apartment therapy

4 House-Hunting Tips an Interior Designer Won't Tell You for Free

When you're looking for a house to buy, there's quite a lot to consider, from budget and square footage to location and accessibility. A real estate agent can help you narrow down your pool of potential houses and steer you in the direction of homes with your requested number of bedrooms and bathrooms, or homes in your desired school district. But another home professional—an interior designer—can offer a unique perspective on a house for sale that you or your real estate agent might miss.

Admittedly, it's not realistic to take an interior designer to every home you plan on viewing. So to stand in, a team of expert interior designers shared their insider tips when it comes to what they look for while house hunting. It's the kind of stuff a paid professional wouldn't divulge for free.

Floor plans

One of the first things an interior designer notices in a potential home is the layout. "When entering a property under consideration for purchase, my first mission is to scan the structure and analyze the layout of the existing floor plan," says Allen Saunders, founder and design director at Allen Saunders Design in Miami. He looks for several things, including whether the floor plan allows for traffic to flow easily through the areas or if it creates congestion when occupied. "I'm also trying to determine if the room sizes and adjacencies allow the spaces to function correctly or if the areas feel cramped when filled with furnishings and family."

Saunders tries to see if there's a natural hierarchy to the room locations, allowing for clearly defined public and private spaces. "Lastly, I'm checking to see if sightlines and sound transmission will become problematic," he adds.

Scale and proportion

Another factor to consider is whether the home is properly sized for the neighborhood. "You don't want to live in what appears to be an overbearing McMansion on a street showcasing rows of quaint bungalows," Saunders says. "Initially, I survey how the home integrates into its surroundings, identify potential scale issues and provide suggestions."

Obviously, you can't shrink an oversized house—but you can use a subtle paint palette to visually reduce the size. "Well-planned mature landscaping conceals out-of-scale architectural elements," Saunders says. On the inside of the home, ceiling heights should also be proportionally correct with the room dimension size. Saunders explains this will create spatial balance and establish a sense of comfort.

Storage

"Ample storage means, first of all, a large entry closet, then good kitchen and bedroom storage," explains Nina Edwards Anker, architect, designer, and founder at nea studio in New York.

Not just any type of closet will do, she says: "Often, solid wooden doors are replaced by hollow and flimsy doors that tend to fall apart and get damaged over time."

Quality cabinets are important for another reason. "Custom quality cabinets for the kitchen are also essential for a clean look that eliminates clutter," Anker says. If the home doesn't have enough storage, she recommends finding a solution before purchasing the home.

Natural light sources

Unless you descended from vampires, natural light is a desirable home feature. "It plays an extremely important role for a human habitat, as living zones illuminated with natural sources of light have a resounding effect on the overall quality of our lives," Saunders says. That's because the sun affects our moods, energy levels, and circadian rhythms.

"Inside a home, I immediately observe the way in which light affects the spaces, how the light moves throughout the day and how light affects the interior architectural finishes," he explains. "When house-hunting, I hunt for light, identifying existing sources and contemplating further options to increase the natural illumination of interior areas."

For example, Saunders says he considers such options as enlarging window openings and replacing exterior solid wood doors with glass paneled French-style doors. "Also, adding a purposefully placed skylight will do wonders for interior spaces sans windows," he says.