

E-design to cut costs

E-design is now an alternative for the home that can offer a less costly alternative to hiring a decorator.

Web-based interior design services are growing in popularity, particularly overseas, even though the designer never steps foot in the room. These services are faster and less expensive than the usual terms of a designer-client relationship, and they are largely conducted online. Clients typically e-mail photos of their rooms, fill out a questionnaire and pay a flat fee. Weeks later, sometimes sooner, they receive a customised design plan that can be implemented with pieces from retail stores and web sites. Cost-effective and convenient, web consulting is just another example of the democratisation of interior design, a luxury once afforded only by the wealthy. Fueled by an increasing number of Pay TV shows, shelter magazines and design blogs, homeowners and renters of every income level have been inspired to put a personal stamp on their interiors. Web-based services not only encourage design, they make it easier to accomplish and allow clients more affordable access to designers outside their geographical area. For US design services this can even extend to Australia, where the Design Institute of Australia says web-based design has yet to take off. "I am sure I could design spaces for virtual E-Decorating clients in Australia," says Los Angeles based Vanessa De Vargas. "It might take me a little longer, in time, but I am sure I could find home decor stores in Australia that are e-commerce and supply links for potential customers." Los Angeles designer Betsy Burnham says

E-DESIGN:
A design board from E-Decorating with suggestions for a home.

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Sitting Room / Nicolette, Minnesota



Now they want their house to be cute and pulled together. They would love to do it on their own, but they need help.

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E-design cuts costs

that people now are design savvy. "They want a designer, they want a designed house, but they can't always afford one," she says. "Sometimes all they need is that master plan."

While focusing on larger projects to build her business, Burnham had to turn away clients with smaller projects and budgets. So she created Instant/space, a flat-fee service for clients who want design but not a full-time interior designer. According to her web site, Instant/space is for those who have a limited budget, want to address only one or two rooms, or want to work in their own time frame based on a master plan.

Four to six weeks after an initial phone call, questionnaire and e-mail exchange (and, of course, payment), Instant/space clients receive a handsome linen-covered box in the mail containing a scale drawing of the room, an inspiration board, a shopping list and swatch books with all furniture, fabric and paint suggestions. The one-time fee ranges from \$US\$95 to \$US\$1495 per room.

"It's an arsenal they can take with them when they go out to the stores," Burnham says. "It's a cheat sheet."

Anne-Marie, 33, and Brandon Kavulla, 36, used Burnham's service for five rooms of their apartment. They tried contacting a few designers in their area but none would return the calls.

"I had never done anything like this before, but I thought, this is our beautiful apartment; I don't want to screw it up," Anne-Marie Kavulla says. "At this stage in our life and family, we didn't want to spend a good portion of our budget on someone's salary. We would rather (spend it on) the necessary items we needed for our apartment. . . . They came up with a design statement for our entire apartment, and we're sticking with it. It's helping us pick out everything. We were thrilled. It does give you a little work to do, but it's fun."

Designers who offer internet consulting acknowledge that seeing a space in person is optimal and that these alternative services are merely meant to provide inspiration and point people in the right direction. Others dismiss the concept entirely, arguing that the impersonal nature sabotages good design from the get-go.

"Good, strong design is based on a strong client-designer relationship," says designer Patrick Baglino. "Some of the most important

things are the details, and they come from being in the space, adding accessories, bringing in the personality of the client. It's important that a designer actually sees the space." Without seeing a room in person, he adds, it's impossible to accurately account for such factors as scale, colour and lighting.

Baglino understands the appeal of such services: "In this economy, it's certainly very attractive." But he's also clear about the drawbacks.

"There's value in hiring an interior designer. You're paying for education, expertise and knowledge of things like spatial relationships, balance, scale and rhythm. Those are aspects integral to interior design that you can't cover by looking at a picture and filling in the blanks. It's not just about making pretty."

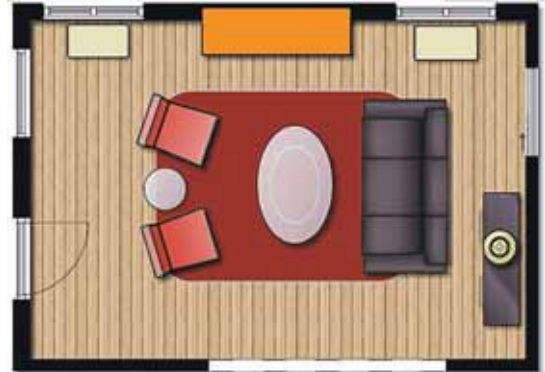
For some, pretty is enough. Bloggers John and Sherry Petersik offer a web-based decorating service, even though neither of them works in interior design or has any formal design training. Since they started offering their service last year, they've created virtual makeovers for more than 50 clients.

