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YOUR HOME: THE GUIDE

Room refreshers for \$500 and less

From creating a faux granite countertop to adding a wall-mounted fireplace, here are easy, affordable ways to transform your space.

By **Elizabeth Gehrman** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT FEBRUARY 01, 2013



WITH SPRING APPROACHING, everyone's looking forward to new beginnings. Tearing out the old kitchen and starting from scratch or adding on a family room can run into serious money, but there are plenty of smaller projects that can make for big transformations with little cash outlay.

> **\$100 and Under**

“SHOP” YOUR HOME

After a few years of homeownership, many people start building up a small inventory of unused furniture. “Revisit some of that stuff in the attic, garage, and basement, and start swapping things out,” says Kimberly Merritt, a design instructor at the Academy of Design and Decorating in Peterborough, New Hampshire. “Think about what the possibilities are, because oftentimes they’re endless.” Some pieces may take on new life with a coat of paint or fresh upholstery, or simply by being moved to a different room than the one they’re meant for. Try using the dining room’s hutch in the living room as a bookshelf, for example, or placing a love seat along one side of the dining table as banquette seating. “Sometimes people think all they have is junk,” says Mark Haddad of Haddad Hakansson, a design firm in Belmont, “but they have some beautiful pieces they’re just not utilizing properly.” **Cost: \$0**

GIVE SHELVING A FACE LIFT

Bookcases or display shelves take on a whole new look — and brighten up the entire room — when you line their backs with fabric or wallpaper. Merritt suggests creating inserts using Homasote or another lightweight board covered in stripes, zigzags, or toile. “When you get tired of it,” she says, “just pop the inserts out and reupholster. It’s a quick fix, fun to do, very inexpensive, and you can change the look whenever you’re in the mood.” **Cost for a 4-by-8-foot bookcase: \$50**

ADD ZING TO YOUR WALLS OR CEILING

Perhaps the simplest way to transform your space is with a can of paint. “Painting a room can give you a lot of bang for your buck,” says Haddad. Paint an entire room — powder rooms or small bathrooms, in particular, call out for “really splashy colors” — or just a ceiling or accent wall. “Not only does it anchor the furniture,” he says, “but it also adds interest to the space.” **Cost for 1 gallon of paint and supplies: \$60**

EXPERIMENT WITH WALLPAPER

“One thing that is totally underrated because we got traumatized by it in the 1970s is wallpaper,” says Celine Riard, owner of [Chic Redesign](#) in Framingham, “but it’s an amazing way to bring a space to life.” A 15-by-15-foot room with 8-foot ceilings will require 11 rolls at as little as \$30 each, but Haddad recommends doing only an accent wall for a more dramatic look. “It’s not as expensive as a whole room, and you can still get the effect of a very special detail,” he says. A 15-foot wall 8 feet high requires only three double rolls of paper, and, because there are no corners, is easy enough for any DIYer. **Cost for one wall: \$100**

REVIVE THE FLOOR

To freshen worn hardwood floors, painting is easier than refinishing. You need only roughly sand the floor before laying down a coat of paint in a solid color or a checkerboard, striped, or diamond pattern. “If you have more time, you can do a stencil,” says Merritt, “which can look almost like a custom tile.” Decking paint, she points out, can stand alone, since it cleans up well and is more rugged than regular latex, which needs a couple coats of polyurethane over it. **Cost for a 200-square-foot room: \$100**

> \$200 and Under

CREATE A PANTRY

An underused utility room or closet near the kitchen can become a space-saving pantry with the addition of a few shelves and other organizers. Big-box home stores have lots of options, from hanging baskets to corner units; wire shelving can cost as little as \$4 a linear foot, while a more finished look can be achieved by hanging painted pine with decorative brackets for as little as \$5 a foot. [IKEA](#) offers even more choices at budget-friendly prices. Once the room is done, Merritt suggests you make the back of the door “organization central.” She recommends using chalkboard paint, hanging a magnetic or fabric-covered bulletin board, and perhaps installing a hanging pocket-style mail organizer with key hooks underneath. “That lets you utilize all the space and give everything a place,” she says. **Cost of all supplies: \$175**

