

# An Expert Shares Her Top Tips For Renovating Tricky Spaces

Whether you’re working with a small room or awkward angles, designer Brooke Moorhead has some ideas to help you make the most of your home.

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Published on June 16, 2017 - 5:30am EDT

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If her renovation of a family’s triplex in Manhattan’s West Village neighborhood is any indication, interior designer [Brooke Moorhead](#) is something of an expert on renovating tricky spaces.

“Prior to renovating, the space was dark, with a lot of wasted space,” says Moorhead of the 5,000 square foot residence. “I undertook to utilize all aspects of the space, including turning a hallway into a bedroom.”

Repurposing spaces, such as turning a previously empty corner into a kid-friendly seat, is one of the many tips Moorhead has for those undertaking renovation projects in small spaces. “I think growing up being on job sites as a kid made me highly attuned to the spaces we live in and how to transform them,” says Moorhead, she was able to turn a dimly lit house with dated furniture into a bright, modern space.

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open home where every design choice was intentionally made to make the most of the space.

We spoke with Moorhead to get her best tips on renovating and how to go about tackling a tricky decor project.

**Let's start at the beginning: what do you recommend as the first step for anyone looking to begin a renovation project? Is there anything specific homeowners should consider or prioritize?**

Design first, build second. I suggest that anyone thinking about a renovation get all of their ducks in a row long before construction begins. This means assembling your team – designer, contractor, and architect, if necessary - and then working with the designer and architect to design everything, down to the last doornail, before anyone picks up a hammer. Imagine if you were asked to give a fabulous dinner party, but the recipe was given to you 15 minutes before the guests arrived and you still needed to go buy ingredients? Things would get messy, to say the least!

Once decisions are made and the designs are put on paper, a contractor's bid will be based on a concrete plan and will be much more accurate. The contractor will also be able to build faster, more accurately and more cost-efficiently if he has drawings in hand from the get-go, because he will not be waiting for decisions, and he won't have to make changes as he builds.

**What's one thing you wish people would keep in mind when undertaking a renovation?**

There are three pillars of construction, what I like to call "the triangle," quality, cost, and time. You can have two out of three. You want a product to be amazing quality and delivered fast? It's going to cost you. You want something cheap and quick? Quality will suffer. You want something amazingly beautiful and not too expensive? You may find it somewhere, but you will probably pay in the time it takes to get it. Decide what your priorities are and use that knowledge to help you develop realistic expectations.

Also, good work costs money. While there are exceptions, in my experience you get what you pay for. Often, you will end up paying the same price or more to fix mistakes resulting from cut corners.

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**In talking about the West Village triplex, you mentioned the importance of utilizing all aspects of the space in clever ways —such as turning a hallway into a bunk area— what were some other examples of this?**

Designing for New Yorkers has made me somewhat of an expert on utilizing space to the fullest —I work with every client to do this, whether they have an 800 sq. ft. apartment or a 5,000 sq. ft. house. For this project, we converted an unused wet bar in the living room into a toy closet, which automatically gained the family additional storage space and looks quite sleek with its flat panel doors and simple brass pulls. Additionally, there were three entrance hallways in the apartment which had previously been serving as waystations for any bike, stroller, or backpack that didn't have a home. We added a sort of cubby/locker area in one of these areas for the children to put backpacks, shoes etc., and in another oddly shaped area we installed cabinetry for sports equipment and coats. The foyers didn't have a lot of space and were awkwardly shaped for installing cabinetry, so we had to be creative in the design.

**What are your top tips for people renovating a small space?**

Overall, my three top tips for people renovating a small space are:

**1. Be En“light”ened:** I think lighting is one of the most important design aspects; even in a tight space, a well-lit small room can feel calming and harmonious. Think about anything from the simple, like switching out your lightbulbs to the more complex, like installing cove lighting.

**2. Bone up on built in cabinetry:** This is absolutely essential for both utility and design for big-city living. If you can afford to do it custom, it's a game changer, and if not, there are ways to purchase storage pieces that can come pretty close to the shape of your room.

