

MAIN LINE DESIGN SECRETS | WEARABLE ART | BREAK OUT OF YOUR COVID FUNK

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# SECRETS OF MAIN LINE DESIGNERS

HUNKER DOWN AT HOME IN STYLE WITH  
THESE TIPS, IDEAS AND QUICK FIXES.

BY MELISSA JACOBS



This cozy-chic Villanova living room is the work of Glenna Stone Interior Design.

Redesigning your home? You're not alone. These days, it seems like every room is being utilized. "And probably for multiple purposes," says Alexis Rodgers, owner of Newtown Square's Home With Alexis. "Flex spaces are now a must."

Since social distancing became the new normal, interior designers have been reconfiguring clients' homes to accommodate working parents, kids in virtual schools, and adults who want home gyms, meditation rooms, outdoor living rooms and much-needed personal space. "A little separation is not a bad thing," says Rachel Schwartz, owner of Haverford's Rachel Schwartz Design. "People are definitely looking for their homes to function in new ways."

Looking for home design inspiration for the COVID era? We asked local pros for their best ideas and insider tips.





Designed by Alexis Rodgers, this Bryn Mawr living room is both sophisticated and adaptable. (Below) a dining room by Rachel Schwartz.



### The Home Office

With kids in virtual schools and parents working, desks and quiet spaces are at a premium in most homes. "The era of bedroom desks is over," states Schwartz. "With their laptops and other electronic devices, kids are mobile and can go anywhere in the house that's conducive to schoolwork."

Parents generally want to keep an eye on their kids, so it's no surprise that semi-private areas have been the most requested option for Donald Thomas and Matthew Wetzel of Thomas Matthew Designs in Wayne. Thomas and Wetzel also create kid-specific workspaces in kitchens or other adjacent areas. Even a mudroom can be repurposed into a study area. "We try to carve out auxiliary spaces instead

TOP: DEVIN CAMPBELL LEFT: LINDA MCMANUS



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Planning outdoor design is as critical as it is for anything indoors. Portable chargers and WiFi extenders are worthwhile investments that boost the utility of an outdoor space.

of space that's otherwise used," says Thomas. "But it has to be well designed to keep kids motivated and focused on schoolwork. Plus, they need all of their materials within reach."

The same is true for adult workspaces, with the added requirement of doors that can be closed for business meetings. Ergonomically correct desks and chairs are crucial. "Everyone is tired of sitting so much," Wetzel says. "We're creating customized standing desks that can be incorporated into bookcases."

Zoom life may be here to stay, but Wetzel and Thomas advise clients to minimize the number of devices, wires, gadgets and gizmos by making them multifunctional. TVs can double as video conferencing or computer monitors, bookcases can house printers, and USB outlets can be strategically placed. "We'd never heard of USB outlets, but now everyone needs them," Wetzel says.

Another new must-have: Zoom walls. Designed to be backdrops for video calls, Zoom walls are aesthetically pleasing, professional looking and always ready. "It's a dedicated space to use even for a surprise or last-minute video call," says Rodgers.

For Zoom walls, there are "shelfies," the new term for photogenic shelves with interesting knickknacks. Rodgers also uses unique artwork, either buying it or relocating it from other parts of the house. "If clients have trouble committing to art, we can take photos from their phones, print and frame them, then assemble them



Outdoor inspiration by Thomas Matthew Designs.

into a interesting design on the wall," she says. "It adds a personal touch to the Zoom wall."

## Outdoor Vibes

To be multi-functional, many yards have to be redesigned, or at least upgraded. "I'm doing more with outdoor spaces than I have in my whole career," Rodgers says.

In demand right now: expanded seating, grills, cooking islands, dining tables, umbrellas, and storage for everything from toys to tableware. Planning outdoor design is as critical as it is for anything indoors, Rodgers says. "Use your garden hose to layout the design so you can see where the components would go," she says.

As the weather turns cooler, homeowners want fire pits, fireplaces and patio heaters. Wetzel and Thomas spent a good chunk of the summer getting backyard living areas ready for fall. "Patio heaters are already selling out because restaurants are ordering them, too, making for really high demand," Thomas says.

Before choosing between a patio heater, fire pit or fireplace, consider your lifestyle, Wetzel advises. What's safest for your kids? How much space are you trying to heat? Do you have a place to store firewood? Can you tolerate the smoke? If not, go with propane tanks or smokeless wood. "Before you invest, make sure the heating source is right for your needs," Wetzel says.





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“You can get into a funny game of where to stop the wallpaper or paint, and there is no good place.”