SWITCH THE ART

Sometimes you need a large piece of art to balance the room — say, over the couch or sideboard — but that can be expensive. You can get the same impact by uniting many smaller pieces. “Use new frames on existing pieces,” Haddad advises. “Make a themed collage wall with the family history or places you’ve traveled, or hang kids’ art. When you frame it, all of a sudden it’s a beautiful piece.” To pick up works from emerging artists, he suggests going to places such as the [SoWa Open Market](#) in the South End, [Mudflat Studio](#) in Somerville, and [Atlantic Works](#) in East Boston, as well as to student art sales such as the one at Boston’s [School of the Museum of Fine Arts](#). Barbara Elza Hirsch, an interior designer and principal of Acton’s [Elza B. Design](#), notes that [Etsy](#) is also a “gold mine” of inexpensive art. **Cost for nine frames and prints: \$180**

ADD HOUSEPLANTS

They can really warm up a space, says Haddad. If you already own some plants, buy new pots periodically. “It adds color and texture,” he says, “and ceramic pots are more interesting because of their details, versus just the standard pottery pot.” Stores like [T.J.Maxx](#), [Marshalls](#), and [HomeGoods](#) often have pots on clearance, and over time you can pick up an assortment of four or five for less than \$100. Haddad also experiments with flea-market finds, such as old dinner plates to put under pots and vintage bottles as bud vases. Plants themselves vary widely in price, but [Home Depot](#) and [Lowe’s](#) sell many fine options for as little as \$4 apiece. **Cost for assorted plants and pots: \$150**

> **\$300 and Under**

GET “GRANITE” COUNTERTOPS



ISTOCK

Bringing in plants and colorful pots is an inexpensive way to make your home more inviting.

If your laminate countertops look tired, but you're not ready to drop a few thousand on granite, fake it with a [Countertop Transformations](#) kit from Rust-Oleum. The kit comes in five colors that approximate the look of real stone, and with a little elbow grease, you can rejuvenate your counters in a weekend. The \$150 kit covers 30 square feet, while the \$250 kit covers 50. **Cost: \$150 or \$250**

CHANGE THE LIGHTING

"I cannot stress how important it is to have a really cool ceiling fixture," says Hirsch. "It

just completely transforms a room and gives the room an edge, makes it feel finished. Ceilings are pretty boring, but when you raise your head and see a really unique light, it just feels more put together." You can give a room an updated feel by adding or rearranging table and floor lamps as well, says Haddad; for example, move an extra lamp from the bedroom, where no one but you sees it, to the living room. "Lamps make a room feel more cozy, intimate, moody," he says. He recommends adding dimmer switches to overhead lights to up the atmosphere quotient. **Cost for ceiling fixture, dimmer, and two lamps: \$300**



GETTY IMAGES

"Lamps make a room feel more cozy, intimate, moody," says Belmont interior designer Mark Haddad.

MAKE A BACKSPLASH

"Tiling is one of the most rewarding projects," says Riard, and tiling a kitchen backsplash is one of the most transformative. Big-box home stores periodically offer free classes in tiling, and once you learn how to do it, you can install anything from white subway tiles to tiny glass squares to funky, colorful patterns behind the stove and around the kitchen cabinets to give the room a whole new look. If you want the look with less mess, the DIY Network sells a [Bamboo Backsplash Kit](#) (available on

Amazon for \$225) that covers 15 square feet of wall space and includes peel-and-stick tiles and pre-mixed grout. Metal self-stick tiles are even easier to install and cost about \$14 a square foot, while [Smart Tiles](#) give the look of ceramic in easy-to-cut self-adhesive sheets for around \$10 for a 10-by-10-inch square. **Cost for 15 square feet: \$225 and less**

> **\$400 and Under**

RENEW KITCHEN CABINETS

A great way to overhaul your kitchen for less is to paint the cabinets and update their hardware. Big-box stores sell cabinet-painting kits, but they're not really necessary; simply prep your cabinets properly — cleaning and sanding them thoroughly and removing hardware, then priming before starting to paint — and you can get many more years out of them. Change the knobs in the bargain, and with a few days' work, you'll have a whole new look. **Cost for all supplies: \$350**

DISCOVER FIRE

Bringing warmth to your living room, dining room, or bedroom no longer has to be a major renovation project with the new ventless ethanol fireplaces available. You simply pour some gel fuel into the firebox and light it to create a safe flame. “So you can go from a very empty, dark space,” says Riard, “to a real-looking little fireplace. It creates a nice little ambience.” The SoHo Wall Mount fireplace by Devco, available from [newegg.com](#), is an affordable, stylish option. **Cost: \$350**



ISTOCK

Need ambience? Consider a wall-mounted fireplace that doesn't require viewing.

