



For Big Impact Inside, Think Small

Rooms looking drab? These four micro-improvements offer an oversize bang for the buck.

YOUR BIG REMODELING PLANS may be on hold for a while, but that doesn't mean you have to miss out on this buyer's market for home improvements. Just go small. Contractors have dropped their prices as much as 40% during the past year, and many top-notch workmen who once scoffed at anything less than six-figure projects are now happy to take on quick, simple jobs. Here are four interior design upgrades that will turn a plain-Jane room into a distinctive, upscale space for less than \$1,000, including installation.

BEADBOARD THE BATHROOM

Beadboard wainscot is in vogue right now, but it's actually a traditional look. The wood paneling, which alternates vertical strips with a half-rounded "bead," comes in large sheets that a carpenter can install in a few hours. "It instantly

makes any bathroom cottagey and cute," says Downers Grove, Ill., architect Cinda Lester. Ask for a chunky "cap molding" (a small shelf-like topper) instead of standard flat trim to ensure that the wainscot looks like an authentic feature rather than an afterthought. **Cost:** \$500 to \$800 for a three-foot-high painted wainscot in an average-size bathroom.

PEP UP THE LIGHT FIXTURES

Cheap "builder-grade" lights are to well-crafted ones what econobox cars are to luxury European models. But you can get handsome pendant lights and sconces at any specialty supplier or home center. Just don't install them yourself, because the fasteners in the ceiling may not match the screws on the fixture—and electricity is nothing to toy with if you don't know what you're doing. **Cost:** \$100 to \$300 per fixture (plus \$50 to \$75 for installation), and \$150 to \$300 if you're adding a new electrical circuit.

BEEF UP THE MOLDINGS

Undersize moldings cheapen the look of the home. Hiring a carpenter to replace narrow trim with bulkier woodwork gives the whole place a more upscale feel. No need to spring for ornate hardwood moldings; simple painted trim is a better fit for a typical house anyway, and as long as it's large (say, six inches wide or better) the impact is dramatic, notes Anaheim contractor Katherine Wu.

Cost: \$800 to \$1,000 for baseboards and window and door casings in an average room.

TILE AROUND THE FIREPLACE

Adding tile is a great way to bring color and personality to your home, as long as you don't put it where it will get torn out in an upcoming renovation. That brick or stone strip between the firebox and the wood mantel is a snap for a tile setter to refinish, and since it's a small area, you can splurge on pricey materials. To find the best deals, visit high-end retailers and ask to see old remnants in the stockroom. You may score posh tiles for a steal.

Cost: \$600 to \$1,000 to have a tile setter remove the existing masonry and install the new tile of your choice. ■