



# **HOME** IMPROVEMENT



# Smart Home Living

Today's smart homes feature a range of devices that communicate with one another, forming an integrated system to improve our daily lives.

These interconnected devices may include household appliances, climate control units, various security features, lighting systems, window coverings, radios and televisions, among other things. But how do they work?

## SMART THERMOSTATS

Smart thermostats have become a widely embraced upgrade and they make for a relatively easy transition into the world of home automation. These devices integrate with apps on your smartphone or digital in-home assistants, allowing you to adjust temperatures on command. Smart thermostats can be programmed to turn on and off at certain times and can even learn your habits so they optimize climate control settings based on your lifestyle.

## APPLIANCES

Upgrading to smart appliances is the next logical step. Higher-end versions of ranges and refrigerators come equipped with Wi-Fi connectivity, which allows for remote monitoring and control. Many of these smart appliances



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incorporate touch screens to change settings, cameras that enable their owners to check inside or access the ice level in a freezer. There are range hoods these days that function as a central communication hub within the home, incorporating integrated touchscreens for managing other smart devices or inputting things like favorite family recipes. Plus, there's no more worrying whether you left the

stove on when you can turn it off remotely from your phone.

## LIGHTING

Automated lighting can be very useful for those who frequently travel, creating a form of theft prevention since your home will appear to be occupied. These systems can turn on lights remotely before you arrive. Some systems let you control the brightness or color of your lights using voice

commands. Other lighting systems connect a range of products beyond the average bulbs.

## INTEGRATING EVERYTHING

For a smart home to operate efficiently, a central system is required to manage connected devices. This may be achieved by adding various digital personal assistants, such as Amazon's Alexa or Google

Home. Some home security or cable systems have their own individual integration capabilities. Once you've selected a platform, identify devices in your home that are compatible with the system. If you've chosen a digital assistant, appliances can be voice-activated. Once connected, you can give commands like temperature adjustments or turning lights on or off from anywhere in the room.



# Tackling a Home Addition

With higher interest rates and ballooning costs for construction materials, it may be smarter to add on to a house rather than build or buy a new one.

Do you have a large yard? Consider building a new stand-alone apartment. This space can serve as an office or rec room, accommodate guests and older children, or even create a new income stream by welcoming renters. Here's how to maximize the potential of your property:

## SECONDARY DWELLINGS

Secondary dwellings or accessory apartments are also referred to colloquially as an in-law suite. They work as a self-sufficient living area within an existing single-family residence. These spaces have a separate entrance, and typically feature a living space, kitchenette, bedroom and bathroom. They may be stand-alone structures, converted space over a garage or built out within a basement.

## RENTAL INCOME

Adding an accessory apartment can be a smart financial decision. By leasing the secondary dwelling, either for overnight stays or through longer-term leases, homeowners can generate extra income that may assist with mortgage payments. They can serve as a valuable financial resource for those who want to offset maintenance expenses or property taxes. Using platforms like Airbnb and VRBO, it's never

been easier to rent out these spaces.

## HOME OFFICES

In the post-pandemic workplace, we've seen a marked increase in remote and flexible work schedules. But trying to get things done in a hectic home environment can be a challenge. Accessory apartments provide a dedicated area for a new home office or studio that's both spacious and private. Having a separate workspace can boost productivity.

## MULTI-GENERATIONAL LIVING SPACES

If you share a living space with aging parents, older children or other relatives, an accessory apartment can allow extended family members to enjoy their own independent living quarters while remaining connected to the primary household. You'll be striking a balance between flexibility and privacy, and sharing a property will lower your overall living expenses.

## RULES AND REGULATIONS

Don't jump right into construction. Before you start, consult local zoning regulations and building codes. Cities, counties and some neighborhood associations



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have their own legal requirements, permitting processes and building guidelines for secondary dwellings. Make sure

you're in compliance with fire codes, safety standards and parking requirements, as well. The best way to make sure is to

hire professional architects and contractors. Talk to officials at your local planning departments to find out more.



# Save Money and the Earth

There are plenty of home improvement options that are both budget and earth friendly.

You can do both by purchasing next-generation options like LED lighting and specially formulated paints. But sometimes saving the planet involves simpler things, like cultivating green space and recycling. It can all work hand-in-hand to lower your bills while protecting the environment for future generations.

## EFFICIENT LIGHTING

Switching to LED lights can significantly reduce energy consumption, since they use up to 90 percent less power than traditional incandescent bulbs. Simply replace the old standard bulbs with LEDs as they burn out, and you'll be making an easy yet impactful upgrade. Studies show that lighting your home with LED bulbs can lead to annual savings of about \$225 on your energy bill.

