

HOME IS WHERE THE HEART IS

A new home is the ideal opportunity to create your perfect environment. However, redecorating a space from scratch can feel daunting – so where to start? Charlotte Starling advises

Get your home right, get your heart right. Begin by asking yourself two questions. How do I want to live in this space? And how do I want my friends to feel when they visit me? Think carefully about both the home as a whole and then each area individually before you make any irreversible decisions. For example, do you really need a dining room? If the kitchen is the heart of your home, why not knock down a wall and combine the kitchen and dining room? Consider the amount of time you are going to spend in each room and what you will be doing there. A living room needs to be multi-functional. You need an area to watch TV while someone else



is reading. It needs to feel cosy for family time but also lend itself to a crowded party with friends.

Finding a decent firm of builders is quite hard; the best way to find someone is by word of mouth and personal recommendations. Don't be tempted by the cheapest estimate. They might have quoted below everyone else

to get the job and then the estimate may start creeping up, or the standard of work start slipping down. Go for someone you like and trust. Hold back 10% of your budget for unforeseen problems and realise that you only get out of builders as much as you put in. If you leave them to their own devices, don't necessarily expect they will finish on time and in the way you want.

Pay very close attention to the essential details. From a good floor to the perfect door handles, get these right first and the dividends will be huge. Budget wisely: spend most on things that receive the most wear.

Good lighting is essential but often the thing that is most neglected. When you first plan a room, along with sketching a furniture layout, an electrical plan will ensure all your plugs end up in the right place. Place plugs behind sofas and chairs, lots of plugs behind the TV and if you're starting from scratch, plugs in the middle of the floor under a chair can be a godsend. Never leave switch or plug placement to the builders, otherwise you will find them stuck halfway up the middle of a wall or hidden behind a door. Mark on the wall exactly where you want them. Always have wires chased into the walls. No matter how many wonderful objects you fill a room with, a messy tangle of wires will distract the eye.

The most important material part of a room is the floor. This is your base to support all the other elements of the room. It will probably have to last the longest of all and is the hardest to replace. It's much easier to repaint a wall, than dig up and relay a floor, so whatever surface you choose – wood, stone or carpet – make sure it is beautiful and the surfaces are flush. Remember, never lay a carpet until the last builder has left the site!



Next pay attention to the walls. Line and paper them with care. Shoddy paintwork is a no-no. Together with woodwork and plasterwork, these should be finished to the best of your ability and budget.

The enormous range of choices on offer can be overwhelming when it comes to deciding what to put in a room. A good way to start



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to buy some interior magazines and compile tear-sheets of things you like. You will soon see a pattern start to emerge. Sit in the empty room with your swatches and tear-sheets and think about how things would look. Don't rush at the job and try to get everything finished in one go. Go window-shopping with your scrapbook for reference and spend time looking and thinking about the room before you make an expensive purchase that you may regret. Try and get the largest possible samples of carpet or fabric and live with them for a while to make sure you really like them.

For large pieces like sofas and beds, simplicity and comfort are key. Choose classic furnishings and quality materials to provide the stage-set and then inject personality and excitement through things which are easily changed like rugs, lampshades and cushions. A house should be a reflection of its

occupants' personality. A room will be bland if it's all picture perfect and off-the-peg. Don't be afraid to mix styles. Flea-market finds with contemporary cool, family heirlooms with Ikea. Whatever you choose, make sure you love it and never do anything by halves.

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