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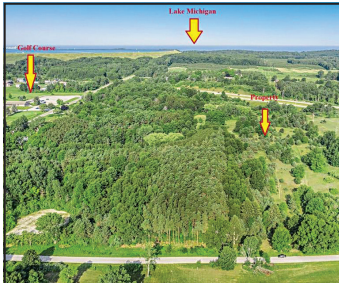
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Media rooms now edge out home theaters



Not so long ago many homeowners were racing to outfit their homes with home theater spaces. If spaces allowed, homeowners would transform rooms into dark, theater-like retreats, complete with large screens, surround sound and reclined seating. Interest in such spaces has waned in recent years, with many homeowners opting for media rooms instead. So what is the difference between these spaces?

According to HGTV, a home theater is a room designed to replicate the experience of the cinema. A media room is a multipurpose space where people can gather to enjoy any type of media, from TV to music to gaming systems. Home theaters tend to limit activity to

watching movies. However, homeowners interested in more versatile paces may find media rooms are much more practical.

A media room is an option for families who want a theater experience in common areas or open-concept living spaces, says Digitech Custom Audio and Video System Integration Specialists. Media rooms frequently feature comfortable, customizable seating, rather than rows of seats facing the screen that are standard in home theaters. Guests can converse in media rooms while enjoying a show, streaming music or gaming. Various design layouts are possible, including furniture that conceals electronics so the media room can be an entertain-

ment lounge one minute and a theater the next.

Because media rooms are not as isolated as home theaters, the acoustics in such rooms may be compromised. That's a disadvantage for homeowners who have invested heavily in sound systems for their media devices. Sound from media rooms also may filter out and disturb others in different rooms of the house. However, fluffy sofas, drapery and carpeting can absorb sound and keep it in the room.

Homeowners who like to entertain while watching or listening to media may prefer the flexibility of media rooms, which make it easy to stream movies and music and play games.

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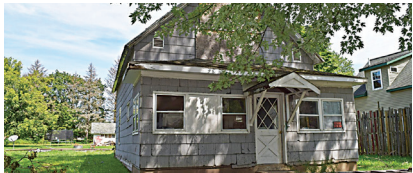
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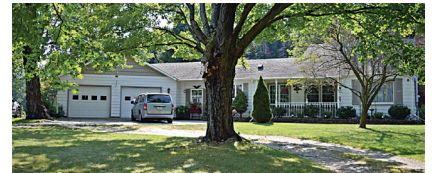


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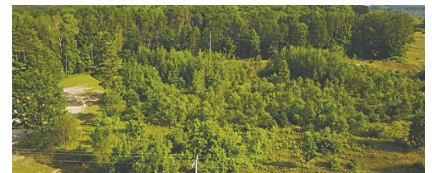
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Gray is here to stay in home designs



Decorating a home in neutral tones has long been recommended as a way to sell a home quickly. But the color gray also provides a blank canvas for homeowners who have no intention of putting their homes on the market anytime soon.

Beige and white have long been go-to colors for neutral living spaces. But many interior decorators now look to gray as the neutral color of choice.

Design experts advise that gray has a broad range. Gray can include everything from silver to charcoal to a dusty cloud. According to the trendsetters at Glidden Paints, gray coordinates well with other colors. Plus, the neutral ap-

peal of gray boasts a timeless quality.

Gray is not a clear-cut color that's simply a 50-50 blend of white and black. Gray has subtle nuances that can lean toward blues, greens, taupes, and more depending on the lighting and surrounding furnishings. That means that homeowners who are ready to replace their furniture or accessories need not necessarily repaint if they've previously decorated in shades of gray.

Individuals need only replace small items to produce a big effect in rooms where gray is dominant. Because gray is so neutral, it works with soft, calming colors in various pastels, but equal-

ly as well with bright reds, yellow and oranges, according to Scott Bodenner, a Brooklyn-based textile designer.

Gray also is a predominant color in natural stones used throughout homes in entryways, bathrooms and kitchens. It can make design sense to maintain continuity throughout by dabbling in gray elsewhere.

Designers have shown how gray does not have to be cold, industrial or gloomy. It can be sophisticated in just about any room of the house. More designers are now leaning toward warmer variations of gray, such as taupes and blends dubbed "greige," that are beautiful but not as stark as pure gray.



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How to choose the right window treatments for your home



Plantation shutters? Mini-blinds? Cafe curtains? Formal draperies? Homeowners' options in regard to window treatments for their homes are extensive, which can make outfitting home interiors challenging for novice decorators.

