

# INSIDE DESIGN

## adriana urtasun and karen williams

The two dynamos behind UW Design Group share their decorating savvy. By Kathleen Dore

**T**he words on the wall of Adriana Urtasun's Toronto living room say it all: Live Passionately. It's a credo she shares with business partner Karen Williams (standing). The two women are clearly passionate about their careers in design. Urtasun, originally from Edmonton, was a foreign exchange trader, and Williams, from Toronto, worked in marketing, but both have an abiding love for decorating, design and architecture. "As a little kid, I spent my allowance on wallpaper and fabrics," says Urtasun. Williams says she was "always completely fascinated with architecture." Both went back to school, Urtasun at Toronto's Ryerson Polytechnic University and Williams at UCLA. Almost two years ago, they met and formed what has become a busy design house – UW Design Group.

From designing TV sets to redecorating

homes for resale to designing whole homes and building additions, they'll take on just about anything. In fact, no job is too small – they even offer two-hour consultations in which they'll assess your home and give you a plan you can execute yourself. "We're finding that people are getting more savvy about how they spend their money," says Urtasun. "They're willing to spend more money on the design fee, to get it right from the start, and then use less expensive materials to make it happen." It's a new approach to decorating that makes hiring a professional economical.

And it doesn't stop there. Urtasun and Williams believe you don't have to spend a fortune for good design. Urtasun is a huge fan of using found objects as art, Williams is a salvage-yard junkie, and both attest to the impact that good styling – from rear-



ranging your bookshelves to creating pleasing vignettes in your front hall – can have on a home's visual appeal. And styling won't cost a thing. But that doesn't mean they think you can scrimp on everything. What should you spend money on? They advise their clients to invest in pleasing architectural features and a good lighting scheme. Once those elements are in place, you can get creative with your remaining resources. Here's how they approach a typical job.

**S@H:** When you walk into a room, how do you assess the space? What do you look at?

**KW:** The shell. If there's good architecture, we can do anything with it. If the shell is weak, my first suggestion is to paint it. You want to create a more harmonious look, then the focus of attention will be on what works in that room.

**AU:** Lighting is so important. Even if someone can't afford to do a retrofit [built-in light fixtures that require installation, such as pot lights], we always try to come up with solutions – floor lamps, table lamps, whatever.

**S@H:** How do you design a lighting plan?

**AU:** First, I think you need to consider the functionality. What do you need in order to function there? What will you be doing in the room? Reading, chopping onions, writing a document, watching TV?

**KW:** And is there artwork in the room?

**AU:** That's the first step. The next is making sure the entire room is lit. So I'm looking at things like corners: Is there something missing in the corner? What can we do to draw attention to it? As for the scale of fixtures, when I look at the scale of lighting, I'm also looking at the style of furniture. ▷





BEFORE



AFTER

## DINING ROOM MAKEOVER

The story: This bachelor pad was furnished with a collection of leftovers from the client's student days. Modern sophistication was the goal, but it was a rental, so no structural changes could be made.

**THE BUDGET: \$5,500**

**THE TIMELINE: SIX WEEKS**

"Changing the paint colour and cheesy light fixture actually made the room look quite modern," says Urtasun.

- The big bucks were spent on gorgeous furniture. Urtasun and Williams designed a dark-stained maple table, velvet-upholstered chairs and an oversize framed mirror to replace the mismatched hand-me-downs.
- The garish orange wall colour disappeared under a more contemporary sage green.

- A simple, modern light fixture replaced the plastic monstrosity.
- The client never used the pocket doors to the kitchen, but when they were closed, the space attained a cosy, intimate feeling. "We just look at things in a different light," says Urtasun.
- The mirror had to stay, but once the other elements were in place, it reflected something attractive and so took on a more elegant look.
- Clutter was banished. The design duo's pet peeve: "We always get rid of dried flowers," says Urtasun. "They suggest death, not life."

**KW:** You're not going to put a small bedside table lamp in a large living room. If you do a lot of reading, it might make sense to have a floor lamp beside a club chair with an ottoman. For that type of lighting, incandescent works well; it's easy on the eyes.

**SOH:** So now we've maximized the potential of the shell and lit the room effectively. If you've spent all your money at this point, what's the next step?

