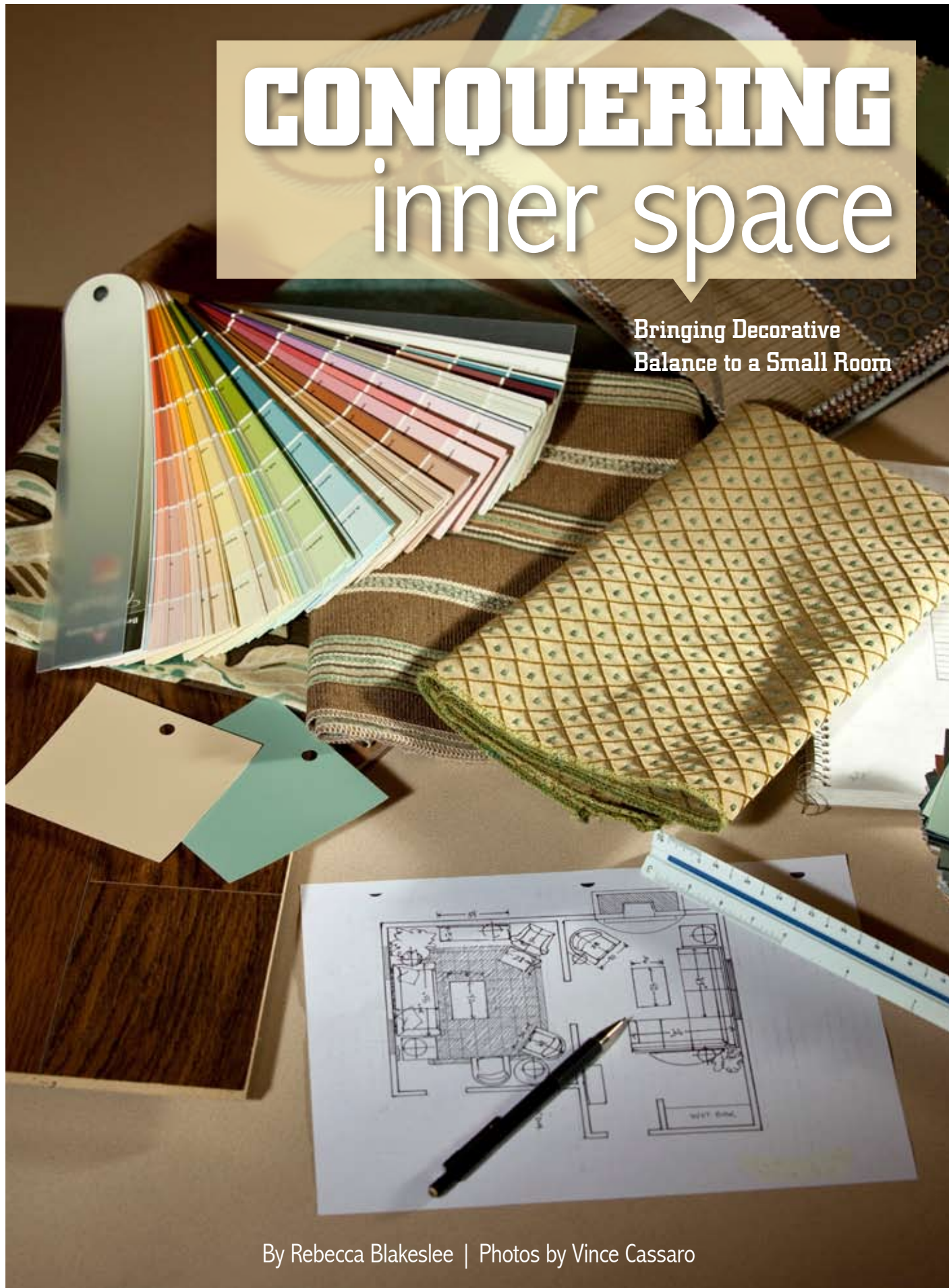


CONQUERING inner space

Bringing Decorative
Balance to a Small Room



By Rebecca Blakeslee | Photos by Vince Cassaro

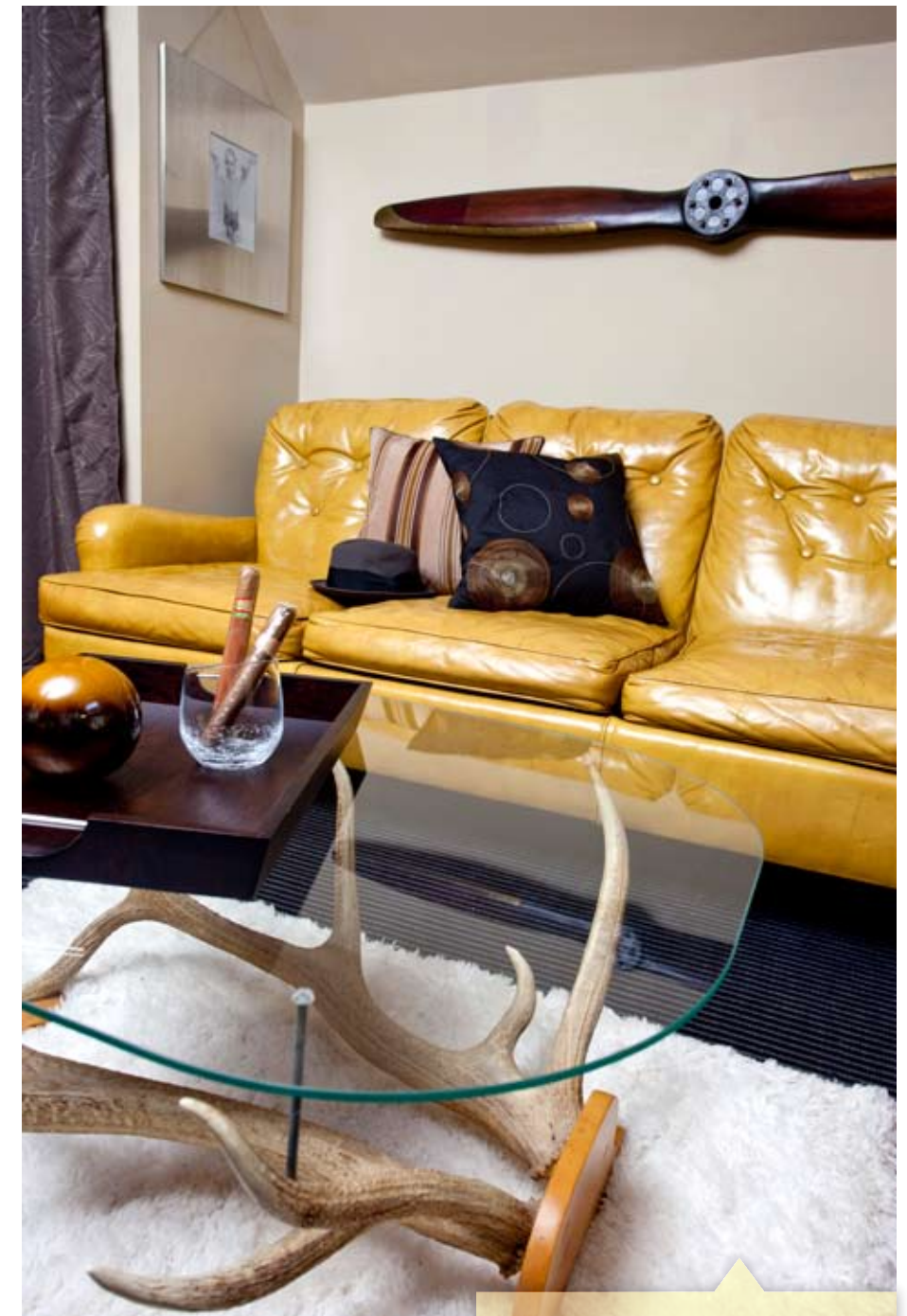
Ask designers what makes small rooms unattractive, and you'll hear certain words over and over again: busy, overwhelming, claustrophobic, clutter. The general consensus? Keep things simple — less is more. But “less” and “simple” needn't mean boring. Sometimes the smallest room in a house can even end up being the favorite.

“They're a great place to experiment, a place to really let your personality shine out,” says Jen Mulledy from Restyle design in Hummelstown. Don't be afraid to be daring, just practice constraint at the same time. Balance is key: keeping the room visually interesting without being overwhelming or compromising the room's functions.

Impulse purchases and decorating on the fly have a low success rate in any room — but are especially dangerous in a small one. It might feel tedious, but careful and detailed planning are essential. Draw up a plan on graph paper, list the items you have, need or want and be very, very sure to measure. The more detailed your plan, the more successful your design project will be.

“One of the biggest things in designing is to create harmony in all the elements of the room,” explains Nancy Phillips LeRoy, of Special Spaces Ltd. in Mechanicsburg. “I encourage people to have a plan — and not to implement the plan until it is totally in place and they know what they are doing.”

Whether you're facing an empty room or about to give an existing one a makeover, take some time to consider the purpose of the room. What will it be used for, and how often? Is it a multipurpose room, or meant



for something more specific? How many people will be using the room at the same time?

“Take traffic patterns into account,” says Alexandra Penkalskyj from Decorating by the Sea in eastern Pennsylvania. “People need to be able to move comfortably through the room ... without a sense of having to walk around or over things.”

