



Design by Edith-Anne Duncan.  
Below: Duncan.

# Help Around the House

Affordable options for getting professional advice on your home update projects.

By VALERIE HUBBARD

**W**HO AMONG US CAN SAY THAT they don't want (or desperately need!) to change something about their home? We've had plenty of time to consider updates and throw together quick fixes over the past year. In the shadow of the pandemic, our living spaces are often doing double, sometimes even triple, duty. We sleep in our bedrooms and work in them all day. Kitchens now serve as classrooms. Living rooms are also workout spaces. Throw in an addiction to Pinterest and a few thousand hours spent watching HGTV, and the desire to transform your four walls into something gorgeous or, heck, even livable, can reach a fever pitch.

Perhaps you've already tried some updates yourself with less-than-desirable results. A lot of us have overestimated our abilities, taking on DIY projects that don't end up meeting expectations, says Matthew Lee, a principal at Hanbury Architecture & Planning in Norfolk ([hewv.com](http://hewv.com)) and the president of the Virginia chapter of the American Society of Interior Designers. "Everybody has

been home for quite a while doing the DIY work, like repainting rooms and switching out furniture, to try to make it better. Our spaces need to do a lot more for most of us these days, but to change our living environment successfully generally requires much more than a quick paint job and a new chair," he says.

Hiring a professional to help improve your home's interior spaces sounds, and can in fact be, expensive and daunting. Where do you begin? How much will it cost?

## DESIGNERS AND DECORATORS

First, it's helpful to know the difference between an interior designer and a decorator. The distinction can be a little murky.

According to Lee, American Society of Interior Designers members have a degree in interior design from an accredited four-year college or university. They understand how people react and behave in various environments, and are trained to create functional spaces that resonate with



an individual's emotional needs. Designers also know about local building codes and the principles of accessibility, efficiency, and even acoustics.

Some are also certified. Currently, there are 493 Certified Interior Designers in the state, a title that requires an accredited design degree, two years' monitored experience, passing an exam, and an application fee. "It's a big deal," says Kathleen R. Nosbisch, the executive director of Virginia's Board for Architects, Professional Engineers, Land Surveyors, Certified Interior Designers, and Landscape Architects. "Certified



La DIFF customer's home.  
Clockwise: La DIFF; dining  
nook by Edith-Anne Duncan.



Interior Designers need to not only prove they know about the elements of design, they also have to know about fire codes and the use of nonflammable materials, for instance.”

Similarly, an interior decorator uses paint, fabrics, furnishings, and various accessories to create aesthetically pleasing and functional interior spaces. However, there's no required education or training, and no state certifications.

No rules prohibit someone from referring to themselves as an interior designer or decorator without the special qualifications, say both Lee and Nosbisch. It's always good to ask about credentials when considering hiring someone to help you create or refresh your interior spaces.

## RETAIL INSPIRATION

As with most things these days, it's all about customization. Retailers like Pottery Barn and Crate and Barrel offer free online design services, with the understanding that these stores are selling furnishings and accessories that will be the focus of any design suggestions.

Some local furniture stores also offer design services. For example, in Richmond, modern furniture store La DIFF ([LaDiff.com](http://LaDiff.com)) provides design consultations for \$175. The process starts at the store, so the designer can narrow down your likes and dislikes. Follow-up meetings can take place at the store or at your home. The \$175 fee will be applied to store purchases to complete the design. “It's super helpful for customers who have a modern style and just need a little help putting a space together,” says design specialist Lea Huggins.

## VIRTUAL ADVICE

Outside of retail options, more customized interior design services are now available online at

prices that won't break the bank. Chelsea Mulroy, the lead designer of KEPT, an online interior design company the Virginia Beach-based entrepreneur created six years ago ([KeptSpaces.com](http://KeptSpaces.com)), feels that, “Everyone, no matter their lifestyle, deserves a haven as their home. ... So, I needed to find a way to offer my interior design services at an affordable price.” Mulroy charges \$75 per hour for remote services and \$125 per hour for

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—Matthew Lee,  
Hanbury Architecture & Planning







Clockwise from above: Nursery by Chelsea Mulroy of KEPT; Mulroy; Atlanta condo design by Decorist; La DIFF customer's home.

in-person consultations. She also offers design packages that range from \$400 to \$2,500, depending on the size and scope of the project.

