the master plan

Interior designer and tutor Debbie Abercrombie explains how to create your renovation master plan – a swatch board.

Whether you’re renovating the whole house, a few rooms or just one space, having a master plan will save you time, effort and stress.

In interior designer terms, a master plan comes in the form of a swatch board – literally a board on which you paste samples of the colours, materials and fabrics you are going to use.

Debbie Abercrombie has put together this example, for a whole house renovation, which will give the finished result a cohesive look. Even if it takes you five years to complete a renovation, once you have created your swatch board, you can keep referring back to it to make sure you don’t wander off track.

While some of the original products chosen may change, or become unavailable, you can always find new ones that fit with the rest of the board. Also, if you feel your tastes change slightly, you can modify the board to suit, without radically changing your direction and therefore ending up with a living room renovated last year that looks completely different to the bedroom you’re planning for next year.

As well as products and colours for the board, Debbie says to collect magazine clippings, product brochures and images that you like, to put in a scrapbook or file box as these can also act as a guide when collecting your samples. For example, if you find yourself collecting ethnic-patterned images, you can then ask the various fabric showrooms for current examples of this style, and maybe end up with the Coyacan fabric seen at the top of our board.
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1. A good way to start any interior design scheme is to find an object to use as inspiration. Here, we have used a shell but it could be anything – a flower or part of the garden, a painting, a view, a piece of fabric. Debbie likes to gain her inspiration from nature: “Nature is never wrong. You will find that the colours found in nature, in the environment around you, always work well together.”

Colours found within these objects are never simple. Most of us would assume a shell is white or cream, but this particular one also has burnt orange, bluegreen and deep brown as well as a couple of creamy tones. Forget your assumptions and look hard at the object you have found, to identify the various colours.

2. The next step is to then match those colours to corresponding Resene shades. You won’t actually use all of these paints as some will only represent accent colours for upholstery or cushions, but this will give you a colour palette to keep referring back to.

Get the various testpots from your local Resene Colorshop and paint up A4 sheets of colour or buy Resene drawdowns. Then put them in order of the amount of space they will be in the room, ie use the whole A4 sheet for the colour/s you will use for the main A4 sheet for the main window and sofa coverings, or buy a colour palette to keep referring back to.

3. Once your colour palette is arranged, Debbie advises to always choose your floor coverings next – the timber, carpet and tiles. “The floor is the largest surface area, it’s the greatest expense and the surface you are least likely to change in a hurry. This is the most important aspect to get right.” And whatever you choose, lay it alongside the colour palette to make sure it fits in.

4. Next comes any other horizontal surfaces in the house, such as the kitchen benchtops, vanities and cabinetry. Again, lay your laminate chips or composite stone samples alongside your colour palette.

5. The final component of your board is the vertical surfaces, for example, curtains, sofa coverings, kitchen cabinetry, cushions etc.

Here, Debbie has used Resene Quarter Silver Sand and Resene Sisal as her base colours, and overlaid the others in various proportions.

The word renovation sends most of us spiraling into equal parts excitement and dread. To visualise the big picture but successfully mastermind tiny details is a true art. Decisions you didn’t dream of will be required, concerning products and processes of which you may currently be ignorant.

Renovating is not unlike getting married. It pays to know uniquely what you do and don’t like, to realise that those trends you adore now may or may not last. For those of us who prefer to personally lead a home project (as opposed to employing an interior designer), immediately apparent will be the mountain of information and plethora of choices.

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But how to start? Trawl the internet first? Hot-foot it around shops every weekend for months? The best beginning may be neither. A thorough search of your own taste and motivation comes first, because this is all about you. Do you know the ideal scale of your alterations or additions? Do you have an exact figure to spend? Do you want the renovation to make the space seem bigger? Fancier? More elegant?

An equally great renovation precursor – one which helps to both broaden your horizons and hone preferences – is a visit to a Home Ideas Centre. The centres are year-round, static home-show exhibitions, with no entry fee.

The Home Ideas Centres function almost like some clients’ living rooms; an approach that’s often more successful.

Be happy to be individual in your taste. Adding a bold, confident or luxury item to your scheme will often lift an otherwise average renovation to new heights!

Choose the highest-quality products you can. Think about what will be stunning long-term. Take whatever time is needed to do it once and do it right. 

The selection process

List exactly what you want your renovation to achieve. Commit to paper specific functional aims like, “cost-effective warmth throughout,” before moving onto aesthetic, stylistic preferences and favoured products. Think about open homes you’ve visited, magazine features you’ve admired. What did you like and why? If you loved a particular deck or piece of furniture, note it down. A scheme can be designed around it!


Think about how eco-friendly your choices are. Are you considering solar water and underfloor heating, use of grey-water, optimal double glazing and insulation levels?

Quickly eliminate lookalike/products you don’t like, or which don’t answer your overall aim. If you really love a particular finish or product, stand firm and question those who try to persuade you otherwise. Don’t capitulate easily and then suffer regret!

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