

Good Space plan gives 'HGTV generation' some creative control

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Brent Neave and Dwaina Sprague offer the innovative Good Space plan as an option to minimize cost, if clients are willing to put in their time.

Photograph by: Jason Payne, Vancouver Sun, Special To The Sun

Brent Neave and Dwaina Sprague were wearing comfortable shoes, had bottles of water stockpiled, and made sure there was a heap of throat lozenges within easy access to make it through the IDSwest show. After all, it takes a lot of talking to foment a design revolution among the proletariat.

It's a bit of an inside joke with the two designers, but it's hard to find another way to describe how momentous they believe the "Good Space" option to be.

Essentially, their design firm can do a traditional full-service style design -where they oversee every aspect of the project. Or, they can outsource a portion of the work back to the client.

"These are people who want to be more hands-on in creating their space, who are comfortable in taking on implementing a plan -they just want some help in creating the plan in the first place," explains Neave. "This is the HGTV generation, and they know how disastrous DIY can turn out to be."

In the full-service model, Neave and Sprague drive around town sourcing furniture and accessories, or wait at a client's home for deliveries and tradesmen, all billed at their full hourly rate of \$125. With the Good Space plan, the client takes over the parts of the project that aren't strictly design-related, at a substantial savings -60 per cent or more off the full-service price.

What the clients do pay with is their time. They fill out detailed questionnaires about their lives, compile tear sheets (examples of things they like, clipped from magazines and newspapers), and find all of the

products they'll need for their new room on their own, in compliance with the design plan they come up with under the guidance of Neave and Sprague.

"We call HGTV our best friend, and our worst enemy," Neave says with a combined smile and grimace. "It encourages people to want to think about improving their home, but it never reveals the actual amount of time or money involved. It doesn't show the true process."

"We look literally at everything: how high are the light switches, where are the baseboards, what are the exact dimensions of the furniture you will buy," Sprague says. "The plan is idiot-proof. It's very specific; you simply can't screw it up. You can also always reach us for support."

The clients begin by going through the Good Space manual of approximately 150 pages. Refined over the course of the past seven years, it divides the tasks of redoing a room into four sections.

First comes identifying the function of a room: Who will be using it and how? This determines the size and placement of the furniture.

Then there are "surfaces" -figuring out what will cover the floors, walls, windows, and ceilings of the space.

Next is looking at the light in the room: Where is it coming from and when? What additional sources of light are needed?

Finally, the designers and clients look at the "goods," detailing the exact specifications of items in the room.

This might mean selecting a specific fabric and toss cushions for a specific sofa model.

"It's a very powerful budgeting tool because you know exactly what to buy," Neave points out. The plan takes about six weeks to create, but after that, the client can implement it over a number of months. They can wait to buy an expensive table or light fixture as their budget permits, instead of a frenzy of spending to have a room done on a designer's timeline (in order to allow the designer to move on to the next project.)

After the initial consultations are completed, Neave and Sprague do a computerized scale plan of the project, and some coaching on how to talk to salespeople. The designers guide the clients through a list of trusted retailers, tradespeople, and suppliers, and even let the clients access discounts usually only available to designers.

There has been a wide range of people choosing the Good Space option, including young couples buying their first homes, empty nesters and bachelors. Neave and Sprague estimate they have done 100 such projects since 2006. Some clients come to Good Space after having tried other designers or trying to do a room remodel entirely on their own. Admittedly, some find the self-serve process too overwhelming, and opt to change over to the full-service plan instead.

Neave and Sprague acknowledge there is no simple explanation to sum up the Good Space plan -and that's why they talked at such length with people at the IDSwest show. Even other designers have difficulty grasping how the radical business model works.

"Our profit doesn't come from billing you for waiting around for the painter at \$125 an hour," Sprague says. "We can take on more projects because we can focus just on the design process alone, and we love it because we get to make design more accessible for more people." They believe they're reaching a segment of the market that would otherwise never turn to them, put off by the price tag involved with design done as a luxury service.

The pair is firmly committed to allowing customers to retain financial and creative control by being so hands-on, and in doing so, allowing them to discover the fun in good design. This is their definition of 'democratizing design', bringing it to the masses by making it accessible.

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