**3. Color, color, color!** Color or bold details can be great in small spaces. People can be fearful of being too bold in a small bathroom, for example, but when making that big statement the room can go from being small, awkward and forgettable to being small but colorful and a real “wow”. Why not try stripes in a breakfast area to define the space, for example, or a fun wallpaper in a tiny bedroom?

**Any other general guidelines people working with small spaces should stick to?**

In a word: PURGE, so you can put everything else away! Clean lines, simplicity and modern living are the words of the season, so embrace them. If there are books, toys, travel memorabilia, etc. in your life that have no home, designing cabinetry to fit your space is usually the way to go, as it can provide a maximized amount of storage tailored to your exact layout.



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### Are there any myths about small space decor you want to dispel?

Bigger isn't better! While large apartments and houses can be glamorous, in the context of renovating, smaller can actually get you more. The more square footage you have, the more a renovation will cost. With a smaller home, you will have more flexibility to choose nicer finishes and furnishings, since you don't need to purchase so much and so many of them.

In terms of decorating, your small space can still be fabulous and have a ton of personality – no need to tone down your style, it just needs to be edited carefully. Often the best small spaces are the boldest ones – a bright colored sofa or an amazing floral wallpaper can be dramatic and look amazing.

Also, people can become obsessed with having “openness” in a small space. But creating vignettes, unique seating areas, and utilizing the space you have won't make it feel more closed-in; quite the opposite. Strangely, an apartment always looks smaller when there's no furniture in it! There's often more room than you think, as long as you size the furniture accordingly.

### What is the biggest mistake someone can make when decorating a smaller space?

Getting the scale wrong. It's vital for the space to feel intentional: a sofa or chair that is too big (or even too small!) immediately makes the whole place feel off. Also, proportion in a small space is essential – meaning you must have different sized objects that can relate to each other. Larger pieces, like sofas and coffee tables, need medium and smaller sized pieces, like lamps, side tables, and well-placed accessories, to make the room look balanced.

### What about people working with awkwardly-shaped rooms —any tips for making the most of the space they have?

You can take one of two roads: embrace the space or conceal the awkwardness.

We “embraced” an awkward layout in a Tribeca Loft renovation (full disclosure: this was a small space had three big columns running down the center of the space, so I decided to let the columns automatically create the space by dividing it into different functional areas. This makes the whole living space multi-functional, perfect for entertaining or finding your

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“embraced” in designing the kids' bunk in the West Village. There is a very odd corner where the cabinetry sits now. The wall actually stops a couple of feet above the

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there was a big open space underneath that went back a few feet. We designed the drawers of the cabinetry to be extra deep — they are not as shallow as they look, but recede about two feet further behind the back wall. It is a great storage space now, and the drawers conceal the weird architectural detail.

#### Anything else you want people to know before they head into a renovation?

The more a client knows what they want, the easier it is for a designer to give it to them. My advice is to read as many shelter magazines and websites as you can to get a sense of what your personal style is. One of my favorite parts of the design process is collaborating with a client —it's an incredibly creative process and I always get more ideas when my clients have opinions. Being able to point out things you like and dislike shapes the design into something unique and interesting that is very truly yours.

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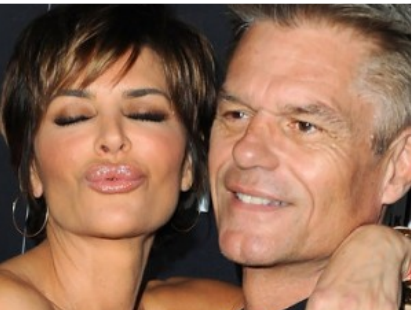
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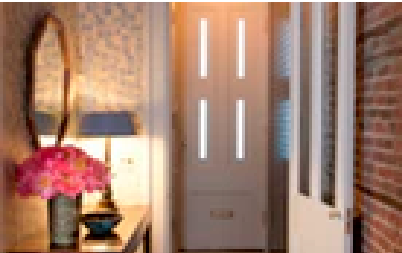
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