## SPECIALIZED PAINTS

Whether you're painting an accent wall or redoing much larger spaces, choose paints with low amounts of volatile organic compounds. These are chemicals present in many paints and other products that are released into the air as unwanted gases. Exposure to higher VOC paints can lead to



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immediate and long-term health concerns.

## SOLAR OPTIONS

Over the past decade or so, the price of solar panels has declined by more than 70 percent. Installed panels can power your entire home or just specific areas that demand higher energy consumption, such as the HVAC system and water heaters.

Solar attic fans effectively expel heat trapped above the ceiling, lowering your bills while extending the life of roofing and insulation.

## REUSE AND RECYCLE

Consider repurposing or using reclaimed materials in your home improvement projects. Whatever the material, it just has to be structurally sound and readily available in

the necessary quantities. Not sure where to get started? Check out online platforms such as Facebook Marketplace, Craigslist or Freecycle. Your community might have thrift options or recycle stores.

## GREEN SPACE

Enhance the beauty of your home and reduce grocery expenses by establishing a home garden. They help

prevent erosion and contribute to soil fertility. When choosing outdoor plants, look for options that are friendly to pollinators and will thrive with the local ecosystem. Apartment or condo dwellers can create container gardens for salad items or herbs. Select indoor plants that act as natural air purifiers, and they'll improve the quality of air in your home.

# Upgrading Your Old Kitchen

Renovating your kitchen within a budget isn't easy. It takes effective planning and a focus on enhancements that offer the biggest bang for the buck.

Here's how to transform your kitchen into a functional and stylish space without breaking the bank:

## PAINT

One of the most cost-effective ways to rejuvenate a kitchen is to simply apply a fresh coat of paint. If you're only painting the walls, select a color that complements your kitchen's appliances, flooring and cabinetry. If you want a bigger wow factor, paint the walls, cabinets and ceiling to transform everything. You'll be bringing the space back to life, while making everything appear brighter, welcoming and more spacious.

## CABINETS

A bit larger project might involve refreshing the kitchen by updating your cabinets. Invest in new cabinetry, or consider refinishing or repainting the existing units for a more budget-friendly transformation. Again, select complementary colors or finishes based on the kitchen's overall style. Replacing cabinet hardware with modern



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knobs or handles can work as a low-cost but impactful upgrade.

## BACKSPLASH

Consider upgrading the backsplash. It's a small but meaningful change. Be on the lookout for affordable and visually appealing materials such as peel-and-stick options. Subway tile is a timeless option. You'll find materials in a variety of colors and patterns, making it easy

to customize the space to your taste. Soon, you'll have a new focal point that will add to the kitchen's overall ambiance.

## FAUCETS

Replacing an outdated faucet can introduce a modern touch and improve functionality. There are plenty of budget-friendly options, many of which also have handy pullout sprayers. Or upgrade to touchless for added convenience.

## LIGHTING

Upgrading the lighting fixtures in your kitchen can transform its atmosphere. Swap out old bulbs for energy-efficient LED, pendant lights, or track lighting.

Focus on task lighting in work areas, while adding ambient lighting elsewhere to foster a warm and inviting environment.

You'll end up with a kitchen with better overall feel and functionality.

## OTHER IDEAS

Elevate the aesthetic appeal of your kitchen by integrating a few stylish accents. Replace outdated curtains or blinds with new options that introduce a splash of color or texture. Consider investing in attractive yet budget-friendly kitchen accessories, such as decorative jars, colorful dishware or a statement rug. These small changes can infuse everything with character and excitement.



# Aging in Place

As you get older, you don't have to leave your home for a shared living environment.

Instead, make a few targeted home improvements and you'll greatly extend the time you can continue to live independently. This has become known as "aging in place." Projects in the bathroom or exterior of your home may be smaller in scale, while changes to the floor plan will likely involve a larger budget.

## FLOOR PLANS

Essential living spaces should be situated on the main floor, including a full bathroom. Arrange furniture to minimize the number of required steps, making sure that all rooms have generous clear spaces for maneuvering. Hallways should be well lit and at least 36 inches wide. Entrances should also be spacious; experts recommend a width of 32 inches. Interior doors should likewise be 32 inches wide, with lever-style door hardware that is easy to open.

## BATHROOM IMPROVEMENTS

Equip bathrooms with adjustable or variable height counters, wall supports and removable base cabinets. You should have at least one wheelchair-accessible bathroom on the main level, with



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added space around the toilet, shower and tub to provide for a grab bar. Incorporate shower seats into all new designs. Install toilets that are higher than standard measurements to help with the transition from sitting to standing.

