

Decor Score: Going clean and lean

by *Rose_Bennett_Gilbert*

Q: We live really hectic lives during the week so I'd like to make our new mountain house as simple and straightforward as possible, without being severe.

SIMPLE, YET ELEGANT - Far from 'Sex and the City,' Sarah Jessica Parker's dining room in the country is dramatically simple. CNS Photo courtesy of Filipacchi Publishing. I'm having a hard time finding "ordinary" furniture. Everything is overwrought - all patterns and lace and dripping crystals. Maybe you have ideas that would help me.

A: Three bits of advice: 1. Practice unclutter. 2. Emphasize natural materials. 3. Let function dictate form.

Unclutter needs little explanation. Your "hectic" life is, regrettably, typical of most of us today. We race around so fast, there's barely time to get the mail off the dining table, much less set it for a proper dinner. Your new house offers a chance for a new cleaner and leaner life. Choose accessories as if you were going to marry them for life. Fight tschotkes like the plague that they are. Practice good-home hygiene: Throw out two-day-old newspapers, two-month-old magazines, year-old stuff you haven't worn or used. I know, I know, easier preached than practiced, but the discipline is worth developing.

Natural materials are naturals, indeed, for a mountain house. Wood tones soothe, so do familiar fibers like cottons, wools and linens. And green, living things are best of all (if you can keep them alive between visits).

Form follows function. The adage applies to a room's furnishings, as well as its architecture. You are smart to look beyond the clutter syndrome that's affecting some furniture designers. Simple, functional pieces cleanse the palette and nourish the soul.

Look how two major stars manage to escape from the hurly-burly of their celebrity lives: The dining room we show here is in the country house retreat shared by Sarah Jessica Parker (of "Sex and the City" fame) and her husband, Matthew Broderick (of Broadway hits like "The Producers"). They've rehabbed an old farmhouse in the Hamptons with help from designer Eric Hughes. Hughes is a great fan of the late Billy Baldwin, a star tastemaker known for his simple, smart, liveable ideas.

Hughes used Baldwin's signature brown denim on a sofa in the living room, and adapted his mantra for "suitability" in the dining room. A pride of mismatched chairs, painted as matte black as any shadowbox silhouette, clusters around a simple white dining table Hughes designed after one that belonged to Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner, his wife, who'd also lived in the Hamptons. Between the warmth of the natural pine floor and the surprise of the antique Egyptian glass chandelier, the room is sparsely furnished but fully - and arrestingly - equipped for both family dining and entertaining. See more celebs' personal digs in a splendid new book called "So Chic," by Margaret Russell and the editors of Elle Decor magazine.

Q: My sister-in-law had us over for drinks last weekend to show off her newly decorated living room. I don't know a lot about interior design, so I thought I'd better ask before I say anything: Her curtains were much too long for the windows. In fact, they dragged all over the floor. I hate to think how the dust bunnies will have a field day! Why did anyone sell her drapes that are too long?

A: You have had your first encounter with "puddled" curtains, that is, where the fabric flows down the wall and out onto the floor. It's not a mistake; it's a style you used to see only in Europe, where over-the-top extravagances may have been used to send signals about riches and status.

Given today's global attitudes, puddled curtains have arrived on these shores, for better (sells more fabric) or worse (entice dust bunnies). Some designers love the look; others are too practical to spill their clients' money on the floor.

In short, long curtains are a matter of taste. My advice: Say nothing.

Q: We're moving to the Sun Belt and I get to send most of our old furniture to charity and buy new. I want all-white in the living room. Will so much white blind us, do you think?

A: No. But you will be turning down the air conditioning to real chill, visually speaking. That's not a bad thing in a hot climate, of course, but you do need to balance all that cool white with some interesting textures - say, a nubby area rug or stucco wall. Wood tones on floors and furniture and art on the walls should "warm" things up enough.

P.S. A good place to donate your old furniture is to a furniture bank supported by a group called Help1Up. It has collection sites all over the country that redistribute good, previously owned furniture to families who need it. Look it up at www.help1up.org.

Rose Bennett Gilbert is the co-author of "Hampton Style" and associate editor of Country Decorating Ideas. Please send your questions to her at P.O. Box 120190, San Diego, CA 92112-0190, or by email.

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