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Amy Mauser's Chevy Chase family room as re-done by Debbie Wiener. The rug is stain-resistant nylon, and the armchair is from Wiener's new Slob Proof! With Crypton collection, with antimicrobial, stain-repellent fabric and a wood finish that can be touched up with a pen.

ENDURING DESIGN

How to make the messy reality of family living look stylish

BY ALEXA YABLONSKI | PHOTOGRAPHS BY ERIK JOHNSON

SOME DESIGNERS WAX POETIC ON THE DRAPE OF SILK DUPIONI or the feel of Tibetan carpet underfoot. Not Debbie Wiener. “Vomit happens,” she says matter-of-factly, before going on to enthuse about the ease of cleaning a solution-dyed acrylic rug she installed in a client's home. “The day after we put it in, their daughter was home from school with a stomach bug. They called to say [the mess] wiped right up. That makes me feel so good.”

With the objective of family-friendly, durable decor, Wiener started Silver Spring-based Designing Solutions in 2000 and in 2008 published “Slob Proof: Real-Life Design Solutions.” She had done the whole “Debbie J. Wiener, interior designer” thing in the early '90s. “I was a lot more formal, more into chintz,” Wiener remembers. “Then I had my two kids, ruined the house and had to go back to work. I went back with a whole different mind-set.”

Despite the economic downturn, Wiener is taking on new projects — albeit smaller ones, typically for people who are staying in their homes and reinvesting in them. “If I can't stay busy in a down market with a message that's anti-luxury and practical, when would I do well?” she asks.



The brightly painted wooden table and chairs are used for game playing; on top, a three-dimensional tic-tac-toe set doubles as decoration.



Top left: The Mauser's main kitchen features hardy Congoleum DuraCeramic flooring, CaesarStone quartz-composite countertops and Groundworks outdoor fabric. In the background, a glass pocket door, one of Wiener's hallmarks. **Top right:** The hanging lamps were handmade by local artisan Rick Sherbert. **Bottom:** Another view of the family room reveals the couch, also from the Slob Proof! collection.



BULLETPROOF YOUR DECOR

1 COLOR ME BOLD. "Color is camouflage," says interior designer Debbie Wiener. "Beige just doesn't hold up in real life." Her go-to-hues are dark green, purple, blue and dark red. Before making a selection, survey the color of the stains on your existing furnishings, then match your new carpet, drapes and sofa accordingly.

2 FIND FUSS-FREE FABRICS. Forgo the silk and linen, and choose a textile that can handle high traffic. Wiener is a fan of Crypton, Ultrasuede and heavy-weight chenille (Lee Jofa Fabrics is a good source, she says). When it comes to upholstery, opt for patterns instead of solids to better conceal stains, and choose sofa and chair designs without skirts (which get frayed and dirty.)

3 LET THERE BE LIGHT. Wiener endorses ceiling and wall lighting over table lamps, which, she says, die a quick death when pets and kids get rambunctious. Plus, ceiling and wall fixtures allow you to highlight the things you love and remove the focus from the things you don't.

4 WATCH YOUR STEP. Solution-dyed acrylic and nylon rugs are Wiener's budget-conscious choices, but she says wool is the way to go if at all possible. "First, it's green. And it has a ton of lanolin, which is like Vaseline," she notes. "It is naturally stain-resistant," as long as you don't use harsh cleaners. If pets are in the picture, Wiener recommends an antimicrobial padding to cut down on odors.

5 SCRIMP HERE, SPLURGE THERE. "Spend money where you sit and stand," Wiener advises. She says coffee tables, side tables and chests are ideal items to save money on. To extend the life of a wood table, she recommends getting a glass top cut. That way, residue from half-eaten lollipops and the like can be wiped clean. — Alexa Yablonski.



Amy Mauser and her mother, Beth, had burned through an architect when they met with Wiener in 2007 to discuss renovating their Chevy Chase home to better merge their lifestyles. The architect “wasn’t really thinking about the house and the family as a whole,” explains Mauser, an attorney who has an 8-year-old daughter. “We needed someone who knew how a family lived.”