**AU:** Then comes the arrangement of your furniture. You don't have to have the sofa pressed up against the wall. Or perhaps the artwork is too low; that creates visual noise. To create a soothing environment, you can do little things like arrange the paintings along the same line, repeat lines in the room. Also look for focal points, as in the front hall, where first impressions are made.

**KW:** There's styling as well.

**AU:** Before a big showing [of a resale property], I spend six hours working with the homeowner's things, some flowers and fruit, and I just keep moving them around.

A bookcase can be a beautiful architectural feature, but often it's cluttered and looks messy, disorganized and dusty, so we reorganize all the books, maybe with a few tchotchkes in between and some framed photos. Maybe I'll take the book jackets off because some are ugly, and leather covers can look elegant. There are all sorts of tricks: some involve design theory, and some involve an intuitive ability to style.

**SOH:** Are there principles about arranging objects on a table?

**AU:** I definitely mix height a lot and pair things and try to tell a little story. Most people know the rule of threes or odd numbers [arrangements are more pleasing when items are grouped in odd numbers]. Let's say you can't afford a big flower arrangement. Just get three glasses, fill them with flowers and put them in a line down the table. It's just as elegant and gives the same feeling as a huge professional bouquet. Typically, I work with a single type of flower because it's visually less noisy.

**KW:** If an arrangement is at a do-it-yourself level, keep it as simple as possible.

**AU:** Also, do the arrangement and then look at it from different angles. You almost have to walk far away and look at it from a different perspective. It might help if you took pictures of your rooms and then went away to look at them.

**SOH:** In terms of saving money, salvaged pieces are probably a good idea. Do you go out and find salvaged pieces for clients?

**KW:** I love salvage yards. I live at them. Even if you can't find a particular piece there, the inspiration you get is amazing.

**AU:** For clients who want to explore, we give them a floor plan so that they feel less intimidated about making the right choices. Take a camera so you can take pictures; that way if you're not sure of something, you can show it to your friends or your designer. Go prepared, with a measuring tape, swatches of paint colour and material. Put all that in your trunk in a little zip-lock bag.

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**SEH:** What kinds of things have you found?

**KW:** There are lots of hospital beds, which have wonderful solid-steel frames that can be cut down. We've done coffee tables by making wooden tops for the frame. I've found vintage bathtubs with claw feet; they need to be re-enameled, but that's fine.

**AU:** We had a client who didn't have enough money for room dividers in a large office space, so we took huge old window frames from a salvage yard and just hung them. At home, you could do that as a room divider between the living and dining rooms. The ones we used had glass in them, or you could use mirror.

**KW:** Or if there's a weight problem, you can use a coloured or textured acrylic.

**SEH:** What other things can you invest in?

**KW:** It's back to good bones and lighting. Make sure that your architectural elements are solid – they don't have to be fancy – because that's what you're starting from.

**AU:** And if you're renting, in the living room maybe your investment is a sofa and one good armchair. Then you can find second-hand lamps and accessories. Just be selective. Don't pile up. Don't be a pack rat.

**KW:** You can take it one step further. Find a vintage lamp, for instance, then put a modern shade on it.

**SEH:** What about artwork?

**AU:** I love pieces that you can do yourself, that say something about you.

**KW:** We found old discs of vintage film reels and used those on the wall.

**AU:** There are just so many great ways that you can display found objects that mean something to you – it's art. ■



### KITCHEN MAKEOVER

A complete renovation of this cluttered kitchen was vetoed: the owners wanted to sell but knew they would never recoup the money, so a facelift was in order.

**THE BUDGET: \$4,000    THE TIMELINE: TWO WEEKS**

"We didn't have enough money to change the flooring, install pot lights, change the window or door, so we worked with the smaller pieces," says Urtasun. • A hutch was removed from the other side of the exterior door, making room for the refrigerator and a built-in cabinet similar in style to the existing cabinetry. • The floating dishwasher was installed where the refrigerator had been – reducing work triangle clutter. • An inexpensive laminate countertop in a neutral colour was installed. • New knobs and pulls were added to update the cabinetry. • A circa '50s globe pendant lamp was replaced with more contemporary track lighting (pot lights would have been preferable but the budget didn't allow for them). • The room was given a coat of paint in a fresh colour. • The eating area was updated with an inexpensive table and new chairs. • All the window treatments and hanging fruits were removed to reduce visual clutter.