

A Countdown of Eight Great Design Ideas

These thoughtful, custom-design touches to a home will dazzle your clients

By Jim Madsen

Great design is about so much more than pleasing the eye. In my 12 years of designing houses, I've found that the best designs are usually rooted in simple, clever, practical ideas that boost a home's livability quotient from just okay to off the charts. While those ideas may make a client feel that the house is custom-made, in reality, they often have universal appeal and can be reintroduced in new designs for other clients.

I've chosen a few of my favorite design ideas to include here, along with my reasoning for where and why they work best. These tips come from my book *101 Great Building Design Ideas*. While some are expensive to implement, others won't dent a client's budget, and many of my suggestions may even save money in the long run. But judging from my own experience, these ideas offer the kind of thoughtful touches to a home that your clients will remember and thank you for.

#8 Turn on the Holiday Cheer

If your clients know where they plan to put up a Christmas tree or other lighted holiday decorations, include a switched outlet in each of those areas. That spares your clients the trouble of having to reach down and plug in the lights every time they want to turn on the

holiday cheer. Because holiday decorations often adorn fireplace mantels, another safe bet for a switched outlet is often at the top and to the side of the fireplace. For outdoor holiday lights, I like to place electrical outlets along the underside of the eaves and then wire them to a switch hidden in a coat closet where it's less likely to be mistaken for indoor lighting.

#7 Hidden Hideaway

Everyone has stuff they want to keep safely tucked away: precious jewelry, grandma's antique silver, even Christmas gifts for the kids. That's why I look for ways to create hidden storage in a home by either using up odd-shaped leftover space, stealing a few inches from an adjoining room or putting a false back in a closet. Any one of those spaces can be a great place for a safe, with the door hidden behind hanging clothes or a hinged bookshelf. Several companies even make hidden doorways to look like bookshelves. Best of all, your clients will have a built-in, secret hiding place that will be easier to remember so that never again will Christmas presents be hidden so well that they're not found until July.

#6 Portrait Gallery

If you're looking for a way to minimize a hallway's length, consider creating a recessed gallery for artwork or family photos. Somewhere near the middle of the hall, recess a portion of the wall 12 inches for the gallery, making the space about four to eight feet long. Place shallow cabinets, about 42 inches in height, below the recessed space. Above it, put in a dropped soffit with recessed spotlights to illuminate the wall.

#5 The Wine Cellar Minus the Cellar

Who needs to dig a basement for a wine cellar when you can create a "wine room" on the ground floor? This room works best if you have a raised-wood foundation (also known as a stem wall foundation). Design the wine room so that it has stairs (usually three or four steps) leading down to a concrete slab foundation on the ground. Think of the room as a walk-in closet with a sunken floor and a ceiling that remains the same height as the adjacent



Turning on the holiday cheer is a lot easier when you include a switched outlet where your clients plan to put up a Christmas tree or other lighted holiday decorations.



rooms. Cover the walls with stone or brick, and add wine racks, a wine refrigerator, sink and counter. Then voila! Behold the cellar-less wine cellar.

#4 Look Mom, No Hands!

For gardeners or grease monkeys who leave behind a dirty faucet in a kitchen or laundry room whenever they wash up, a hands-free faucet may be just the ticket. Foot pedals in the toe-kick turn on hot and cold water, allowing dirty hands to get clean without ever leaving a grubby trail of fingerprints. The hands-free faucet even reduces the spread of cold or flu viruses around the house. A quick search online for “foot pedal faucets” will give you several options. And don’t forget to order a deck-mounted spout because most pedals are sold separately. While a faucet with a motion sensor, like the ones found in commercial restrooms, also frees the hands, the water may not run long enough to get hot especially if the water heater is some distance away from the sink.



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Like those found in commercial restrooms, a hands-free faucet with a sensor can reduce the spread of viruses, but only install one if the water heater is close by.

#3 Safe Closet

Okay, this is not a panic room like the one in the Jodie Foster movie, but it’s something along the same lines. When you’re designing the master closet, specify a solid-core door made from wood or steel. Reinforce that closet doorjamb and include a deadbolt. Don’t forget to install a phone inside the closet. While this setup won’t keep an intruder out indefinitely, it should buy the homeowner enough time to dial 911.

#2 Tidy the Backsplash

I’ve seen this scenario so many times. A client chooses beautiful tiles for the kitchen backsplash but then once they’re installed realizes that multiple electrical outlets pockmark the design. The solution? Specify a low-profile outlet strip that runs just below the cabinet and along the entire length of the backsplash. Have the upper cabinets built with a large enough apron or trim around their base to hide the strip. That way the outlets won’t mar the backsplash, and your client will have plenty of sockets to choose from no matter where they’re working. There is a downside, however, because the electrical cords are more visible when plugged in. So, if your client plans to always keep the coffee pot in the same location, a standard wall outlet would be better there.

#1 A Dry Run at the Controls

Nothing wakes a person up faster than turning on the shower to be scalded or made hypothermic by water that hasn’t yet reached a comfortable temperature. Here’s a way around that problem that will have your clients singing your praises for many years to come: Locate the shower controls near the shower entrance but *not* under the showerhead. This allows the user to turn on the water without getting wet and enter the shower only after the water is comfortably hot. Make sure to confirm (and re-confirm) the controls location with the plumber and general contractor before they start the rough plumbing because the location will be outside the norm for them. ■

Jim Madsen is a California-based, award-winning designer whose work has been featured in several magazines. His book 101 Great Building Design Ideas can be ordered on his website (www.DesignClassic.net) or from Amazon.com.