## OUTSIDE THE HOME

Consider replacing high-maintenance lawns

gardens with options that require less upkeep. Choose native plants and shrubs, as they tend to be more manageable. Build or renovate decks and any balconies with durable materials, rather than cheap wood, so they'll last longer. Make sure there is easy access to outside areas, installing a ramp and non-slip flooring if necessary.

## OTHER PROJECTS

Install thermostats, light switches and other controls where they are easily accessible, positioned no higher than 48 inches from the floor. Position electrical outlets where they are easy to reach, with a recommended height of 15 inches from the floor and at intervals closer than 12 feet apart if possible. It's smart to

install both audio and visual strobe light systems to indicate when someone is at the door or when smoke or carbon monoxide alarms have been activated. Connect the switch directly to emergency services, including police, EMS and fire. Take advantage of modern security systems that can monitor lighting and climate control.

# Weatherizing Your Home

As the seasons change, prepare your home to survive the elements.

Four tasks that can help you prepare for the colder months include building new storage options, adding or inspecting weatherproofing and insulation, upgrading or repairing your fireplace and maintaining your gutters.

## NEW STORAGE

Summer's tools and equipment will need protection during the harsh winter months. If your garage is already packed to the rafters, consider new storage options. Consider building a small shed or barn to house outdoor power tools, such as mowers and string trimmers, grills and outdoor furniture. Some smaller items like string trimmers, brooms, rakes and propane tanks can be stored in new stand-alone cabinets. Just remember to close the tank valve and disconnect it from the grill. Clean your outdoor power tools before storing them in their new spaces, performing any necessary annual maintenance. Some plants may need to be brought indoors.

## WEATHERPROOFING

Look for drafts around windows or doors, since you don't want cold air to infiltrate your home and send utility costs sky high. In some cases, new weatherstripping is all that's

required. Applying fresh caulk around windows can really improve energy efficiency. But if your windows and doors have begun to stick, come off track or reveal huge cracks, now is the time to replace them. Inspect attic insulation and consider upgrading to newer options that keep the outside air from

seeping into your home.

## KEEPING WARM

Schedule a fireplace inspection now to prepare for your first fire of the season. Accumulations of soot, creosote, animal nests and simple debris can pose serious hazards. Do your research before hiring a qualified chimney

sweep. Depending on the age of your home, they may recommend a larger overhaul. You might consider installing an improved heating system that doesn't involve cutting, stacking and burning wood.

## DON'T FORGET GUTTERS

Once the leaves stop falling,

you'll need to clean your gutters to prevent blockages and ensure proper drainage of rainwater and melted snow. Consider installing gutter guards to reduce the accumulation of debris.

Be on the lookout for repairs that need to be made to key components like your downspouts.



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# Create a Bathroom Oasis

Bathrooms can very easily be transformed into a spa-inspired sanctuary.

After a long day at work, imagine the sense of tranquility you'd find after making strategic bathroom upgrades. With the right materials and accessories, you can make it happen. Some may opt for small renovations while others go for a complete remodel. Either way, a lifetime of relaxation awaits.

## NEW COLORS

Select a calming color palette that gives you a sense of serenity and relaxation. That usually means soft, muted shades, with many choosing some form of blue, green or earthy colors. Mix and match them on tiles, walls and accessories to establish a unified feel reminiscent of a spa. Integrate natural elements that stand out against hard surfaces like wooden or bamboo accessories to complete the look.

## LIGHTING

Establishing a soothing ambiance begins with lighting. Choose soft, warm light that replicates the gentle illumination of candlelight. Implementing dimmer switches allows you to manage brightness levels, creating a tranquil environment. Consider integrating recessed lighting around the ceiling's perimeter for an ethereal effect. High-lighting essential areas, such as the vanity or bathtub, with subtle lighting fixtures can enhance the overall spa-like atmosphere. Scented candles can serve a dual purpose, providing both soft light and aromatherapy.

## BATHTUBS

Elevate the space with a free-standing bathtub that encourages



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relaxation. Deep soaking tubs allow for complete immersion, and that's a perfect setting for unwinding.

Consider models with built-in jets to create a massage-like experience. Scented candles, plush towels and luxurious bath salts can add to the serene atmosphere. Consider adding a rain showerhead instead of the same old standard fare.

## BATHROOM STORAGE

It's not the sexiest part of this remake, but storing away brushes, toiletries, hair dryers and charging devices will greatly improve the room's general ambiance.

Consider installing electrical outlets inside of cabinets for a more clutter-free experience.

## FINISHING TOUCHES

Heated flooring and towel warmers can guard against the chilly days to come. Consider soothing elements like aromatherapy with scented candles or essential oil diffusers for an elevated sensory experience. Plush bathrobes and towels add another layer of luxury. Plants or small water features add a nice finishing touch.