



DECORATING FOR DUMMIES

BY ZIBBY RIGHT

I KNEW I WAS IN TROUBLE. Soon after Andrew and I got engaged, we decided to move in together and began an exhaustive search of Upper East Side rentals. When we entered what would soon become our apartment, Andrew walked straight onto the enormous terrace and immediately declared, "We'll take it."

"Don't you want to look inside?" I asked.

I'd fantasized about our first home together. Keyword: charm. I'd envisioned rounded archways, high ceilings, crown moldings, hardwood floors, maybe even a fireplace. Andrew, however, had only two requirements: outdoor space and light.

As I walked dejectedly around the cookie-cutter, white-walled, low-ceilinged apartment, Andrew wisely said, "We can add moldings, paint it, and decorate it nicely, but we can never add more space."

Point taken. The place was quite reasonably priced for the space and had a lot to offer. But decorate it nicely? I didn't know the first thing about interior design. I was still using my scratched, shoddy desk

from college. My end tables were from Ikea. My artwork consisted of framed French vintage posters and my biggest splurge to date was a remnant rug from ABC Carpet. Where would I begin?

My mother (bless her) decided to help decorate and furnish our apartment as a wedding gift. She even treated us to the consulting expertise of her decorator, the well-known and utterly fabulous Arthur Dunnam of Jed Johnson Associates. I'd met Arthur several times before as he breezed in and out of my mother's East Hampton home, supervising the installation of wall-to-wall carpeting or the "perfect" table. Calm, thoughtful, understated, and professional, Arthur crushed the typical eccentric decorator stereotype. With only ten days before our lease began, I knew we were in good hands.

The first thing Arthur asked for was a floor plan. I decided to draw my own. How hard could it be? I bought an industrial tape measure and spent two hours on my hands and knees measuring every nook and cranny. My final "floor

plan" was eleven pages and could generously be described as childlike.

I met Arthur in the lobby and showed him my creation. He looked horrified.

"Hmm," he said, tactfully. "Let's see what we can do about this."

I had already spoken to Arthur about my "vision." My taste, like my mother's, was simple, classic, traditional, and elegant. I didn't want anything modern, and I certainly wanted nothing flashy. I brought him various examples of what Andrew and I liked from magazines I'd just discovered, like *O at Home* and *Elle Decor*. We were on the same page. Apparently, all we had to do was find a painter, install molding, buy new furniture (including a bed), order drapes and blinds, select carpeting, and choose light fixtures. Piece of cake.

When we walked into the apartment, Arthur whipped out his tape measure and within five minutes had magically canvassed the entire place like a pro.

"Wow, you're so good at that," I marveled. "So fast!"

He smiled politely.



*"The apartment had potential.
But I didn't know the first thing about interior design."*

The next time we met, Arthur handed me a computerized floor plan drawn to scale. It could've been a sonogram; Andrew and I couldn't stop looking at it. Our new baby! But every time I looked, my pulse raced. How could I turn that diagram into a home I loved in mere days while staying within my budget? The endless wedding planning decisions seemed effortless compared to this.

For the next two weeks, my life became a sea of fabric swatches, paint chips, catalogs, and carpet samples. My vocabulary grew as fast as when I'd crammed for the S.A.T.: swags, billowing curtains, chair-rails, piping, and swing-arm lamps filled my frantic thoughts. Yet despite my crash course in home decor, I struggled to articulate what I wanted. I knew what I didn't like, but how would Arthur be able to read my mind when all I could do was point to a Ralph Lauren ad and say, "Maybe something like that?" I trusted Arthur implicitly, but I was the one I worried about.

As someone notoriously indecisive, the prospect of selecting just one color

out of the millions of paint chips had me practically in tears at Janovic Plaza until Arthur swooped in and selected just the right ones. The sisal carpet samples all looked the same at ABC Carpet. Pottery Barn, Crate & Barrel, and Williams-Sonoma Home blended together in a haze of leather club chairs and upholstered headboards. I started cataloging every room I entered, looking for clues.

"See how great their moldings are," I'd whisper to Andrew at a family friend's Park Avenue holiday party.

Even restaurants were fair game.

"I'll have the chicken," I'd say to the waiter. "And who did your curtains?"

Luckily, Arthur provided just the right amount of direction without ever seeming opinionated or overbearing. His subtle suggestions and creative solutions (custom-made pillows from Ethan Allen to match the armchairs? Why not?) made each decision obvious. Occasionally, I did have to remind him that we were on a strict budget. When he recommended a five-figure Oriental rug, I quelled my panic

attack and nicely said, "Arthur, this is for me, not my mom." He took it in stride.

After two weeks of frantic phone calls to Flavio (the painter, my new best friend), late-evening shopping trips with Arthur, deposits issued to dozens of stores, searching for lost fabric swatches, and countless consultations with Andrew, we moved in. It took another couple months for everything to arrive (I think I tipped every deliveryman in Manhattan), and even then there were a few mishaps—who knew that our brand-new mahogany bookcases wouldn't fit through our back hallway? But finally everything was finished. And it was worth every second. The place looked amazing.

Now, a year later, the apartment is bursting at the seams. Andrew's groomsmen's wedding gift, a wine fridge, sits in the middle of our study. An exercise ball hides behind the daybed. Hundreds of magazines pour out from under my desk. I shudder to think what Arthur would say. But for us, it's home. I love it. Andrew was right; the place is charming. And if anyone needs four unused bookcases, let me know. ♦