

REAL ESTATE | DESIGN

Status Decor: How to Avoid the Tasteless Trends

It's tempting to fall for showy decorating fads. Here, interior designers identify the worst missteps—from overkill chef's kitchens to pretentious tray ceilings—and offer graceful alternatives.



CHOICE SUBSTITUTIONS In an Iowa City, Iowa, home by Jessica Helgerson Interior Design, a homey white-oak table takes the place of miles of islands.

PHOTO: AARON LEITZ

By Kathryn O'Shea-Evans

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JUST LIKE a *molto costoso* Italian sports car or \$40,000 handmade handbag, a home's architectural flourishes and finishes can be wielded as status symbols. Two-story fieldstone fireplaces, for example, or sweeping "Scarlett O'Hara" staircases.

But many members of the design cognoscenti do not regard these as aesthetic assets. Among the meretricious trends that Washington, D.C., designer Annie Elliott currently sees spiraling out of control: those “chef-style” faucets whose spouts are wrapped in a coil of chrome. Originally designed for commercial kitchens, they’re overkill in a residence, where they confer “a Frankenstein laboratory vibe,” she said.

Below, designers list other “luxe” architectural fads that give them the heebie-jeebies—and share advice on what they’d choose instead.



In a modern French-country-style house in McLean, Va., architectural designer Anthony Wilder used understated rather than conspicuous black window frames.

PHOTO: JOHN COLE

Snooty Cook Quarters

“Chef’s kitchens have jumped the shark,” said Ms. Elliott of cabinetry that resembles freight containers and counters vast as salt flats. “And for what? Unpacking takeout. Real cooks know that skill is not proportional to how many cubic feet of storage your kitchen has.” To give a cook space a homier feel, she would install a wooden dining table in lieu of an island—a move that evokes “a well-loved room, not a sterile laboratory.”

Over-Glow

“Why does every surface need to be treated like a runway at an airport?” asked designer Darren Henault of the LED strip lighting he sees outlining bookshelves, tray ceilings and even sofas in high-end estates. “The technology has run amok.” The owner of Tent New York, an e-commerce and bricks-and-mortar home shop based in Amenia, N.Y., would instead use rechargeable LED lamps (he favors the Poldina Pro from Zafferano America) that throw warm pools of light. “The fact is, it’s the shadow that creates interest and depth in a room,” he said.

Crowded Showers

Designer Carolyn Elleman of Case Architects & Remodelers, in Bethesda, Ma., confesses to a bathroom *bête noire*. “A designer’s nightmare is having a valve for each showering fixture—the hand-held, the body spray, the main shower head, the rain head...the list goes on,” she said, noting that she has dubbed this excess “wall acne.” A one-valve system will get you just as clean.

Weighty Frames

In the near future, stocky black window surrounds—a hallmark of the farmhouse architecture we sent to pasture in our [2021 trends report](#)—will date a home as one built during Covid, predicted Anthony Wilder. If you’re set on black frames, make them classic and understated, he said. The architectural designer, based in Cabin John, Md., recently took that route with diamond-grill panes in a modern French-country-style house (shown right). “Think about thick heavy black eyeliner versus fine, discreet eyeliner.”

Egg-Shaped Soakers

Mr. Henault would also throw supposedly elegant ovoid bathtubs out with the bathwater, noting that the rounded bottoms leave no way to ground yourself. “You end up white-knuckling the sides or you float around like an amoeba,” he said. He considers a flat base essential to bathing comfort. “Everyone wants to insist they live in a spa. Well, you don’t.”



Rather than tray ceilings, Boston designer Nina Farmer recommends painted beams, like those she installed in this Westport, Conn., dining room.

PHOTO: STEPHEN KENT JOHNSON/OTTO

Cheesy Ceilings

Interior designer Maryline Damour loathes tray ceilings, a common tactic that developers deploy to imbue newly built white boxes with “character.” The effect—as if the center of the ceiling has been pushed upward like one big coffer leaving a thick frame of drywall—rarely relates to the overall architecture, said the partner at Damour Drake, in Kingston, N.Y. “Many are too ornate for the rooms they’re in,” she said, and when set in an 8-foot ceiling, feel “claustrophobic.” In a recently completed dining room, she achieved more idiosyncratic overhead enchantment by hand-painting wood beams (set on a matte-black ceiling) with a repeating pattern of graphic blue triangles.

Chefery Al Fresco

Another thing Mr. Henault finds tasteless: those fully tricked-out patio kitchens, complete with fridges and ice makers. “Unless you live in a climate where cooking outside 365 days a year is possible, why on earth would you spend upwards of \$250,000 putting in something that belongs in a catering kitchen to feed 300?” he said, adding that these extravagances are seldom handsome. All you really need to properly entertain outdoors, according to the designer? A humble charcoal grill and proximity to your indoor cook space for drink runs.