

STYLE & SUBSTANCE

# Designer-Approved Upgrades

Looking to bring a dated space into the 2020s? We consulted with a panel of experts for their takes on timeless elements that will keep the most important rooms in your house on-point for years to come.

**Q** They say kitchens and baths sell a home, but when a budget is limited, what are some more reasonable upgrades you would recommend?

**Sarah Malek Barney** I [suggest] spending money on timeless finishes, such as beautiful flooring, tile and fixtures.

**Vanessa DeLeon** You don't have to spend a ton of money to get results that look like a million bucks. Companies like GE and LG have added all the bells and whistles to make stunning kitchen appliances. You can also skip the top-of-the-line hardware and opt for budget-friendly alternatives like Kohler or Brizo.

**Beth Dotolo & Carolina Gentry** We always advise our clients to make the biggest investments in the things that are the workhorses of a room—countertops, flooring and cabinetry. If you love to cook and bake, you may want to upgrade your range and save somewhere else in the budget.

**Megan Molten** Lighting and plumbing fixtures are the



jewelry of your home. Everyone likes diamonds, not cubic zirconias. It will always be worth the investment and helps with resale value.

**Christine Vroom** I highly suggest new countertops, backsplash,

new cabinets—or if they're in good condition, a fresh coat of paint—and some new lighting and hardware. You can design a beautiful space without going crazy budget-wise. It's the taste and details that matter versus the big splurges.

## STYLE MAVENS

Meet the members of our panel.



**Sara Malek Barney**  
Founder and principal designer at Austin, Texas-based BANDD Design



**Vanessa DeLeon**  
Principal interior designer and founder of Vanessa DeLeon Associates in New York City



**Beth Dotolo & Carolina Gentry**  
Founders of Seattle Pulp Design Studios, in Seattle & Dallas



**Megan Molten**  
Luxury interior designer and owner of Megan Molten in Charleston, South Carolina



**Christine Vroom**  
Los Angeles-based principal designer and founder of Christine Vroom Interiors

**Q** What are your thoughts on quartzite versus marble countertops?

**Barney** They both have advantages and disadvantages. If it's a kitchen or bath with lots of traffic, then quartzite will stand up better over time. But if you don't mind a few scratches, then marble is always a classic.

**Dotolo & Gentry** [We base that decision] on how our clients use their home and what's most important to them. If you have a family with young children or if you love to bake and cook, you may prefer natural quartzite

tend to be more crystallized or wavy versus veiny and exotic. It's a really strong contender to replace granite as far as durability, and since there's nothing like natural stone, it's a great option for depth and character. However, marble, in my humble opinion, remains the most prized natural stone on the earth. Its beauty is unparalleled...I believe its reputation as being fragile and prone to staining is overblown. Yes, it can spot and etch from liquids with high acidic content, but you can protect it with a long-lasting sealer.

**"DON'T UNDERESTIMATE THE POWER OF A FRESH COAT OF WHITE PAINT. IT'S TRULY TRANSFORMATIVE."**

MEGAN MOLTEN

because it's beautiful, and it holds up very well to wear and tear. But for other clients, having a gorgeous marble that ages and patinas over time is important. You can't beat the stunning veining and look of a luxe marble.

**Molten** I absolutely love quartzite. It would be my top choice for counters to add dimension, color and character to a kitchen. It also provides the durability of granite but gives you the look of marble. Marble countertops are a classic choice for bathrooms. I'm trying to educate clients to not shy away from natural countertops because of duality. It's a living stone and meant to show life.

**Vroom** Quartzite is a fabulous, durable natural stone deriving from the pressure in the earth from quartz sandstone. It is a harder stone, so it is durable and easy to maintain. The patterns

**Q** What about painting cabinets? Are you a fan?

**Barney** Yes! It's a great option for creating a truly custom room.

**Dotolo & Gentry** We love painted cabinets in bold colors in the kitchen! We prefer to bring in the professionals because it saves you time and money, particularly when mistakes are made. Painting cabinets so that they don't chip and wear can be labor-intensive, so you want to make sure that this multistep process is done right.

