

Designer Mark Dalton's "aha" moment came while he was working on a pricey project for a client in Georgia.

"It hit me that I wanted to live like my rich clients. Why shouldn't I be able to create a personal home full of chic, costly looking things, including luxury granite?" he pondered. "After all, I'd need less of everything since I have a small house."

So, Dalton and his partner, Jay Poindexter, a theatrical technician at the Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall, set themselves a unique challenge when they took on a 1,700-square-foot, concrete-block, 1954 ranch home in a transitional neighborhood within walking distance of the Ringling Shopping Plaza near downtown Sarasota. They decided to have it all while spending practically nothing.

"We bought the home from an elderly lady who had acquired the place in the '70s," said Dalton. "She hadn't done any updating, but she maintained the house. We paid \$190,000 for the property and subsequently spent \$50,000 on the renovation for everything including furniture and the yard, which was one of the selling points of the home."

There's a big live oak tree in the front, lots of plants and a fenced section in the back. Dalton said the house appealed to him because it had good bones, meaning it was solidly built and the rooms were nicely proportioned. "The kitchen cabinets were outdated but in fine shape, the rooms were a nice size, the closets were cedar," said the designer.

"And I really liked that the porch off the kitchen had been made into a room with a separate entrance," he continued. "I knew it would be perfect for a home office because it's quiet with a nice view to the back yard. The floor is the original quarry tile. The house also has a separate dining room, which I wanted, and the living room is a generous 15-by-30 feet." There are two bedrooms and two baths.

The owners purchased the home in early August of 2007 and moved in the end of September. They worked fast and with confidence. Dalton and Poindexter took care of the design scheme and purchasing; they hired contractor Jeff Francola for demolition and renovating, which included updating the plumbing and electrical systems.

The owners mandated crown molding everywhere, including the bathrooms, and they boldly had all the trim in the house painted black, flat for the window and door casings. They stained the interior doors, except for the closets, black.

"This gave the rooms a modern, sophisticated aspect, and although most people think it's a radical move, it isn't," insisted Dalton. "Black is quiet and it works beautifully with our modern/Asian design scheme." Dalton painted the ceiling of the home office black, too, since he said it was ugly and he wanted it to visually disappear.

In the kitchen, Dalton removed the dropped ceiling and improved the overhead lighting. He kept the cabinets, but painted them black, added new hardware, including hinges, and removed some of the cabinet doors for a modern open-shelving look. On the shelves on either side of the sink, Dalton displays his collection of rare black Fiesta dinnerware. The new appliances are stainless steel and the kitchen floor is marble while the counters are granite.

"I didn't need much of either since the space is small," reasoned the designer, "but those touches of costly stone really make the room glamorous. I was able to get remnant stone, so it didn't cost much."

The homeowners took up the old carpeting and replaced it with sand-colored, commercial-grade, faux sisal throughout the whole house. This makes the rooms flow and seem larger. They kept the jalousie windows because they were in excellent condition and spoke to the vintage charm of the house. Dalton said he spent \$15,000 on all the furnishings, and that he shopped daily, online and in local stores.

"Doing this house taught me that you don't have to pay retail for anything," said the designer. "I shopped the bargain stores, garage and estate sales, flea markets, the big-box places and I researched sources online. I made a game of it; I just refused to buy unless it was a deal. I got the vanity in Jay's bathroom for 40 percent off and I found our fountain in Tampa at a huge discount. I followed the downward price of an animal-print fur throw at Pottery Barn until it came into my price range. I became an expert bargain shopper and that made all the difference."

In the back yard, the owners replaced the chain-link fence with wood and created a large gravel patio filled with container plants. It's now a serene and private eating/entertaining area that offers leafy vistas from inside the home. In the front, they removed the tired sod and added a shell driveway.

In the side yards, they planted a variety of ferns, bromeliads and thick groundcover. The landscaping came in at \$2,000.

The men painted the house a soft green to blend with the surrounding foliage and chose a coral color for the trim. For all the paint, both inside and out, they went with off-the-rack Benjamin Moore colors, not choosing the expense of custom colors. Kevin Hare was the painter for the project, and he had a dark palette to work with -- charcoal gray, brown, burnt sienna, black and slate blue.

"The darker shades are cozy and enveloping," said Dalton. "These colors give our rooms a peaceful and sophisticated spa feel, and we've used enough art and mirrors so that the colors actually make the rooms seem larger than they are."

The ceilings throughout the house, except for the home office, are white.

Dalton said he became such an expert on doing chic on the cheap that he and Poindexter are doing another house a few blocks from this one, and they hope to sell it turnkey ready in a few months. He also consults with homeowners who want to renovate on a budget friendly master plan. He advises them about where and how to shop and offers strategies for bargaining with retailers.

"Doing this house taught me that we can all have glamorous dwellings with luxury elements. The key is sticking to an overall design scheme and not getting distracted. Then you pick luxury items while being absolutely determined not to pay retail."

* Only renovate something that's worth it - the house has good bones, the location is extraordinary, the yard is outstanding.

* Buy on sale and don't become attached to anything. Walk away if it's not a deal.

* Haunt garage and estate sales and visit salvage places regularly.

* Check out the remnants corner in carpet, granite and cabinet places. If you only need a small amount of granite, say for a powder room counter, ask to see the most expensive remnants they have and then negotiate a price. They want to get rid of it.

* Negotiate on the price of furniture floor samples that are on sale. Often the price will come down and the store might have a second example of the same object that you can buy as a pair. I got my slightly damaged dining room leather chairs that way.

* Find the style you want in magazines and luxury stores and then go to budget places and get the looks for less. You can do this with lighting, flooring, fans, and fixtures for kitchen and bath.

* Take your shopping seriously.

* Paint makes a world of difference.

* You have got nothing to lose by asking for a better price.

-- Mark Dalton

CITATION (MLA STYLE)

Marsha.Fottler@heraldtribune.com, MARSHA FOTTLER. "Chic on the cheap - A clever designer finds ways to live large on a small budget." *Sarasota Herald-Tribune (FL)*, All ed., sec. SUNDAY REAL ESTATE, 30 Mar. 2008, p. 11. *NewsBank: America's News*, https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info%3Aid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=NewsBank&req_dat=FD06DF3A01BA4367BCBB89423E758655&rft_val_format=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews/11FC72165E Accessed 4 Sept. 2026.

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