Some people do not pay a lot of attention to window treatments, failing to realize just how great an impact the right window treatments can have on a space. According to the design experts at Hunter Douglas, window treatments are often an afterthought because residents may not consider them necessities. As a result, homeowners may install whatever is on hand or accept window treatments that came with a house or apartment. But ignoring window treatments, especially when they can fulfill certain needs, is a missed design opportunity.

One of the first steps to choosing window treatments is determining your end goal. Is privacy your main goal?

Are you seeking more natural light in a room? Is there too much light and you need to darken the room? Window treatments can serve multiple functions, and some treatments may make better fits depending on homeowners' ultimate goals.

SEMI-SHEER WINDOW TREATMENTS

Semi-sheer window treatments are often fabric and can help brighten rooms with natural light but offer little privacy. They're usually appropriate for spaces where people gather, such as living rooms, dens or dining rooms. Semi-sheer curtains may be paired with another complementary window treatment so privacy can be customized as needed. For example, sheer curtains let light into a bedroom, but shades can be drawn at night.

MAXIMUM PRIVACY

Bedrooms, work spaces or bathrooms can benefit from extra privacy. While some people may think that privacy comes at the cost of light, that's not always the case.

Functional curtain panels can be drawn closed when privacy is desired and then opened to let in light. The thickness of the fabric will also dictate the amount of privacy the panels create.

Tiers are hung on a short rod-pocket panel and usually cover the lower one-third of a window. They're popular choices to let light in from the top, but obscure views from the bottom portion of the window.

Cellular shades are another option that provide privacy but still let light in. Cellular shades come in hard and fabric varieties and their use depends on the room. Many cellular shades are constructed with a honeycomb design, offers the design resource Houzz, so they can insulate as well as decorate windows.

BLACKOUT SHADES/SHUTTERS

Perfect for rooms where babies nap, shift workers rest during daylight hours or external lights, such as that from a street lamp, need to be blocked out, blackout shades do just what their name implies. A dense fabric lining helps keep light out entirely.

Shutters also can block out light but add to the character of the room. They can be painted a bright color to make a statement or match wall colors to blend in seamlessly.

When selecting window treatments, shoppers can choose retail options or custom treatments. Many designers recommend custom window treatments because they are measured, manufactured and installed specifically for homeowners' windows. However, there are many DIY options available at budget-friendly retailers.



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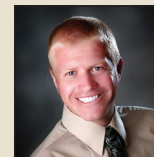
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Signs it is time to overhaul your kitchen



Remodeling a kitchen adds value to a home. Remodeling Magazine's "Cost vs. Value Report" indicates mid-range kitchen remodels cost about \$66,000, and homeowners can expect to recover about 60 to 80 percent of that cost at resale.

Homeowners may wonder if remodeling their kitchens is worth the investment. But homeowners should not just consider cost, but also the current conditions of their kitchens when deciding if a renovation project is the right move to make. These signs indicate it may be time to renovate a kitchen.

- Breakers are triggered: If the lights go dark from a tripped circuit breaker every time you try to microwave and run the toaster oven at the same time, your wiring is likely not up to the task of handling the workload and could be out of date. A kitchen remodel will assess wiring load needs and an electric overhaul may be necessary.

- Lack of storage: One of the biggest hassles homeowners encounter in their

kitchens is a lack of storage space. If making a meal involves a Jenga-like stacking and rearranging of kitchen tools, or if an avalanche occurs whenever you search for an item, you might need more storage. A carefully planned redesign can achieve this, even in a smaller kitchen.

- Outdated appliances: Even if your appliances are not avocado green or mustard yellow relics of the 1970s, they might still need to be replaced. According to CRD Design, appliances are only expected to last around 10 to 15 years. If appliances have become unsafe or energy hogs, it could be time for a remodel.

- Family is expanding (or shrinking): Kitchens often are the heart of a home. They need to meet the needs of the family that resides in that home. A remodel can add space as needed. On the flip side, when a couple becomes empty nesters, kitchens can be redesigned and downsized to reflect their new needs and desires, such as the addition

of a wine chiller or espresso station.

- Poor lighting: Task lighting is essential in a kitchen, but older homes may not be equipped with lighting where it's most needed. A carefully designed remodel can improve lighting with under-cabinet lights, pendants, overhead lighting, and even natural light to make the space attractive and more functional.

