



Designer tips for a gorgeous home

# Mix old and new, stir gently

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Sometimes doing what you love takes a couple tries. Interior designer Meryl Stern of Haworth began her career as a tax accountant.

That was a mistake. "I hated that," she recalls now. "But I don't think I had a name for what it was I loved." Doing tax work for a company that converted warehouses into office space, however, reminded her how much she loved rearranging her home, and so she headed back to school — this time to the New York School of Interior Design, where she graduated with honors.

"Going back to school — going to school when you choose it — is fabulous. It's so much easier; you get all A's because you've chosen it," she says.)

After interning with home design powerhouse David Easton (famous for his eco-friendly "rammed earth" houses), Stern started her own company, Meryl Stern Interiors. In addition to many private homes, she's also designed the Harvest Bistro in Closter, a soaring space filled with nature-inspired touches like a two-story stone fireplace, wooden beams and a stair-rail made of branches.

The effect, though, is chic rather than country-cute — the restaurant got the top design ranking from Zagat's New Jersey — and is typical of Stern's style, which manages to mix the old and organic with the modern and man-made. Some of her tips for designing with a blend of styles:

**Q Do you often use natural elements in homes, as you did at the Harvest Bistro?**

**A** Well, that's a very organic place — it's located next to a 22-acre flower farm, and because of the food element, the idea of harvest, that's what they wanted.

But I do love stone and wood. And I'll never use Formica! But I am starting to get into some man-made materials — Lucite, and some man-made polyresins...you can get wall panels now that are made of an eco-friendly resin that's recyclable.

**Q How would you characterize your style?**

**A** I would say "classic-modern," that's how I would describe it. I love mixing antiques in a modern way, a clean way. But I can't imagine doing a job without some antiques.

**Q Where do you find the antiques you incorporate into your designs?**

**A** Everywhere! I shop online — there's a wonderful website called First Dibs ([www.1stdibs.com](http://www.1stdibs.com)). I've never been disappointed with them, the quality of the vendors is very good. And I go up to the Hudson valley in New York, and to Stamford in Connecticut.

And I'll mix in pieces from Crate and Barrel here and there. But I don't normally shop retail, my clients are looking for something different — they could go to Crate and Barrel themselves.

**Q How do you work antiques into a modern design?**

**A** I'd say the environment itself has to be set, before you introduce any furniture elements. Then you can mix, say, modern lighting with an antique fixture. Or you can



have wood floors stained ebony — that's a more modern floor look — but the wood is still a traditional element.

Or you can take an older upholstered piece, and put a really modern, whimsical fabric on it — make it fun, make it less serious.

I think I just try to do it in a clean, gallery-like way, where there's not so much in a space, so your best pieces can be seen on their own. Remember that everything can't be the most-special thing in a room — something has to take a back seat.

**Q What do you think is the most common mistake people make when arranging their homes?**

**A** I would say the biggest mistake you can make is with space planning. A lot of people don't see their space objectively — they haven't come up with how to solve their problems in the space. A lot of my job is to get them to communicate what their problems are — for example, do they entertain a lot and need seating? Then you can plan for the space to accommodate that.

And that applies to something as mundane as dog bowls. If you have pets, you need a space for them! You can't pretend they're not there. They're in your life, and you

need to plan for it. I always have a cabinet for dog food or cat food in my kitchens. It just keeps everything organized and clean. You don't want your dog food sitting out in your gorgeous new kitchen!

**Q How do you "plan a space" for your clients?**

**A** I ask them to prepare by pulling out pictures in magazines, so I can see spaces they admire, and what they don't like. And then our first meeting is all about the space and its function. And then we inventory everything that's going into that space — wallpaper, floor coverings, furniture.

And we come up with a budget. We assign a value to each item going into the room. Having been a tax accountant, I'm very sensitive to my client's budgets.

**Q Do you have any tips for designing on a budget?**

**A** Remember that nothing lasts forever, so spend your money wisely. I'd say spend it on good, comfortable upholstery.

Also, color is so important. I always use color. I never paint anything decorator's white; it's modern but it's too harsh — everything looks better on a softly-colored wall.

And paint is inexpensive and it can go a long, long way.