

# how to SURVIVE THE DESIGN CENTRE

You've painstakingly picked out the lot for your new home, or carefully selected your fabulous new condo, and are still basking in your success. But now comes the hard part. Designing your dream home with only the developer's floor plan for reference can be overwhelming, so we talked to the experts. Here's your guide to making even the most difficult design decisions with all the confidence of a pro. Written by Sydney Loney



## setting design goals

Before the decision-making process begins, it's important to create a vision of what you want your new home to be – and do some prep work before your first design appointment.

**Build a scrapbook** of magazine clippings with colours and styles you like – everything from flooring to faucets. **Visit design centres** in other developments. "You can go from one display suite to the next and do a lot of comparing," says Adele Rankin, senior interior designer at CHIL Design Group in Vancouver, who managed the interior design for the city's new Millennium Water development. **Create a "needs and wants" list**, says Kimberly Williams and her team of designers at Kimberly Williams Interiors in Victoria, who worked on the Dockside Green development there. "Know your budget and where you can and can't compromise." **Take advantage of marketing tools**, such as online visual tours and interior renderings, as well as open houses and browsing days. **Talk to other homeowners**. "We went to see the house of someone who had bought the same model as my fiancé and me, and asked what they liked and didn't like," says Julie Aston, a new homeowner in Oakville, Ont. **Go to your development's design centre** and look around. "Touch things, test them out, and bring a digital camera," says Kelly Cooper, a project manager in Toronto, who has done everything from home inspections to setting up sales centres for developers and helping customers navigate sales centres. "Take pictures of everything, then go home and take it all in."

## decisions, decisions

Every design choice you make can affect subsequent decisions – and your budget. Here are some things you should keep in mind.

**changes in structure** Your first decisions usually involve structural and electrical elements – ask the developer's designer assigned to you what kind of impact any changes may have. For instance, adding a fireplace may change the configuration of your windows. **changes in flooring** Even if you choose something as simple as a thicker carpet, the baseboards will need to be raised to accommodate it, and doors may have to be shaved down so they don't skim along the pile. **changes in upgrades** Picking a granite countertop for the ensuite could mean that you'll also have to switch to an undermount sink, for example, thereby adding the cost of a second upgrade.



## the design appointment

"We didn't expect the appointment would take so long or that there'd be so many things to think about," says Julie. "We had to pick everything from grout colour to shower enclosure tile, and I couldn't believe the number of choices there were for each!" The design appointment is where the building of your dream home actually begins. Here's what you need to know.

**what to bring** Take your wish list and scrapbook to give the designer a point of reference. "And bring pictures and dimensions of any furniture and art that you're moving into the space," says Kimberly. **how long it will take** Appointments typically last from one to three hours. And sometimes they're broken up into stages – your first appointment may be to decide exterior colours, or there may be a separate one for appliances and cabinetry. **the process** When it comes to putting everything together, your assigned designer might start by anchoring the home with a room, like the kitchen, or begin with flooring and move up to counters, wall colour, tiles and woodwork. Don't be afraid to ask questions – use this person's expertise to guide you. "Sometimes people have a hard time visualizing how different elements will work together," says Heather Saunders, interior design manager for new-home builder Shane Homes in Calgary. "I make sure that whatever they select works, and will offer alternative suggestions until it all comes together." ▶

## shed some light



“Most new-development homes have limited lighting,” says designer Anna Simone, co-owner of design firm Cecconi Simone in Toronto. “There’s often only one fixture in the entry hall, one in the bathroom and one in the kitchen.” Here are three ways to ensure your new home is well lit.

- 1 “Engage a professional to do a proper lighting plan and make sure it’s coordinated throughout,” says Anna. “To put light fixtures in after the fact is often impossible.”
- 2 Consider the amount of natural light your home is going to get. “Then ensure there are provisions for task, ambient and decorative lighting,” says Kimberley. “Find out if fixtures are energy efficient, or if they can be replaced with compact fluorescents.”
- 3 “To keep the lighting design simple, always light your corners (for intimacy) and your centre (to expand the room), and put them on two different switches,” says Anna.

“Consider your lifestyle and make sure the space is conducive to whatever is important to you, whether it’s kids and pets or entertaining and overnight guests”

HEATHER SAUNDERS, INTERIOR DESIGN MANAGER, SHANE HOMES, CALGARY

## choosing upgrades



How you upgrade depends on how long you plan to live in your new home. If you hope to move in a few years, choose upgrades that are visual and important for resale, such as fancy faucets in your kitchen versus underpadding for your carpets.

### short-term

- “I encourage people to look for things of value that will set their homes apart,” says Kelly. “So, if you’re going with granite, it may be a worthwhile investment to select a higher quality of granite.”
- “Add things people can see, like an attractive backsplash in the kitchen or tile on the stair risers – things you notice right away,” says Heather.
- “If your home comes with black appliances, upgrade to stainless steel,” says Kelly. “And go for an over-the-stove microwave.” Since the space would be taken up with a range hood anyway, putting the microwave there will give you more room elsewhere for cabinets.

