



After: The living room, made cheery with polenta yellow walls, is much more livable now that it's free of clutter. The wicker hamper serves as a coffee table while storing some of the children's board games that had previously been stacked in the dining room.

spring cleaning
and a dash of
color work
wonders

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Spring is the perfect time to get organized, clean away the staleness of winter, and throw open the windows to let inside the vital energy of clean, fresh air. Hopefully this month's makeover will inspire each of us to tackle the tough job of "getting organized."

Recently I received a call from Tory Schmitz, who had received some unexpected cash for a speech and decided to spend it on freshening up the main living spaces in her circa-1963 house in one of Houston's older neighborhoods.

A regular reader of *Houston House & Home*, she was very interested in seeing what could be done using essentially her same furnishings and possessions. "I thought previous DIY makeovers looked livable, yet also beautiful and classy," she explains, "and I wanted that for our house."

Before we met, I asked Tory and her husband, Mike Dings, to go through magazines and books and mark pictures of rooms they really liked. When I visited them for the first time, she showed me photo after photo of rooms with natural wood trim, strong

free your home's chi from clutter

mustard-colored walls and lots of color in ethnic accessories and rugs.

"I was surprised at how quickly you pointed out these themes in the photos we had selected," Tory says, "and that you suggested painting walls right off the bat." (The couple had moved into the house with a one- and a five-year-old, and painted everything white. "Getting paint on the walls was all we could manage," Tory says, laughing. The kids are now 14 and 18 years old.)

The one thing I noticed immediately was how the pale lavender and gray wallpaper in the entry hall "died" against the beautiful red Oriental rugs and colorful artwork. The only way to balance the rug color was with color on the walls, which meant eliminating the wallpaper. They were reticent. "We lived for weeks with big paint samples taped up on the walls and decided we would never know unless we tried it. It was a 'leap of faith'. Once we agreed to go ahead, Mike and I worked together on stripping wallpaper, spackling and painting," she explains.

DINING ROOM DECISION

A surprise for Tory was my focus on the dining room, which was one of the first rooms you see upon entering the house. It was, shall we say, stuck. There was art pinned to the walls from when the kids were in grade school. The piano was



After: Enlarged and neatly framed travel photos remind the couple of favorite places they've been. In place of the piano is a sideboard flanked by ladderback chairs that have been painted black.



The lavender and gray colors of the wallpaper in the entry couldn't stand up to the bold colors of the couple's art and furnishings.

crammed behind the dining table, which was placed perpendicularly in the small room. Their son's unused magic show was against one wall. Deep wooden shelving, suitable for the garage, held Monopoly and other games. The microwave and trash can were in the corner. The cat food was on the dining table to keep it away from the dog. The window did not match the parlor's new stained bay window, located right next to it—and both face the street.

Surprisingly, Tory did not have the dining room on her wish list, but knowing how evil clutter is, and how it completely stagnates the energy in a house, I suggested she tackle that room first, to clear the roadblock and to get the ball rolling.

"I thought that the dining room/playroom/music room was a lost cause. I guess I tuned it out, seeing it as a project for some future time," Tory says.

FENG SHUI PRINCIPLES

I am a big believer in feng shui, the mystic art of placement, which has been practiced for thousands of years in China. The Chinese do not consider homes to be inanimate objects—rather they believe homes radiate an energy field called chi. Chi is energy that enters into our homes through doors and windows, and radiates from both the furnishings and the people and animals who reside there. Strong, healthy people, thriving houseplants, and pets with gleaming eyes and coats means there is healthy chi in the home.

Chi flows around our furnishings, caressing us with positive energy and, conversely, distressing us with negative energy. We have all been in homes that "feel good" and those that "feel uncomfortable". Since clutter is pure, negative energy—and thus bad feng shui, we need to eliminate it, ideally as part of spring cleaning.

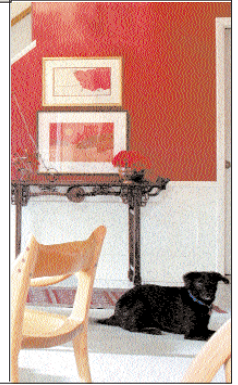
Clutter is very berating, and "talks"



The dining room was essentially being used for storage.

trade secrets

- To declutter like Tory, handle one item at a time—just once. It should go into the “keep” pile, the “Goodwill” pile or the “trash” pile.
- Don’t re-clutter what you just decluttered! If you just cleared off a tabletop and waxed the top, don’t violate it by piling clutter on top. Pretty soon, you will back yourself into a corner by limiting the space in which you can clutter.
- As you make tracks, hanging up your clothes, filing your papers, keep forging ahead with cleaning and clearing. This is known as “ahhhhhh” space!
- * Sometimes the most effective ploy is not to buy more furniture and accessories for your home, but to rethink the pieces that are already paid for.



to us constantly. Clutter says, “Take me to the cleaners”. “File me”. “Give me to Goodwill.” “Take me to be repaired.” “Dust me, wash me, hang me up, put me away in a drawer.”

