

CREATING A HOME  
THAT SAYS

“Welcome”

BY SALLY KILBRIDGE

Avenue Interior Design has masterminded stylishly sumptuous hotels from the concrete canyons of New York to the red rocks of Arizona. Now they help homeowners lay out the welcome mat.

Why is it that some homes reach out and embrace you like a hug, while others seem about as welcoming as a research laboratory? For answers, we turned to a couple of people who specialize in creating feel-good spaces that are as warm as they are chic.

Ashley Manhan and Andrea DeRosa joined forces 10 years ago to create Avenue Interior Design, a Los Angeles-based firm that specializes in one-of-a-kind concepts for some of the smartest innovators in the hospitality industry. You can find their designs everywhere from Las Vegas mega-resorts to a boutique hotel in Palm Springs to the Bahamas' most eye-popping property.



The team says that hotel brands and owners are putting an emphasis on making hotel rooms feel residential, and giving even the grandest space a homier atmosphere. Here, they give us pointers on making your own guests — whether they’re coming for dinner or for the weekend — feel like the VIPs they are.

#### MAKING AN ENTRANCE

Manhan and DeRosa say that first impressions are everything, and one way to create a friendly entrance

is to bring your interior decorating style outside as well. “Paint the front door to reflect your home’s color scheme. If there’s room, think about adding an ‘intimate moment’ such as a bench or a small accent table, which can humanize an impersonal entryway. So many companies are making outdoor pieces that look like interior furniture, so it’s fairly simple to find something appropriate.”

If your lighting hasn’t been changed since move-in day,

swap it out for something more distinctive, creating a focal point. For the price of a new fixture and an electrician, you can completely transform your guests’ arrival.

Keep the welcome going inside, as well. Jamming your guests’ coats into an overstuffed hall closet isn’t that different from greeting your friends in a bathrobe: It sends the message that you’re not prepared. The quick solution is moving your excess outdoor gear into a bedroom for the night. Long-term, do some editing.

*Guest bedroom bliss: crisp white linens, bedside lighting, and a table for your stuff.*

## COMFY VS. CHAOS

Turns out there's a very distinct line between "lived in" and "messy." According to the Avenue team, the key emotion you're trying to trigger in your guests is a sense of comfort. So while you want your house to feel as though real people live there, those people should be seriously tidy. A stack of books on a coffee table? Nice. A stack of laundry on the sofa? Not so much.

On the other hand, a clinical interior can be just as much of a turnoff. "Don't be afraid to show

people who you are," says Manhan. "Framed photos, small collections from your travels—they're things that people can study or pick up and learn your story. It makes people feel at home."

## NO-DRAMA DRINKS

When guests arrive for a meal or party, it's standard practice to ask what they'd like to drink, but Manhan says you'd be kinder to limit the cocktail options. "When someone asks for your drink order, you find yourself looking

around, trying to figure out what's available and what everyone else is having. The last thing you want to do is name something the hostess might not have on hand." Much less stressful, she says, is to serve a signature cocktail. "It's a luxury not to have to choose," she says. "It doesn't have to be fancy—it can even be a particular wine the host has selected and explains a bit."

And while you're at it, don't quarantine the cook. "I love a party that revolves around the kitchen, so

you're either part of the cooking or are watching the meal come together," Manhan continues. "You know that the cook doesn't feel as though she's missing out, and it creates such a warm environment. There's a reason people love sitting at the chef's table in a restaurant."

## INVITING DÉCOR

Color can play a role in creating an inviting space. According to Manhan and DeRosa, "Going into a house that's all white—while it can be beautiful—is also intimidating." They prefer a palette of warmer neutrals, using pops of color and fun patterns to add personality. Among their favorites: oatmeal, taupe, shade-of-the-moment greige (a gray-beige blend), and soft, dusty rose. "You'd be surprised how many men are drawn to that tone of pink."

When it comes to furnishings, they often use a statement chair as a focal point. "It's a great way to add style to a room without sacrificing comfort." It also allows you to keep the bulk of your furnishings simple. An easy way to make a less-than-fabulous dining room feel as though every meal is a special event is to mix up the seating, placing a noteworthy chair at each end of the table. Other easy ways to introduce character while keeping a living space approachable and welcoming? "Look for a really great rug—ethnic, or an antique piece with a great pattern."

The Avenue team is also keen on using art to create interiors that

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invite conversation. “Great art is becoming so much more accessible, with online resources showcasing up-and-coming talents. A lot of our favorite pieces come from people who are posting their own original work online.” Decorating large spaces such as hotel lobbies means getting creative with their shopping, and the duo spend a good bit of time at flea markets. Another appealing option for homeowners is identifying a subject you like and building a collection

around it. “It could be florals, or water colors, or even baskets. Visit antique stores and flea markets, have patience, and work on it over time. A collection won’t happen overnight but it has so much heart.”