"You'd be surprised how many people don't care about our experience," says Sherry Petersik. "They just like our aesthetic. The proof is in the pudding. They've seen it, and that's what they want." What the Petersiks' clients also want are affordable furnishings. The usual suspects on the bloggers' resource list include budget-friendly retailers.

But these services are not for everyone, cautions Linda Merrill, a designer and blogger who offers a wide range of web-based consulting. She says those who use these services would rather spend money on furnishings than on a designer's time. "If you have a modest budget, you don't necessarily want to take 25 per cent of that and pay a decorator," she says.

According to several designers, virtual clients are typically 30-something women or young couples who are in their first home or have just remodelled or had a child. They are design-savvy people who want to make sure they do it right and avoid costly mistakes.

"Most are \$US\$1500 to \$US\$2000 sofa people," says designer and blogger Megan Arquette, who started her Room-to-Go service two-and-a-half years ago. "They're done with the baby thing, so now they want their house to be cute and pulled-together. They would love to do it on their own, but they need help. They want a



grown-up house, but they don't necessarily have the resources to hire an interior designer."

By eliminating the full services of an interior designer, clients avoid the costs of hefty retainers, hourly fees and furniture markups, which can accumulate quickly.

Web-based design also feeds the ever-growing need to have it now. "Everything is electronic," De Vargas says about her service, E-Decorating. Her web-based clients receive a design plan via e-mail with prices and links. "You get it, you click on it, you buy it."

With a design plan in hand, homeowners can work within their own timeline and budget, doing part of the plan now and another part in two years. They can commit to as much or as little as they wish. If they don't like something in the plan, there's no obligation to go forward or any awkwardness about having to say no. "It's more private in the sense that no one is in your house, and you don't feel you're being judged," De Vargas says.

But the comfort of privacy may ultimately undermine the design. "You take the personal interaction out of the equation, and there's a big part of the design that's missing," Baglino says.

He suggests that those on a budget find a local design school graduate who will have the skills, just not the experience.

"There's no substitute for one-on-one human contact," he says. "You need that to create an outstanding design."

Even Kavulla, who had success with web-based design in her apartment, agrees. "Certainly there are things you can't account for unless you're in the space, but in terms of cost, we got what we paid for," she said. "It's not a perfect service, so you're not going to get a perfect product, but it's 10,000 times better than doing it on my own and making expensive mistakes."

— Original story by Terri Sapienza, of The Washington Post. Additional copy Chris Watson

FURNITURE PLAN: A map showing where to place furniture that goes with the design board on the preceding page.



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Living Room / Harlem



WHAT YOU GET

- **INSTANT/SPACE:** Betsy Burnham, Burnham Design, Los Angeles; www.instant-spacedesign.com
- **Years of experience:** 12
- **US cost:** \$895 to \$1495 per room
- **What you get:** A concept board; detailed schematic of the furniture plan drawn to scale; samples of fabrics, wallpaper/paint and flooring; shopping list of resources; step-by-step explanation of how to complete the plan. All items are packaged in a presentation box and mailed to the client.
- **Turnaround time:** Four to six weeks

- **ROOM-TO-GO:** Megan Arquette, Bungalow Home Staging and Design, Manhattan Beach, California; www.beachbungalow8.blogspot.com
- **Years of experience:** 13
- **US cost:** \$800 to \$1100 per room
- **What you get:** An inspiration board; hand-drawn floor plan; samples of wallpaper, fabric and paint colours; a list and photos of suggested furnishings with dimensions and prices; a resource list for all items and labour, if necessary. All items are packaged in a presentation box and mailed to the client.
- **Turnaround time:** Four to six weeks

- **E-DECORATING:** Vanessa De Vargas, Turquoise, Los Angeles; www.turquoise-la.com
- **Years of experience:** Four
- **US cost:** \$450 to \$500 per room
- **What you get:** A design board, a detailed description of where to place furnishings and accessories, and list of links to all resources needed to complete the project. Suggestions can include paint, wallpaper, fabric, rugs, lighting, furniture, art and window treatment options. Everything is delivered via e-mail.
- **Turnaround time:** 2 1/2 weeks

DESIGN IDEAS: Design boards from E-Decorating showing ideas for homes in Grand Rapids and Harlem, USA.

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