Technology is another way to boost the utility of an outdoor space. Portable chargers and WiFi extenders are worthwhile investments that allow for outdoor speakers and other forms of entertainment. Thomas and Wetzel treated themselves to a Bluetooth projector to broadcast movies onto the side of their home, using it as a screen. “We ordered it from Amazon for \$300 and loved using it from the minute it arrived,” says Thomas.

### Trend Alert: Graphic Wallpaper

Sophisticated, saturated with color and downright cheerful, newly updated wallpapers are designers’ favorite room boosters. “This is not your grandmother’s wallpaper,” states Michelle Gage, owner of Villanova’s Michelle Gage Interiors. “It’s a great way to add pops of color to a room.”



Graphic wallpaper has become interior designer Michelle Gage’s new secret weapon.

Schwartz often designs wallpaper for clients, then has it printed on interesting fabric. “From shiny lacquer to canvas, the options abound,” says Schwartz. “Start to finish, the timeline is six-eight weeks, and then it’ll be your own wallpaper—in your house and none other.”

Gage and Schwartz love to wallpaper ceilings. “The ceiling is the fifth wall, so why not play with it?” Schwartz says. “Wallpaper has elements of texture that paint can’t offer.”

### What’s Hot: Rattan

When it comes to furniture, natural materials are all the rage. Rattan is making its own splash, showing up in accents

and as a main component of furniture. Recently, Gage scored a rattan buffet for a client, then designed a custom built-in desk and bookcases with cane detailing. “It’s trendy but timeless,” she says.

### Fabulous Foyers

Two-story foyers are meant to be grand entrances, but wall dynamics make them tough to decorate. Start with a light fixture. “You need an amazing chandelier that is the right scale for that space—and the right scale is ginormous,” Gage says.

Find a console and mirror that fit the foyer, then look for a rug. You can even cut wall-to-wall carpet into rugs and add canvas borders. “Just like that, you have





A bedroom wardrobe area by Rachel Schwartz.



“Create a whole story, even in a tiny room, while conserving space.”

LINDA MCMANUS





Rachel Schwartz made this dining room pop with wallpaper and textiles.



a customized rug that fits perfectly,” says Glenna Stone, whose eponymous design firm helms many projects on the Main Line. “They’re durable, too.”

Colorful accents can personalize foyers. “It is the entryway to the house and should say something about the family that lives there,” Stone says.

But don’t put color on the walls. “They should be neutral because they open to the house,” Gage says. “You can get into a funny game of where to stop the wallpaper or paint, and there is no good place.”

### Small Bedroom, Big Design

No room in a bedroom? No problem. Go small with furniture, using only what’s necessary. Consider floating shelves that are vertical, not horizontal. “Build a platform bed that has a small footprint,” Schwartz says.

Make the walls visually different by using wallpaper on one, paint on another. Or do an entire wall of a unique texture like reclaimed wood. Add pops of color, even on unusual places like radiators.

Schwartz paints radiators fun colors, or she wallpapers them. Custom-made radiator covers are another option. “Create a whole story, even in a tiny room, while conserving space,” Schwartz says.

### Managing Renovations

Organization is key to making renovations go smoothly. Designers specialize in multi-team projects and use technology to help stay on track. Rodgers uses GoogleDrive to share documents between her team and her clients. “The easier it is to access, the less back and forth there is,” she says.

One of those shared documents should track orders, projected delivery dates and arrivals. “We track which items are coming from which vendor and their order numbers so we can check on deliveries,” says Rodgers. “Break it down by room so you have it at a glance.”

Keep updated on costs by using a budget tracker app, or create an Excel spreadsheet. Organize it by items purchased and what still needs to be purchased. “No one loves

seeing the dollars add up, but we don’t want clients to be surprised at the bills,” Rodgers says.

Start planning 2021 renovations now. Contractors are still dealing with work delays because permits are backlogged from government offices being shuttered during the spring. And some hot ticket items are on back order, especially if they’re coming from overseas. “Anyone who is thinking about renovating in 2021 should order materials now, so when the contractor is ready, you have what you need,” says Gage.

To speed up the work, move out until the renovations are complete. “That way, contractors don’t have to clean up every day or work around you and your family,” Gage says. “That gets the job done more quickly.”

Rodgers’ advice: Get comfortable while you wait. “Renting furniture is practical and a sanity saver,” she says. “You don’t have to be sitting on the floor eating pizza. Given the flurry of activity with everyone renovating their homes, you could be waiting for quite a while.” **MLT**

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