#### BEDTIME BASICS

Designers who specialize in hotels know a thing or two when it comes to guest rooms. “While hoteliers today want their properties to feel more like homes, homeowners should strive to

make their guest room feel more like a hotel. That means clean and comfortable, not a repository of your leftover furniture. Less is more.”

First, of course, is the bed, which you should sleep on yourself to ensure your guests won’t wake up in need of spinal manipulation. Almost as important: a thoughtful place for overnight belongings. “A luggage bench is nice. But even if your guests are sleeping on a convertible sofa in your den, clear off a side table so they

*ABOVE: A house that’s all white is beautiful but intimidating. Instead, think about a palette of warm neutrals with pops of pattern.*

*OPPOSITE: An easy way to introduce character while keeping a living space welcoming: a really great rug*



can unpack the essentials. And make sure there's a place to plug in a phone."

As far as bedding goes, Manhan says nothing compares to white linens, which unlike darker sheets, always look fresh and clean. Add a lamp — bonus points if guests can reach the switch without getting out of bed. Think about what people may have forgotten: It's considerate to stock the bathroom with a great soap, shampoo, and conditioner. And finding a makeup mirror and a hair dryer under the sink might just make someone's day.

### RAZZLE-DAZZLE

A house that says "welcome" is wonderful. Beyond that, Manhan and DeRosa say homeowners can take further inspiration from the hospitality industry, and create a house that says "wow."

"Hotels today are becoming more aspirational than they were 20 years ago. People want to stay in a room that is a notch above their day-to-day life. They want to feel elevated; inspired."

From the designers' perspective, that means

high-end tech, plenty of convenience outlets, large TVs, statement furnishings, and lighting. "Architectural lighting that can set a mood with dimmers — things like bedside sconces and a focal chandelier — sends a sumptuous message." Another investment that makes a bid impact: luxury window treatments. "Hotels know that draperies are one detail that make a big statement. Homeowners can be overwhelmed by the logistics (Who's going to hang them? Who's going to clean them?) and might

*THIS PAGE: Building a collection—of baskets or watercolors—takes time, but has so much heart.*

*OPPOSITE, FROM TOP: A statement chair adds style without sacrificing comfort. Architectural lighting such as a custom chandelier sends a sumptuous message.*



shy away from spending a lot of money on custom window treatments. But it makes such a difference.”

Of course, at the end of the day, the most welcoming part of your home is you. Says Manhan, “A lot of hotels are replacing personal interactions with technology. Instead of calling room service, you place your order on an iPad. I’m sad that the whole idea of ‘hospitality’ seems to be disappearing a bit. In my experience, knowing that another human is taking care of you is the ultimate hospitality.” ☺

“The guest room should be clean and comfortable, not a repository for leftover furniture.”

# THE MAGIC OF LIGHTS

At this time of year, a beautifully illuminated yard is shorthand for “Come in and celebrate!” And Park City homeowners consider Dean Lyons’ company, Brite Nites, to be the gold standard in holiday lighting. (See this issue’s cover for a prime example.) Lyons says what his crew does is nothing short of create magic. “Looking at holiday lighting is like looking at a fire or a sunset, it’s calming and brings joy. Christmas lighting creates magical feelings. Whether you have them on your house or you see them on your neighbor’s house, it says this is a special time of year.” Here, Lyons shares tips on creating a welcoming winterscape.

## create a focus

Even with a sky-high budget, Lyons says you don’t have to blanket the landscape. “Some of our clients love to light their entire property, and it becomes an incredible winter wonderland for everyone to enjoy. But in general my goal is to make the home look appealing from the street in the evening, and then leading up to the front door.” On the other hand, don’t skimp on the bulbs. “It’s better to light one tree well than to spread the lights too thinly around other trees.”

## prepare to get bigger

Lyons says that landscape lighting in Park City is going

bigger, mostly thanks to nature. “The trees we started to light twenty years ago have all grown. When we started lighting the all-red tree at The Reid Building on Kearns, we could do it with a ladder. Now we need two large lifts!”

“Those big, magnificent trees are a huge attraction for skiers coming to Park City. At night, the lights all over town help make it the greatest ski town in the world.”

## create warmth and coziness

Lyons suggests that homeowners think about the outside view that dominates when you are sitting in your main living area. Then light one or more trees that are within that viewing space. “What is usually a blank sheet of glass when you look outside now becomes a framed piece of art to enjoy well into the winter. It creates warmth and makes our long and cold winter nights so much more enjoyable.”

## learn these DIY rules

If you’re not hiring a professional, Lyons has a few words of wisdom. “Start small—do not attempt to decorate a tree that’s more than six or eight feet tall. And don’t ‘go it alone.’ Have a spotter who can secure the ladder. Be conservative at the outset, to avoid frustration, and add more lights later. Although we don’t always have this luxury, get your lights up before the ice. Last, use lots of lights!”