

Presto chango

One night last fall after viewing a stunning house for this column, I walked through the door of our '50s bungalow and hated what I saw. I hadn't been happy with it before, but now I had reached a breaking point. The house looked dark, cluttered and was far too eclectic, with no unifying theme. We either had to move or redecorate.

The carpet was the worst, and the landlord continually ignored our plea to replace it. Yes, we rent — the huge down payment required to buy in this town unfortunately stops freelancers like my husband Brian and me. So we stay because the public school is great for our son and Corona del Mar is one of the few walking towns in Orange County.

But we needed to make changes. After writing about home design for several years and learning about houses, I felt sure there was a wood floor beneath that awful carpet. Brian yanked up an edge of the rug and sure enough, there it was. He must have realized how desperate I was because even though he had no experience refinishing a floor, he agreed to the monumental task ahead and began ripping out the carpet.



Leonard Ortiz/Orange County Home

WITH LITTLE INVESTMENT and lots of sweat and imagination, renters can create a pleasing environment.

Herein began the transformation of our rented abode. One thing I've learned, regarding design, is a house works best when the interior matches the exterior. Since ours was a cottage, it made sense to stay true to the cottage theme.

We sold or gave away laminate furniture and things we didn't love. We traded a loveseat for custom lampshades. Brian pulled up carpet and padding, extracted staples, sanded, stained, and varnished the floors. I learned how to clear clutter according to feng shui, studied books by Rachel Ashwell, the queen of Shabby Chic, and talked to designers and friends who had done great things with homes like mine.

Gay Penney, a Corona del Mar design consultant/floral designer, offered tips and made lampshades with material provided by Gianna, a good friend. Brian and I applied new white paint to the walls, cabinets, the ceiling fan, and the fireplace, and moved things in — sparingly. Our house faces east and receives little direct sunlight, so to maximize brightness, we slipcovered our sofa in white twill and painted earth-toned wicker chairs white. I combed swap meets, garage sales and eBay for vintage fabrics, white furniture, glass lamps, sconces, paintings and accessories.

Then came positioning everything. "People have great stuff, but they scatter it

around the house and push furniture right up against the wall," Penney said. "You want to create clusters of things and have seating areas every eight feet."

So we white-framed photos, mirrors, and vintage plates, which can be as beautiful as any artwork, clustered small collections of hobnail and Cameo ware, and hung mirrors — good for energy flow, according to feng shui.

Vintage fabric and painted white shutters hide a cinder block stand upon which sits our 29-gallon aquarium of goldfish. Vintage tablecloths cover the table, now in a corner of the living room beside the kitchen. In the kitchen, beside my old Iowa farm table desk that occupies a corner, our rarely-used dishwasher serves as my file cabinet; the dish trays make perfect file holders! Pegboard painted white hangs over and beside the stove, where pots, pans, and vintage utensils hang.

When you rent, it's common to accept the status quo; after all, the property is not yours. But you can make your environment pleasing — and even wonderful — with little financial investment and lots of sweat and imagination. ■



Would you like to suggest a remodel for Environs? Send a short description to Orange County Home, 625 N. Grand Ave., Santa Ana, CA 92701 or cmeyer@ocregister.com