**Q** What kind of flooring are you loving right now?

**DeLeon** I love using tile, wood and vinyl flooring. It all depends on the project.

**Molten** I'm still pretty in love with a white oak wide plank but with a matte finish. I'm ready

BOTH PRACTICAL AND PRETTY, THE RIGHT PENDANT LIGHTS MAKE A HUGE IMPACT ABOVE AN ISLAND.



**BRASSTACKS**  
Even if you can't totally reconfigure a kitchen, modernize it with a dark paint color and brass hardware, lighting, plumbing and furnishings.

“IF A CLIENT HAD A LIMITED BUDGET, I’D HAVE THEM START BY REPLACING THE FLOORS AND ADDING SOME FRESH PAINT.”

CHRISTINE VROOM

WHEN WOOD DOESN’T FIT A LIFESTYLE OR BUDGET, CHECK OUT ALTERNATIVES LIKE PORCELAIN OR LAMINATES.

**STOKED ABOUT OAK**  
Rifted white oak isn’t only having a moment in flooring, it also remains a top choice for cabinetry throughout a home.



to do a herringbone pattern throughout an entire floor of a home—that’s such a statement yet still gives a nice nod to tradition. I’m also very into tile floors. The tile world has just exploded with possibilities that are available at a host of different price points. You can have the look of marble on your floors now with a porcelain material. And then there are the concrete tiles that everyone loves. While concrete is a bit harder to install and pricey, the ceramic patterned options are just as good-looking but on-budget. And they’ll make your installer much happier!

**Vroom** I am still loving a white oak floor. I’m not trying to veer away from those common blondes, but I’ll play with stains that are cooler and beige-y. I’m also really into an ultra-wide, slightly rustic plank in a modern home. The juxtaposition of styles feels really balanced and cozy.

**Q** What are your top three favorite paint colors right now?

**Barney** Benjamin Moore’s Chantilly Lace, October Mist and Light Pewter.

**DeLeon** I have a list of soft greens that I like right now: Behr’s Breezeway, Sherwin-Williams’ Evergreen Fog and Benjamin Moore’s October Mist. They give me a warm fuzzy feeling and work well in any room.

**Dotolo & Gentry** C2’s French Roast is a rich chocolate color that’s

fantastic. Sherwin-Williams’ Tricorn Black is the best black paint color we’ve ever used. And Benjamin Moore’s Gentleman’s Gray is a dimensional color with a gorgeous blue undertone.

**Molten** Sherwin-Williams’ Megan Molten White. I created the perfect white paint color. It has no cool or warm undertones, and it’s just the best neutral white that works with everything. It’s bright, crisp and clean—just how I like it!

Benjamin Moore’s Boothbay Gray is the most beautiful blue-gray. We use a lot of blue in our designs, and it instantly transforms dated cabinets and walls and makes them feel coastal, modern and fresh. It’s a color that works for people who

are a little scared of color because it’s very subtle and soft.

Sherwin-Williams’ Iron Ore is my go-to “black.” It’s not black—it’s more of a very, very dark gray. It works when you want the look of black and some contrast, and it looks very cool when applied with a flat finish.

**Vroom** I am loving Agreeable Gray by Sherwin-Williams for a pretty natural greige. Deep and dusty greens are taking the design industry by storm, and I’m loving Farrow & Ball’s Green Smoke. And I’m a bit obsessed with Mole’s Breath by Farrow & Ball (although maybe not with the name!). It’s a rich deep brown-toned gray. It would be stunning for a base and casing against a contrasted wall or a built-in.



**RUNAWAY PROJECT**  
Painting cabinets is time-consuming and requires attention to detail. If that’s not your strong suit, hire a professional.