Clutter is a scrap of paper with a phone number scribbled onto it, a half-wrapped package not taken to the post office, an un-returned purchase in a bag on the floor, loose change emptied onto a dresser top—in short, unfinished business. In order to turn down the volume on all the noise that clutter makes and have some peace in your home, it is vital to develop a plan of attack. Since clutter will not go away by itself, you have to take the reins and make it disappear—just like Tory did.

My favorite organization book, which I encourage clients to read, is *Lighten Up! Free Yourself From Clutter*, by Michelle Passoff. Tory bought the book the same afternoon we met, and finished reading it that evening. Within 24 hours, she had cleared every scrap of clutter from the dining room and had switched the piano and the sideboard’s locations, and turned the dining table to parallel the long wall. She was definitely on a roll!

Successfully eliminating clutter implies that you are making a move in your life. Throughout the clearing process, you must ask yourself many questions about what is- and what is not—relevant to the life you really want to be living. Brutal honesty, author Passoff says, is the key to success. The fear of regret or of making mistakes keeps people from tossing out objects or making simple decisions. Tory knows firsthand how tough this process can be. “I carefully sorted the games, puzzles and toys that were in the ‘dining’ room. Some I moved upstairs to kids’ rooms, many went to Goodwill, some to the trash, and the remainder went into the wicker basket,” she says. The greatest value in letting go of what no longer has a place in your life is that it sets you free.

“We were ready to begin our ‘adult’ life and make more physical and mental room in our lives, now that our daughter

has left for college and our son has started high school,” Tory explains. “Not only was there a decrease in teenage physical clutter, but a decrease in the amount of mental space which was consumed with homework, college applications, Girl Scouts, swim meets and carpooling. I was ready to spend more time on other things,” she says.

ACTION PLAN

The first visit resulted in a pages-long master plan, which included future replacement of the dining window to match that in the parlor, selection of paint colors and space planning. We selected C2 Paints “Turkish Market” for the dining room and entry, and “Polenta” for the parlor, family room and kitchen.

Board games were relegated to a wicker chest (found in a back bedroom, which we moved into the parlor for a coffee table). Space was found in the kitchen for a smaller, new microwave. The trash can found a new home in the kitchen. Beautiful area rugs were rearranged. Chairs were moved, and the piano and sideboard were assigned to their new, flipped positions. The rest of our work was done with e-mails and sending photos back and forth, including the idea for enlarging and framing their favorite photos for the dining room wall.

Once the room was cleaned out, I suggested she find some Windsor chairs for the table (four for \$ 99 at Alabama Furniture) and paint the two red ladderback chairs black, and place them on each side of the rosewood sideboard. Tory had PhotoWorks blow up the photos, bought six 16” x 20” frames at Cost Plus Warehouse, and had mats for the entry hall and dining room art cut by Arden’s Picture Framing (my favorite framer).

Unbeknownst to me, Mike had two specific desires in this redecorating project: to gain a dining room and to have a place to display photos. So for Mike, “Having a real dining room was far and away my favorite change,” he says. “Tory and I both love photography. We



After: C2 paint's "Turkish Market" red gives the newly uncluttered dining room high energy. The pre-owned Windsor chairs were a real find—four for \$99 at Alabama Furniture.



before

Before: The kids' art projects and games overtook the dining room. Cat food is placed on the dining table to keep it away from the dog.

have traveled to some very beautiful places, and when I look at those photos on the wall I can recall everything about the moment I took the picture. It's almost like being there again," he says.

What did Tory learn? "That it is definitely worth every penny to consult someone with a professional eye," she says. "That a 'leap of faith' can be a growing experience. And that this process definitely reinforced and strengthened our move to a more adult life by helping us change old habits and try new things. But the big surprise was how much fun this has been—and still is.

"The dining room is a joy to look at

and to be in," Tory says. Mike adds, "Tory and I used to cook and entertain more before the kids came along. Now that the dining room is useful and beautiful, we feel inspired to have friends over more often, like we used to." ■

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