Interactions with clients typically involve conversations about their lifestyles to determine what story they want to tell about their spaces. Online clients also must provide detailed measurements. “I’ve been working with people all over the country,” she says. With a typical waitlist of one to two months, she’s seen an uptick in 2020. “Everyone is at home wanting to improve their spaces.”

With clients stretching from Florida to Maryland, Blacksburg-based interior designer Edith-Anne Duncan ([EdithAnneDuncan.com](http://EdithAnneDuncan.com)) also offers online services. She begins with an initial consultation with clients about the size, use, and goals for their spaces. “I ask a lot about lifestyle. ... I want to know everything from what their favorite outfits look like to do they drink coffee in the morning and what time they go to bed. Lots of questions,” she says, laughing. She dedicates a day to design, which often also involves more calls or video chats. She charges \$1,500 for this process,

including a 30-minute follow-up conversation.

Kitchen and bath retailer Ferguson Enterprises ([FergusonShowrooms.com](http://FergusonShowrooms.com)) offers customized virtual design appointments. Richmond-based design consultant Amy McCarty says lots of people look to these areas for redesign. “I walk customers through their layouts by sharing my computer screen. We can peruse the cabinetry manufacturers’ websites to make initial color selections, as well. I find that this is incredibly helpful for initial appointments. But eventually the customer will need to see the colors in person, since computer screens will always alter the color a bit,” she says. Pricing is done on a case-by-case basis.

Selecting a designer is a two-way street. Just as you are looking for the right chemistry, they are also looking for the right fit. First impressions are important, and so is knowing what you’re willing to spend and value of a designer’s time and talent. As Lee points out, “Designers are walking into someone’s life. It just doesn’t get any more personal than that.”



## E-DESIGN

*Get professional help at home with online décor services.*

While the roster of online interior design services was growing even before the pandemic, they've exploded in popularity as customers who might not think to hire a professional designer are seeking to make their homes more comfortable and functional. Here's a look at several of the top e-design services available to customers.

Created in 2014, **Havenly** offers personalized interior design for any space, at any budget—all online. First, you take Havenly's style quiz, then the company matches you with the perfect designer, who works with you throughout the process to find stylish solutions that fit your budget and lifestyle. "Customers collaborate in real-time on the ideas presented, and their designer incorporates that feedback into a final design that uniquely reflects their lifestyle, personality, and aesthetic," says Heather Goerzen, creative and design at Havenly. Cost: Havenly offers two packages. The Havenly Mini (\$79) is the easiest way to get design inspiration and custom solutions to spice up your space or refresh a room. The Havenly Full (\$129) lets you collaborate with Havenly to transform a blank canvas or redesign an entire room, with layout visualizations and custom floor plans. *Havenly.com*

Launched seven years ago, **Decorilla** was the first digital interior platform providing personalized and fully custom online interior design help. Each project begins with an initial one-on-one consultation and interactive questionnaire to start. "You receive design concepts from multiple designers based on your requirements and budget, with constant designer communication," says Decorilla spokesman Devin Shaffer. The designer works with the customer to finalize the design in photo-realistic 3D renderings, creating a color palette, floor plan, and online shopping list using designer discounts. "Our typical client is someone looking for a high-quality, customized design solution and, more importantly, a service that provides a strongly personalized experience," Shaffer says. Cost: Each room type has three online interior design services to choose from, ranging from \$549 to \$1,849. Customized packages starting at \$75 are also available for smaller-scope projects. *Decorilla.com*

Founded in 2014, **Decorist** matches you with a designer to pull your room together in your style and budget for one flat fee. After selecting your design package, you will be paired with a designer to work through ideas. You will then receive two initial design concepts, a final design, a floor plan, and a personalized shopping list that Decorist uses to order and ship your items at the best price. Decorist designers can also work around existing pieces the customer would like to remain in the room. "A majority of our clients work with us on multiple spaces in their home. With our diverse set of services, Decorist can help with anything from styling a single coffee table to designing an entire room from scratch," says Renee Appareti, director of design operations. Cost: Customers can choose from three different tiers: Classic (\$299/room), Elite (\$599), and Celebrity (\$1,299). *Decorist.com*

—By Markus Schmidt



Living room by Havenly.  
Below: Kitchen by Decorilla  
designer Francis D.

