaning are the things we've collected over ourselves over the years.”

The beauty of arranging is you can keep reinventing a room. Describing the continuing fluffing she does in her own home, decorator Burnham Stern reflects: “It's like (painting) the Golden Gate Bridge. As soon as it's done, I start again.”

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