REPLACE FABRICS

Almost any room can take on a fresh personality with fabric. In the bathroom, find a shower curtain you love — [Target](#), in particular, has lots of innovative designs — match

new towels to it, and, perhaps, if you're feeling handy, buy a second shower curtain to adapt for the window. In the bedroom, "new bedding sounds simple," says Haddad, "but it makes a world of difference." Queen-size duvet covers and bedspreads typically sell for around \$200, as do sheet sets; both are significantly less at websites like overstock.com and stores like HomeGoods and Marshalls. For the dining room, new curtains, tablecloth, runners, and cloth napkins work wonders, while many dining sets have cloth-covered seats that are a breeze to reupholster: Simply pop out the wood insert, remove old fabric, and staple the new fabric into place. In the living room, Haddad recommends adding sheers behind long curtains. "They give you a sense of privacy," he says, "but allow the light to come through." Accent pillows on the couch and chairs liven up the space and can be changed seasonally. Dress rooms in winter with wool, boucle, Ultrasuede, or even faux fur; in summer, change to raw silk or a colorful cotton. **Cost to redo fabrics in one room: \$100 to \$400**

> \$500 and Under

REGLAZE THE TUB

Reglazing, done by a professional, is a practical way to get rid of that old pink porcelain at about a third of what you'd pay to replace the tub. It lasts for years and may save you enough to buy a swank new toilet and vanity. **Cost: \$500**

EMBRACE ORGANIZATION

"Sort your stuff and get storage bins," says Hirsch. "Any room can benefit from that, whether it's your office or the kids' bedroom or the entryway." Shop for supplies at places like the [Container Store](http://ContainerStore.com), IKEA, and Target. In the kitchen, consider lid racks, pullout trash bins, and back-of-the-door spice racks, and add a freestanding cart or island to fill with small appliances and cookbooks. For children's rooms, shelves with canvas bins conveniently stash toys,



ISTOCK

Low-cost storage bins can reduce clutter while adding visual interest.

while organizing the closet by clothes' colors or sizes can help with the morning rush. And even the dingiest basement can be brightened up with a fresh coat of white waterproof paint, a shelving rack, and some bright, coordinating colored boxes from the storage section of your local big-box store — use one for extra electrical supplies such as extension cords and adapters, one for paint brushes, one for tape and twine, and so forth. Finish the revamp with one folding table for screwdrivers, hammers, pliers, and power tools, and another for gardening supplies, from potting soil to extra planters. **Cost to organize one room: \$450**

CREATE A COMPACT HOME OFFICE

If living space is at a premium, consider converting an underused closet into a home office. If you have a 4-foot-wide closet, start by removing any built-ins and freshening up the walls with paint or wallpaper (two double rolls can cost as little as \$60). Next, spray-paint two two-drawer file cabinets (\$55 each at [Staples](#)) a bright color to complement the walls. Place an easy-to-clean IKEA Galant white table top (\$70) over them to create your work surface and add three clean-lined Ekby Jarpen wall shelves (\$25 each) above to hold books, papers, baskets, and knickknacks. Lighting is crucial in a small space, so be sure you have a bright overhead fixture as well as a task lamp; an electrician can install a double outlet for as little as \$150, so you'll have a place to plug in your computer, phone, and whatever else you might need. Finish the space by hanging pegboard or corkboard on the doors or painting them with chalkboard paint. Tuck in a small swivel chair (as little as \$25 for IKEA's Snille model) and get to work. **Cost: \$490**