- Frequent run-ins: The notion that you can have too many cooks in the kitchen refers to having too many people trying to pitch in or offer their opinions. However, it also can apply to when too many people are gathering in a small space. Redesigning a kitchen can improve the efficiency of a space and make the room feel larger.

- Aesthetic appeal: Many kitchen remodels have been inspired by unsightly kitchens. Cosmetic changes can lead to big improvements.

Kitchen renovations can add instant appeal and help address issues that tend to plague outdated rooms.

Protect your home from winter's freeze

Freezing temperatures may be good for ice skating or building snowmen, but sub-freezing temperatures can be dangerous for the average person and his or her home.

Cold weather often leaves people scurrying to do whatever is necessary to safeguard themselves from the big chill. But it's important homeowners also protect their homes in cold weather.

PLUMBING

Plumbing and pipes may be vulnerable to cold weather. Frozen pipes may burst and cause substantial damage to a home, potentially causing flooding and structural damage.

Homeowners should disconnect and drain garden hoses before winter arrives. Water to outdoor hose bibs should be turned off, though the valves on these outdoor faucets should be left

open to drain. Also, outdoor faucets can be covered with insulating foam covers.

The Red Cross says pipes that freeze most frequently include pipes in unheated areas, such as basements, attics, garages, and crawl spaces. Close vents to the outside in areas like attics and basements to limit the amount of cold air that gets indoors. Think about insulating unheated areas, as well as using pipe sleeves, heat tape or wraps on exposed pipes.

By opening kitchen and bathroom cabinet doors, homeowners can allow warm air from a home to reach pipes under the sink. During extreme freezes, keep cold water dripping from a sink to prevent pipes from freezing.

SERVICE HVAC SYSTEMS

It's important to ensure that heating systems are working properly prior to the cold-weather season. It may only

take hours for the interior of a home to reach dangerously low temperatures without adequate heat. Homeowners should schedule annual checkups of furnaces and hot water heaters. Inspect the heat exchanger for cracks, install a clean air filter and make sure all thermostats are working properly.

HAVE FUEL READY

Homeowners who heat their homes with oil, wood or coal should make sure they have plenty of fuel on hand in advance of winter. Shortages can occur, and it may take some time for new fuel to arrive in the midst of a cold snap.

As a precaution, homeowners can rely on portable space heaters to fill in the heating gaps during freezing temperatures. Exercise extreme caution with these devices, turning them off when leaving the room and remembering to avoid overloading outlets.



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Benefits of freestanding tubs



Few home design elements provide the instant wow factor of freestanding tubs. Freestanding tubs have an air of luxury that can help current homeowners relax, and impress buyers when homes go on the market.

Freestanding tubs are typically made of cast iron or porcelain. The home improvement website HomeAdvisor notes that cast iron is durable and solid and retains heat well, which is great for those who want to spend more than a little time relaxing in a freestanding tub. However, because cast iron is so heavy, installing a cast iron tub may require structural reinforcement of the flooring, which will add to the overall cost of the project.

According to HomeAdvisor, the average cost to install a tub varies widely depending on the type of tub, the materials it's made of and other factors, including plumbing and piping. For example, the cost to install a freestanding

tub will rise considerably if new plumbing and piping are necessary.

Before purchasing a freestanding tub, homeowners should seek estimates regarding installation, making sure to get them in writing. Contractors will determine if structural reinforcement is necessary and include such costs in their estimates. In addition, make sure to ask contractors to investigate piping and plumbing so no surprises pop up after the tub has been purchased and work has begun.

If estimates from contractors aren't budget busting, homeowners can consider these benefits of freestanding tubs before making their final decisions.

- **Cleaning:** Because they're detached from other bathroom fixtures and not flush against the wall, freestanding tubs tend to be easier to clean than built-in bathtubs. Freestanding tubs are accessible from all sides, making it easy

to reach all those nooks and crannies where grime can build up.

- **Return on investment:** In its 2018 "Cost vs. Value" report, Remodeling magazine noted that upscale bathroom remodels recouped 56.2 percent of their cost at resale. That was a better return on investment than an upscale kitchen remodel (53.5 percent) and an upscale master suite addition (48.3 percent). The thought of a sizable return on investment can make relaxing in a freestanding tub that much more enjoyable.

- **Warmth:** Even freestanding tubs made of materials other than cast iron offer great heat retention. Stone resin bathtubs, for example, provide excellent insulation on cold nights. That's ideal for people who want to unwind in the tub without having to exit early because the water has become cold.

Freestanding tubs can transform regular bathrooms into luxurious oases.

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