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Be a design renegade

By Judi Ketteler

Six decorating rules to break

COSTCO MEMBERS Jeff and Beth Olson may be law-abiding citizens, but when it comes to decorating their house the Indiana couple refuses to conform. That doesn't mean it's haphazard.

"We've lived in four houses, and we've always tried to make them our own," Beth says. It's definitely a "mixed" marriage: Her husband is an architect who leans toward modern design; she grew up in a family of antique dealers (and has several family heirlooms). They've figured out how to blend their tastes by breaking the rules.

Here are six rules to throw out the window.

Rule to break: Paint small spaces light colours.

If you have a small room, it's always going to be small, no matter what colour you paint it, says Boston-based interior designer Abbey Koplovitz of AbbeyK Inc. You just can't trick the eye that much, so you

shouldn't feel compelled to paint that tiny powder room white. "You might as well have fun with those small spaces and paint them crisp, perky colours," she says.

On that same note, don't worry about all of your paint colours "matching" from room to room: "Walls don't have to speak to walls," Koplovitz says.

Rule to break: Stay true to the period.

"Before, we lived in an Arts and Crafts-style home," Beth Olson says, "and while we can appreciate Arts and Crafts, our style is more modern." They decorated with modern furniture and accessories, and picked the paint colours they wanted—versus feeling limited by "historic" paint colour choices.

"Historic homes are beautiful, and it's great to give a nod to the period, but period style can feel dated and heavy," Koplovitz says. "It's just not how we use our space anymore."

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Rule to break:**Keep brick and wood unpainted.**

In the Olsons' current 1950s Colonial-style home, the kitchen (which had never been updated) was full of red brick, and the living room had a mixture of red brick, dull wood trim and wood panelling. Instead of tearing it all out, they decided simply to paint it. They painted the brick dark grey, the trim white and the panelling a lighter grey. "We turned a country look into a modern one," Olson says.

Koplovitz is also a big fan of painting woodwork to update it (unless it's something stunning like mahogany). White paint can do wonders for woodwork that looks outdated.

Rule to break: Hands off the fireplace.

Fireplaces don't have to be untouchable sacred spaces. Koplovitz admits that even though some designers regard it as a terrible no-no, she will put a flat-screen TV over the fireplace—if that's the best place for it.

"You should treat your fireplace like any other kind of space. Put plants in front of it, or put candles in it," Koplovitz says.

Rule to break:**Antiques and contemporary don't mix.**

The Olsons' home is a prime example of how wonderfully the two can mix, especially in an older home. For example, in the dining room, a clean-lined modern table and chairs are paired with an antique hutch that belonged to Beth Olson's grandmother.

The Olsons took down frumpy window treatments and painted the existing chair rail a dark navy, but decided to leave the traditional chandelier and Colonial-inspired blue-and-white wallpaper. "You can take pieces of what's already there and blend it with what you love, and it all lives together," Beth says.

Rule to break: All furniture must match the scale of the room.

"It's a misconception that a small room needs only small furniture and a large room needs all large furniture," Koplovitz says.

An oversize piece of furniture can work in a small room, while a dainty chair in a corner of a large room can help to bring it down to a more human scale.

Koplovitz is also a fan of including surprising elements and pieces of furniture, such as running stripes horizontally on an upholstered piece or on draperies, or covering a classic Louis XIV chair in a non-traditional fabric. "When you break the rules, you get unexpected, fun changes," she says. [E]

Judi Ketteler writes about home, garden and craft topics for a wide variety of magazines.

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