REVAMP THE POWDER ROOM

“A small bathroom can be so boring,” says Hirsch. “But it can be updated to feel more put-together and inviting with a few minor details.” She recommends starting with a bold, graphic wallpaper for a “big bang effect.” Then, up the luxe factor by switching the dull overhead light to a mini chandelier, and add spa-like finishing touches such as a sea-grass basket to hold rolled hand towels, a clear glass liquid-soap dispenser, and a vintage flea-market mirror. “Just a few small changes can create a sense of quiet and visual harmony and unity that make people feel pampered,” Hirsch says. **Cost for a**

4-by-5-foot powder room: \$430

MAKE OVER THE MUDROOM

If your mudroom or entryway has become a disorganized catchall, reorganizing and beautifying it can help inspire family members to keep it neat. After painting the room a standout color, the first priority is to create a surface on which to install matching bins or baskets. Even a single 8-foot-long shelf can make a world of difference in getting miscellaneous stuff off the floor. “Tag the bins by what they hold, such as mittens, et cetera,” says Hirsch, “or with a family member’s name. It creates a sense of unity.” Not to mention a sense of personal accountability. She recommends installing pegs or coat hooks underneath the shelf to hold coats, hats, and reusable shopping bags, and adding a boot tray or two to the floor. A 4-by-8 area rug and a bench for changing shoes can make the place feel homey at a cost of around \$150 each, less if you shop [Craigslist](#). A dry-erase calendar with corkboard can aid in the organization effort. “You can pin up important invitations, notices, tickets for the Saturday game, and emergency numbers,” says Hirsch, “rather than putting thousands of magnets on your fridge.” Finish the look with an interesting container to use as an umbrella stand and identically framed family photos, kids’ drawings, or, to visually expand the room, a mirror. “It’s all about streamlining,” Hirsch says. **Cost: \$500**

CHANGE THE RUG

“A lot of people have a rug that is too small or totally outdated,” says Riard. If your furniture is neutral, a new rug can add a splash of needed color that you can then pick up with accent pillows and a throw. **Cost for 8-by-10-foot rug and matching accessories: \$500**

THE WONDERS OF REARRANGING

“Most people never think of another way to put their furniture,” says Celine Riard, owner of Chic Redesign in Framingham, “but it’s a great way to change a room.” How to get started:

✦ Decide on your focal point. In the living room, that's usually the fireplace or the television. But resist the temptation to combine them, putting the flatscreen over the fireplace, where it can be too high and awkward. Nowadays, Riard says, with LED and plasma, "most TVs have a very good viewing angle," so the TV can be off to the side, as long as you can see it from every comfy seat in the room. If you don't have a fireplace and don't want to make the TV the center of activity, create a focal point with an accent wall or artwork.

✦ A common mistake is to push all the furniture against the walls. Instead, consider "floating" larger pieces in conversational groups toward the center of the room, anchored by an area rug. "You don't need more than 18 inches distance between the sofa and the coffee table," says Riard. "That's almost like your little island of coziness." A console table behind the couch, she adds, can give you a place for lamps and favorite decorative items, and if there's space, the perimeter of the room can hold bookshelves or a shallow computer desk.

✦ If you have a long, narrow space, split conversational groupings by placing two couches or a couch and one or two chairs at one end, with the pieces facing one another around a coffee table. At the other end of the room, two chairs and a side table make a cozy nook.

✦ Consider angled configurations. "It's not space-saving," Riard says, "but it's a great way to change the room," particularly if you have a lot of doors and windows that make traffic flow awkward.

✦ Separate the set. "People get hooked into buying a matching sofa and love seat," says Riard, "but it's more unique and stylish to break it up." Bring in that wingback chair from the bedroom instead or perhaps a pair of wicker seats from an outdoor set. And remove any unused pieces; rooms can be overwhelmed by too much furniture.

✦ Remember designers' "rule of three." Groupings, whether of furniture or accessories, are best in odd numbers, three being the most typical. Artists and photographers know this as "the golden triangle," and it can apply to anything from a trio of vases to tables on each end of the couch and a painting behind it.

Elizabeth Gehrman is a frequent contributor to the Globe Magazine. Send comments to magazine@globe.com.

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