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Is this your year to get organized?

Pros say home makeovers need not be `extreme' -- or expensive

[CELESTE SMITH](#)

Staff Writer

Sarah Scott, a Charlotte businesswoman who preaches clutter-free living, makes clients think about their pack-rat ways with a few pointed questions:

Can you actually park your car in the garage?

Do you have a junk drawer? No -- wait -- an entire junk *room*?

Listeners try to explain themselves: "It goes on for hours," Scott said. But apparently people aren't too offended.

There's a wave of simple-living preachers who want you to make 2005 the year you do more with less. And in the Charlotte region, people are listening.

While shows such as "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition" are ratings blockbusters, trend watchers say another movement favors keeping it simple. Folks still want to enjoy where they live -- but without busting the budget.

Professionals say cable network shows such as the decade-old HGTV (Home & Garden Television) are showing the way -- and more people are open to the concepts.

"Redesigners," now available in Shelby, Gastonia and Huntersville, don't want you to buy more furniture or artwork. They promise they'll gussy up your bedroom or make your den more cozy by using what you already own.

Scott, a professional organizer, will teach a class on clutter in February at Queens University of Charlotte.

Her work has already won over clients such as Kathleen Hinrichs. Hinrichs turned to Scott for help in organizing the kitchen and kids' playroom of her south Charlotte home in the fall.

"I have more time to ... do things with the children," Hinrichs said, instead of "trying to chase things down in the house."

People are willing to spend money to make homes more orderly. In 2003, Americans bought \$6.1 billion worth of stuff, such items as space organizers and closet systems, according to the International Housewares Association. That compares with \$5 billion in 2002.



CHRISTOPHER A. RECORD - STAFF PHOTO

"Redesigner" Christina Lewis is one of a new breed of organizing professionals who help transform rooms affordably with items clients already own.

Charlotte-area redesigners, who say they're getting work largely through word of mouth, charge about \$175 and up to redo a room. Professional organizers can average around \$50 an hour.

The National Association of Professional Organizers -- which has designated January 2005 as the first "Get Organized Month" -- now has about 3,000 registered members, up from about 2,000 members in 2003, according to president Barry Izsak.

"Industries are born out of need," said Izsak, who runs an organizing business in Texas.

"It's not that ... people don't have enough space, it's that they're not using it to the best advantage."

'Juggling your resources'

Paring the amount of things you have is not just a diversion for rich people with too many things, notes Ramona Creel -- founder of OnlineOrganizing.com and a professional organizer in Atlanta. It seems the penchant to hold on to empty butter containers to "use later" is a universal habit that crosses income lines.

"It has nothing to do with being part of a privileged lifestyle, where I say I'm going to hire somebody because I don't want to do it," said Creel, whose free advice Web site also pushes philanthropy by suggesting where to donate your stuff. "A lot of people confuse professional organizers with housekeepers, and that's not what we do."

Judyth Blanton, a redesigner in Shelby, calls it "juggling your resources." Redesigners "shop" around the client's own house for furniture, artwork or mementos that would look better in rooms being redone. They replace what they take with items being moved out of the redesigned room.

The concept that redesign is for anyone got its legs from Lauri Ward, who is nationally recognized as the pioneer of the "use what you have" redecorating movement, notes Kim Arell, who with Maria Tobin started their Marvelous Redesigns business in Huntersville this year.

Ward, who promotes redesign on shows such as "Oprah," and wrote a book called "Use What You Have Decorating," pointed out that many people want decorating and organizing help but can't afford a professional designer.

That's where people such as Arell come in, who says her client base is now seven times what it was when she started her business.

Arell said households even hire her as part of their strategy to get their homes ready for the holidays, so their living spaces are more amenable to relatives who want to sit around and talk or sprawl out over board games.

January is a good time for redesign, Arell said.

"After the holidays are over, it slows down and it's a good time ... to focus on your environment," she said.

Demonstration

To illustrate the power of using what you own, Huntersville redeigner [Christina Lewis](#) performed a demonstration on Emily Dorgan's family room.

Dorgan -- prone to crafting her own display-worthy clipboards for her children's artwork -- believes in not spending more than what's needed to make her family more comfortable in their north Mecklenburg home. But she did want more seating for guests, while still keeping floor space for her children to play.

Lewis, teaming with her mother, [Linda Gromko](#), moved Dorgan's denim sofa so those seated would look out the window at the view, instead of a wall.

Lewis relocated a buffet table that had been in a hallway into the family room instead, and placed a cherished Tiffany style lamp on it. The lamp had been in storage because Dorgan couldn't find the right spot for it.

Gromko whipped up terracotta-colored throw pillows for the sofa and a wrap for the window -- created from fabric leftover from when the kitchen drapes were made. CDs were hidden in a basket. Chairs, moved in from the dining room, created another seating area. Dr. Seuss books, brought in from the children's room, were stacked at an eye-catching angle on an end table. Shelving items were switched out to give family pictures more prominence.

The redo wasn't strictly without purchases: Lewis bought apples for the coffee table bowl, two live plants and a \$15 vase to display branches she found while out driving that week.

The change drew an immediate thumbs up from Dorgan and her 4-year-old son, Michael, who came in together after the redo to see the changes for the first time.

"I wish this was my bedroom just looking at this," he announced, plopping on the sofa and crunching on one of the apples.

Lewis, who started [The Redesign Company](#) this fall, said more people need to realize what's possible with their own things.

"People should love coming home -- there's no reason not to," Lewis said. "Life's too short."

New habits

The average homeowner spends about 25 minutes a day looking for things, according to Lowe's spokesperson Julie Yenichek. We use only 20 percent of what we have in our homes, according to Scott, the Charlotte professional organizer.



Folks might say they want to change, but professionals insist clients must be ready or de-cluttering habits won't stick.

Susanne Hicks was open to change. She worked with Scott to organize her kitchen when Hicks and her family moved into their south Charlotte home several years ago.

Following Scott's advice, Hicks later added shelving in a closet so her daughters can store their mittens, hats and sports gear right when they walk in.

Hicks knows now that it's a matter of having a place for things as soon as they come in the door.

Or throwing away things that aren't functional, Hicks said, instead of "having more of things you don't need."

How to Get Started

Ramona Creel, founder of OnlineOrganizing.com, offers these strategies:

- Pick the place that causes "the most pain." Maybe it's that stack of mail that annoys you every time you look at it, or that closet where you can't find the shirt you want in the morning.
- Start off small. "Don't go in and say 'I'm going to organize the kitchen today.' Instead, pick a drawer or cabinet.
- Try to finish an area before moving to another space. Leaving things half-organized is sometimes worse than doing nothing.
- Consider hiring a professional if it feels like more than you can handle. Professionals don't judge you on how you got into your situation. A friend or family member can help, too, if they're nonjudgmental.

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