



Here is a **simple question** to ask yourself when your home decorating dilemmas have brought you to a creative standstill: What **bold choices** would you make for **colors, fabrics, furniture** and **accessories** if everything you arranged could be **redone** in a month, or say, in a week? The design **solutions** that come to you might **surprise**

you, and at the same time, finally let the **inner artist** in you **break free from the rules** of design-book decorating.

Change Artist

When it comes to decorating, for me nothing is carved in stone," says artist-home renovator Sandy Tarr. "It's the biggest mistake people make – thinking what they do or what their interior designer does has to last forever." She claims she knows people, but politely won't name names, who once their interior decorator has placed the designer soap in the designer soap dish, and put the designer silk-flower arrangement in the designer vase, never dare to touch them for fear of being caught breaking some decorating law. "It would be scary to redo a house," she says, "if I thought my choices had to last forever."

Tarr, who has restored and decorated nearly a dozen homes for clients and for herself, offers a straightforward lesson in liberation to anyone paralyzed by the fear of making a decor blunder. "Start with change in mind right from the start." More importantly, according to her, the number one rule is that there are no rules.

"Never decorate to follow someone else's idea of what a bedroom should or should not have in it, or what a living room should or should not look like," she says. "It takes all the fun out of it."

Clearly, Tarr does not decorate either by rules or by chance – by whim, perhaps, but not with a haphazard hand. Each of the 10 rooms in her 1790 Historic Hill house are a meticulous composition; each item

Above Stair hall, original to the house; English chestnut table with blue and white Delft bowl; wooden birdcage, a flea market find. Right Keeping room now used as dining room; early English chestnut table; early hutch with original paint; rust and white Chinese import porcelain in the Bird and Butterfly pattern; French ironstone dishware and pewter.



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Most of the furniture,

art and antiques Sandy Tarr keeps in the Samuel Yeates house, which was one of the early Newport Operation Clapboard projects and on the National Register of Historic Places, came with her from homes where she lived before moving here in 2001. Although she has moved time and time again, she has parted with very few of her prized possessions, noting, "I think I have kept at least one desk or one table from every place I've ever lived or visited."



large and small, old and new, hard and soft, is precisely placed for reasons evident only to her. Yet she says, "It's all temporary." An accomplished painter, textile designer and of late, art print retailer on the web, she instinctively collects beautiful things and surrounds herself with them. She says that she has, in fact, rearranged a whole room just to enjoy it that way for an afternoon.

"When my eye no longer finds the room interesting to look at," Tarr says, "I change it—I like to move things." It is a lesson every would-be home decorator should learn. All the furniture and accessories Tarr owns that are small enough to move from place to place are likely to be shuffled on a regular basis, including the paintings and prints on the walls.

"You'll notice," she says, "that most of the artworks in my house are 'leaners'—they just lean against the walls so that I can rearrange them any time." Buried somewhere in her artistic vision for her home is the long-lived gene of an Old Master's eye for detail and nuance. Getting up from her worktable where she has been quietly painting a seascape, she crosses the room to purposely nudge a seemingly unimportant household object barely half an inch sideways so that it will be in its "right" place.

Tarr spent almost 30 years in New York City, followed by a shorter stint in

Pittsburgh. "Every apartment, co-op condo or house I had before this had high, high ceilings," she says, "so the only things that I did not bring with me to this old gambrel-roofed colonial are the tall things, such as big cupboards, that just would not fit through the door."

Ever the artist, she confesses that she has a particular passion for assembling interesting vignettes simply for the pleasure of being able to look at her treasures and enjoy them each time she enters or passes by a room. Anything she sees or feels can instantly inspire her to take valuable time away from her easel or her design computer to fiddle with the layout of a room. It can be an idea she saw in a magazine photo or a scene in a movie that sets her creative energy in motion. Suddenly, down come the heavy curtains in her bedroom, out goes the red Oriental rug, gone are the flowers in the French wine jugs she uses as vases. Choosing from her vast personal inventory of interesting and unusual objects, things which run the gamut from priceless folk art treasures to everyday flea market finds, she recomposes each tabletop every shelf, windowsill, hearth and corner until she has created her version of another domestic work of art. "It is like painting," she says.

"When I grew up," Tarr says, "the only things people put on their coffee table, for example, were things that had a

sensible purpose — an ashtray, a lighter, a candy bowl, always with the candy in it, a family photo in a frame." In Tarr's sitting room, on a small English-made table, rustically hand hewn in dark, polished wood, are five objects: A huge carved wooden bowl, an old Shaker band box, a smaller marquetry wooden container and two antique piecutters.

She says, "My tables and shelves are filled with groupings of objects that I like to look at, or something I like to touch. I like the contrast of things and looking at how the materials, colors and shapes are both the same and yet different. It doesn't have to make sense to anyone but me."

It would give anyone trying to decorate their own home a great boost of confidence to see how, in Tarr's remarkable home, good decorating taste is not about the acquisition of expensive designer trinkets and rare antiques. Beauty and pleasure, for her, are quite obviously found in the simplicity of the most ordinary objects.

"I like plain wooden bowls, primitive paintings — mostly portraits — blue and white porcelain, ironstone china, boxes, baskets, metalwork trivets, tables and chairs, and," she says, "I love textiles." She advises do-it-yourself decorators to select a few things they can respond to with great pleasure and start there.

"Everybody has at least one thing they like to look at — it doesn't have to be an expensive art object. It could be a sea shell, or something that has sentimental meaning to you. Make that a focal point, then add more of the things that please you," Tarr says. "If you don't like it, just change it."

Walking through the hall and into the dining room, Tarr sweeps her glance around the entire space, where the table, mantle and china hutch have just been rearranged to make room for her to display the newest additions to her antique pewter and reproduction collections.

"Look!" she says, with unabashed delight, "Nothing matches!" It is true, but at the same time, for her and for her alone, every single thing appears to be exactly where it always belonged, and, like her, it is all completely at home. 🍷

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