It may seem like an obvious reminder, but don't block the walkways. Nothing says “clutter” like not being able to get where you are trying to go. You can help give the room an open, easy-to-navigate feel by leaving floor space visible when you enter the room. A throw rug or two instead of wall-to-wall

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carpeting can also help break up the space, and hardwood flooring adds a sense of motion so a small room doesn't feel stifling.

Once the purpose of the room is established, decide on the atmosphere you want to create. Casually comfortable? Romantically intimate? Austerely elegant? The color scheme you choose will have a large impact on the feeling of the room. For a warm, intimate setting, choose darker colors. If you want an open, airy feel, then head for the cooler, lighter colors.

"Whenever people talk to me about color, I always ask, 'What is the mood you are trying to create?'" says LeRoy, "There is a psychology of colors. Red stimulates appetite, yellow can make people high-strung and nervous.... Once you've determined the mood, think about intensity. It's often a matter of personal taste."

Although designers recommend sticking with a monochromatic color scheme in a small room — different shades of the same color — that doesn't mean it has to be monotonous.

"Contrasting color is a good way to break up a space," says Tara Cassady, a designer from York Wallcoverings in York. "Wall space is the largest space in the room and can have the biggest impact."

It might seem like avoiding dark wall colors would be important in a small room, but that's actually a misconception, says Jennifer Mann, an interior designer with INTERIORS in Lancaster. "There are times when a dark color should be used to make the walls recede, which will make the room feel bigger."

Having one wall a darker color than the other three can visually elongate the room. Ideally, the accent wall should be the one you face as you walk into the room. Keep in mind the colors of any rooms the wall leads into, and try for a sense of continuity in color. If you go with a darker tone for the entire room, offset it with lighter accents, such as a lighter-colored trim or throw pillows.

"Don't be afraid to use paper in a small room," Cassady says. But she advises against using small prints or a busy pattern. Instead, go with a medium to large design, or with a texture. Stripes can give the room added height — but small stripes are too busy. The same guidelines apply to drapes and upholstery. The right patterns can help set the mood you are trying to create, as well as giving the room a sense of motion and airflow.

If you are trying to make the room feel more open, consider using a mirror. "A strategically placed mirror can make a



When wallpapering a small room, go with a medium to large design, or with a texture.

room feel larger by allowing the reflection to become part of the room," says Mann. Some designers favor a single large mirror for a small room; others suggest a collage. Either way, remember to look at what the mirror will be reflecting. Laura Lacovara of Vara Inc. Interior Design suggests hanging a mirror on the wall opposite a window to increase light and add space by reflecting the window.

Liz Miceli, owner of Elizabeth Anne INTERIORS in New Cumberland, suggests

glass for the same reason — it's reflective and open. Look for furniture that you can almost "see through." On the extreme end is a plexiglass stool Miceli once found for a client. More commonly found items are glass tabletops and upholstery without skirts at the bottom.

"Furniture with space helps," Miceli explains. "An end table on a pedestal might be small, but with a large pedestal it tends to look heavy. A larger surface with spindly legs will look lighter."



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An important but often overlooked aspect in a small room is light. "Natural light is the best light for use in a small room," says Mann, adding that it's important not to block windows with window treatments or furniture. Besides natural lighting, she recommends table and floor lamps or wall sconces — a central ceiling light will make the room feel smaller.

Lacovara offers a simple trick to make a window appear bigger than it is: Install a curtain rod that extends past the window at the ceiling, and hang white sheers from either side. "White sheers," she says, "go a long way."

When a lot is demanded from a small room, then it's important to find multipurpose furniture.

"Go big," says Mulledy. "Using small things is a big mistake." Instead, she recommends going as large as possible, with each piece functioning in as many ways as possible. A love seat, for example, might be a better choice than two to three chairs. Storage units such as wardrobes and built-in bookshelves, in particular, should be large. Offset a large piece by hanging large artwork on the opposite wall, or long curtains on the window.

If the room has a closet, Mulledy suggests replacing the doors with a curtain. Not only will it help open the space visually, but it is also an easy way to bring color into the room.

Another creative use for a closet in a small space is what LeRoy refers to as a "home office." "Put in a counter top and some file drawers. It doesn't have to be expensive." The main idea, she explains, is to have somewhere to store things and reduce clutter.

There it is again — clutter, the archnemesis of the small room. The small room isn't the place for all the knickknacks you've collected over the years. If the room is a personal space, or if the collection is important to you, try to keep the items grouped together.

Small rooms are most often personal spaces. You might be the one spending the most time there, and others may rarely set foot in the space or stay only for a short while. If the room isn't somewhere that you'll enjoy being, then it isn't attractive.

"You have to be true to yourself," says Cassady. "Make sure it is something you really like, something you will like 10 years from now."

If you've accomplished that, then congratulations: You have a lovely small room. *