### long-term

- Do things that are harder to change later, such as putting in pot lights, adding hardwood throughout, upgrading to a fully tiled bathroom, or switching to a more durable carpet.
- Look for items of convenience or choose something you’ve always wanted, like six burners on your stove versus a four-burner range if you love to cook.
- Choose things that fit your lifestyle, like soft-close drawers. “I have them because I have a hot-headed 14-year-old – when she slams a drawer, it slowly closes by itself,” says Heather.

### best overall value

- “We chose functional things that will help streamline our life – like a pullout garbage with two bins in the kitchen,” says Julie.
- Add those things you may regret not having later, such as drawers in the bathroom instead of open shelving or cabinets with doors.
- “Built-in closet organizers are a really good place to spend your money,” says Kimberley. “And they can take some of the pressure off having to buy a stand-alone dresser for the bedroom.” ▷

## layout liabilities

“Make sure you look very carefully at how the space is planned out,” says Adele. The floor plan is your map to your new home: try to visualize ceiling height, room size, sightlines, and the flow of light and traffic throughout. Here are some other things to keep an eye on.

- Are there too many **hallways**? Even a large space can feel small if a big chunk of square footage is dedicated to traffic zones.
- Are there **awkward areas**, like unusable nooks? Ask the designer about other cumbersome features that may not appear on the layout, such as **bulkheads**, which can make it hard to hang draperies.
- Is there enough **storage**? “Has consideration been given to adding built-ins, or are there places you can adapt for storage, like the area under a stairway?” says Kimberley.
- “Will you be able to **tailor the space** to your needs, or is it so rigid that you won’t have any flexibility?” asks Anna. If there’s a **formal dining room**, could it become something else if you don’t entertain? If there’s a **den**, could it be opened up to give you a larger living area?
- How many **bathrooms** are there? Look at the ratio of bedrooms to bathrooms. “We put in an extra bathroom on our second floor,” says Julie. “It was originally listed on the floor plan as a computer nook, which is probably just a creative way of saying ‘unusable space.’”



## the dos and don'ts of new-home design

**DO** select a neutral palette when it comes to choosing architectural finishes. “People like to add colour when selecting finishes, but they often tire of the colour quickly,” says Anna. “Add it later, with art, an accessory or an area rug.” **DON'T** develop your design around things like the colour of your existing towels when choosing items like tiles or countertops. “The least expensive way to change the look of a room is through paint, towels and bedding,” says Heather. “Two years down the road, you’ll want new towels anyway.” **DON'T** select different finishes for each room in a small space. “Pick one floor material and one tile and make sure your millwork package is the same throughout,” says Anna. “That will make everything far easier to work with and will make your space look larger than it actually is.” **DO** follow up after your design appointment to make sure nothing got missed. “I realized later that we hadn’t picked tiles for the entry into the garage or for the main-floor powder room,” says Julie. **DO** read your contract before you sign. “It’s all there in writing, so don’t miss that opportunity to ask questions or address any concerns,” says Kelly.



## getting what you paid for

**Research your developer:** find out what their track record is, what customizations they offer, how they’ve handled problems in the past, and the rules for visiting your home while it’s under construction. **Negotiate as much as you can,** right from the start. “You have the most power at the time you make the agreement of purchase and sale,” says Kelly. “Think about what you want and then negotiate up front – you’ll discover what they can and can’t change.” You may be able to determine the markup percentage on upgrades or guarantee your completed unit will match the floor plan in your contract. **Protect yourself.** “Ask the developer to deposit money for upgrades into a trust account, so it’s only withdrawn when items are delivered,” says Kelly.

“Imagine the display suite with nothing in it – really strip it down in your mind – and then fill it up again with your stuff. Is it all going to fit in the space?”

ADELE RANKIN, SENIOR INTERIOR DESIGNER, CHIL DESIGN GROUP, VANCOUVER



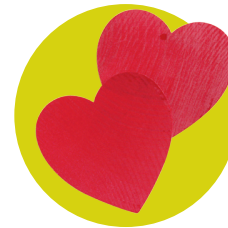
## call in a designer

**why it’s worth it** The person running your design appointment isn’t necessarily going to be an interior designer, advises Anna. “Hire someone you have a rapport with and who’s independent of the developer but familiar with the process. Just tell them you need them for about four hours; if they charge around \$150 per hour, it will be well worth the expense,” she says. **how they can help** “It’s like bringing a realtor with you when you’re buying a house,” says Adele. “An interior designer will be able to point out things you may not be looking at.” ○

Throughout the process, you should feel involved and that you have a say in how you want your space to work”

KIMBERLY WILLIAMS,  
KIMBERLY WILLIAMS INTERIORS, VICTORIA

## he says/she says



You like contrasting colours and traditional design, your partner goes more for monochromatic and modern – **how can you resolve your differences**

**so you’re not airing them during your design appointment?** “I’ve been doing this for 23 years, and it’s still tough when a couple comes in and I have to try to appease both parties,” says Kimberly. “It’s important to talk everything over beforehand and make sure you’re in agreement. Have an idea of style and colour, and make sure you both go over your scrapbook to see whether you’re on the same wavelength.” After that, it’s all about compromise.