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Jeffrey Fisher: Stylin' in the sticks



This room, by interior designer Philip Mitchell, is light and cheerful and oh-so-country chic. Don't forget to prime the cedar knots on the walls before painting or they'll bleed through. Tim McGhie Photography: Philip Mitchell Design

Jeffrey Fisher, Ask Jeffrey, National Post · Mar. 25, 2011 | Last Updated: Mar. 26, 2011 4:02 PM ET

Q: My husband finally convinced me to move to the country from the city. Never ones to do things halfway, we bought a converted barn on 10 acres of land and now have a cow, two goats and chickens. You get the picture. The previous owners covered practically all of the interior walls with cedar panelling and I find it dark and depressing. When we initially viewed the house, there were wooden ducks, roosters and plaid-and-checked fabrics everywhere.

My husband likes the idea of decorating casual and rustic, but I am not ready to leave my city style behind. How can I make my refined furnishings look like they belong here in the country? My husband reads the Post every weekend so if you can find a photo to demonstrate my case, I would greatly appreciate it.

— Lynn

A: I think I found the perfect room with which to argue your case or at least start a healthy dialogue. And please note: Not a wooden duck or rooster in sight.

This living room was designed by Toronto-based interior designer Philip Mitchell. Not only do I absolutely love this room, I think from what you tell me of your predicament, it addresses many of your concerns. As you and your husband look at this photo, Lynn, keep in mind that this room and its decor style could just as easily apply to your bedroom as it does the living room. Substitute a king-size bed for the two sofas and you have a dream master suite.

When I spoke with Philip about this interior, he told me his clients had the same dark-stained cedar walls that you seem to have. Though I have no “before” photo to show (you’re essentially living with the before) you both can well imagine what a few coats of paint could do to lighten your “dark and depressing” living room. Remember to shellac the cedar knots and then prime the entire wall with an oil-based primer before painting so that the knots don’t bleed through your new paint job.

Since the goal is to lighten up your space, you may wish to choose softer shades of upholstery fabrics like Philip did. The straw-coloured sofas and blue/green armchairs and ottomans provide ample seating without visually taking up a lot of space. Had he

chosen patterned or dark fabrics the room would take on a completely different mood. I appreciate the calming affect this room has and I like the subtle introduction of pattern on the decorative pillows. It's a room I can picture spending time in, either entertaining friends or reading a book.

Stripes make a lovely addition to almost any room and they don't disappoint with the draperies pictured here. The cotton fabric makes the room seem less formal than silk would, while still providing an elegant, tailored appearance. Philip mentioned the owners did not want to block their view so instead of installing full draperies on the wall with the large window and door, he hung three decorative drapery panels (two shown here) to soften the long stretch of glass and wall. For continuity, he hung panels with the same fullness on the single window. Without these striped draperies hung from very simple poles, the room wouldn't seem as warm or finished and I encourage you, Lynn, to make sure proper window coverings are on your must-have list.

Instead of adding built-ins, Philip placed two beautiful reproduction cabinets on the end wall to add symmetry and storage to the room. They house audio/video equipment, games and blankets and though they would look out of place in a formal city house they add form and function to this country retreat.

You didn't mention whether or not you have hardwood floors, but I'm going to assume you do. This room has white oak floors that help create a casual feel; a carpet with a three-inch tape defines and anchors the main sitting area. If you decide to paint the wood on your walls (and why wouldn't you after seeing this room?) it would be ideal to leave some exposed on the floors. And by using broadloom for an area rug you can custom size it for problem measurements.

The overall feel of this room is relaxed, elegant and comfortable without being too rustic and country-clichéd. I believe if you get your husband to adopt this look and decor in your living room (and bedroom) then it won't appear as if you've left your city style behind. You can add refined touches with side tables, lamps, artwork and accessories without making your rooms seem fussy and out of sync with your new bucolic surroundings. Just remember: No barnyard critters on the furniture!

- Send your design question to askjeffreyfisher@gmail.com

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