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DESIGN

Home-Office Decorating Flubs —and How to Fix Them

We asked hundreds of pros where people typically go wrong when designing their residential workspaces—and pressed for smart solutions



THE EYES HAVE IT A Sagaponack, N.Y., setup by architect Guillermo Gomez includes two essentials: a sight-saving view and an ergonomic chair, in this case Knoll's Generation model. PHOTO: ALEC HEMER

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PHOTO: MATTHEW COOK

WHEN QUIZZED on the mistakes they see most in home offices, designers and architects list both aesthetic and practical flubs. For New York designer Mikel Welch, who often sees lapses in taste in the workspaces of otherwise stylish homeowners, what comes to mind is “those dated, black-handled, hand-me-down scissors. Swap them out for antique gold versions.” Another error folks make is failing to consider the ways they’re most productive. One of Manhattan designer Kati Curtis’s clients realized she really prefers to work in bed. The two scrapped plans for built-in storage and a desk in a second bedroom, opting instead for an upholstered bed. “It serves as a space to work that’s not her bedroom and doubles as a guest room,” said Ms. Curtis. “Win/win.” Here, more solutions to common home-office missteps.



PHOTO: MATTHEW COOK

Make It Chic as Your Home

“If a space doesn’t have good energy, I promise you will find other things to do at home than get work done,” said designer Amanda Lantz, in Carmel, Ind. “Add residential elements like carpeting, color, pattern and texture.” Load on the willfully unbusinesslike personal effects such a collection of cut cranberry glass. “I want to look at what I love and find inspiring,” said New York designer Starrett Ringbom. “I put one of my favorite pieces of art over my desk, a Josef Albers print, and chose the wall color and curtain fabric around it.” Think of what you see in insipid corporate offices, and do the opposite. Paint the back of bookshelves or line them with wallpaper. In a Dublin project, New York designer Phillip Thomas painted an unexpected emerald green inside dark blue cabinets. “It is this level of detail that elevates the home office from just a place one goes to work to a space where one wants to be,” he said.



PHOTO: MATTHEW COOK

Go Beyond the Task Light

Natural illumination beats all other types, and when it's available, the office layout should work around it, said Steve Delfino, vice president of office-furnishings and technology company Teknion. If windows are in short supply, Princeton, N.J., architect Joshua Zinder warned of eyestrain, emphatically cautioning, "A computer monitor does not provide enough light to read by." Lighting should be adequate and layered. New York designer Andi Pepper advised a combination of overhead lights, table and floor lamps and sconces. "LED lighting, very energy saving, must be carefully selected because it can be eerily blue," said Los Angeles architect Raun Thorp. Many design pros recommended hanging chandeliers. "They offer warm pools of soft lighting," said Mr. Delfino.



PHOTO: MATTHEW COOK

Bring in the Outside

International firm NBBJ is responsible for the design of the Amazon Spheres recently opened at the center of the online-retail giant's Seattle campus, a sort of rain-forest-cum-lounge for 800 people at a time. Guided by research concluding that access to nature reduces stress and helps us work more effectively, designers filled the three transparent spheres with nearly 40,000 plants from all over the world. NBBJ architect Jonathan Bahe suggested homeowners might apply these insights by bringing plants and greenery into their home studios. You can dip your toe in so-called biophilic design with two of the plants NASA research shows scrub the air of toxins most effectively: the peace lily and variegated snake plant. They are also nearly impossible to kill.

Get Off the Wall

Though many people think shoving their large furniture pieces against the perimeter of a room frees up space, Caitlin Murray of Los Angeles firm Black Lacquer Design argues that it can make a space feel “cramped.” Floating a desk in the middle of a room is sophisticated, but unless you work on only a Wi-Fi-connected, battery-driven laptop, you face a power-source dilemma. M.A. Allen’s preferred arrangement: “I like to do built-ins against a wall incorporating a work surface with knee space, then float a more open table desk in front,” said the Raleigh, N.C., designer. “Everyone wants the look of the floating desk, but desktop computers, dual monitors, printers need to be plugged in.” To minimize the dusty jumble of cables that inevitably accretes, many designers turn to furniture with built-in charging and electrical plugs.

Consider, too, your hardworking eyes. “It is important to provide people working on computers with something further away that helps to refocus tired eyes and is pleasing to see,” said Mr. Phillips, who recently repositioned a desk, which had been against a wall opposite a window, to be perpendicular to that aperture, so the clients could enjoy a view. Where an outdoor vista isn’t available, “orient to views of larger spaces within the home,” suggested Mr. Delfino.



PHOTO: MATTHEW COOK

Concede You'll Spread Out

Designers noted that despite the digital promise of a paperless world, you need ample surface and storage space. Desk size, said Ms. Thorp, “should be at least the span of your outstretched arms, from fingertip to fingertip.” Atlanta designer Nina Nash recommended building shelves and drawers into closets and finding a buffet or credenza deep enough for a printer and files. The best part is, she said, “it doesn’t look like traditional, boring office furniture.”