Wiener prides herself on just that, acknowledging that she cares more about people than the houses they live in. And it shows. Amy’s daughter, Dana, greets the designer by jumping up and wrapping her legs around her like a koala bear. The goal is to create interiors that are not necessarily jaw-dropping, but are attractive and, better yet, enduring.

For the Mausers, Wiener created a suite in the walk-out basement, complete with kitchenette and a bathroom. Upstairs, the main kitchen was made over to accommodate mother-daughter baking sessions, weeknight family dinners and homework hour. Materials such as Congoleum’s DuraCeramic flooring, a limestone composite, and CaesarStone quartz-composite countertops were easy on the budget, yet they are hardy enough to withstand years of abuse.

A glass door links the kitchen to the family room, which is turned out in a similar ready-to-rumble fashion. “We wanted a kid-friendly room with space to play and furniture and carpeting that’s basically indestructible,” Amy Mauser says. As with

The Bethesda basement of Karen Dubin and Robert Litowitz has a stain-hiding dark shag rug, a lime-green sectional sleep sofa from Lee Industries upholstered in Crypton fabric and chairs covered in Groundworks fabric. The pop-art portraits of the family are from mydavinci.com

many of her projects, Wiener opted for a stain-resistant nylon rug and — her object of obsession -- Crypton, an antimicrobial, stain-repellent fabric originally engineered for the health-care industry. “With over 20,000 [choices], ranging from velvet and chenille to damasks and Ultrasuedes, why would I source anything else when budget is a factor?” she asks.

Wiener is such a fan that she teamed up with the makers of the go-anywhere, withstand-everything fabric to create Slob Proof! With Crypton, a seating collection that is launching this fall.

The designer selected Crypton fabrics to cover the new sofa in Karen Dubin and Robert Litowitz's basement in Bethesda. Thanks to a tight weave and integrated moisture barrier, the textile is spill-proof and virtually impervious to wear and tear —

qualities that would have come in handy over the five years that the family's three teenagers and 2-year-old schnoodle, Maggie, used the space as their personal playground. When the couple decided to spruce up the basement in 2008, Dubin says, “We wanted something for their active, messy lifestyle, and something that was stylish and pulled together.”

The result is what must be the coolest rec room on the block, complete with shag rug (dark enough to camouflage stains), a lime-green sectional sleep sofa, a pool table and a Pioneer Elite 60-inch plasma television, in front of which you can often find 17-year-old Reid playing “Madden NFL” or “Call of Duty” with his friends.

Despite its teen appeal, the room is sophisticated enough that the adults can host Super Bowl parties there. A custom

Leeny and Keith Oberg, also of Bethesda, hired Wiener to design their living room, which features a comfortable, Ultrasuede sectional sofa from Crate & Barrel, a brightly patterned rug from Kane Carpet, and striped chair and cubes from Slob Proof! With Crypton.





zebrawood wall unit adds a bit of organic panache to the windowless basement and showcases a collection of ethnic treasures — including an eye-catching Vietnamese water buffalo puppet. Both Dubin, an international trade specialist, and Litowitz, an intellectual property attorney, do a lot of traveling and collecting.

To cut costs, the pair did some of their own shopping, scoring the pool table at a Champion Billiards closeout sale and ordering the coffee table through Design Within Reach. “Working with Debbie is great; we could take control when we wanted to,” Dubin says.

Wiener is among the designers who don't believe the most expensive item is necessarily best. Bethesda clients Leeny and Keith Oberg told her that if she had to choose between something perfect or something less than perfect for less money, she should go with the latter. Wiener didn't blanch. “I saw that as a challenge,” she says. The designer created a serene living room with a comfy Ultrasuede sectional, brightly patterned rug and eye-catching striped chair. Despite adhering to a tight decorating budget, the room looks just-so, not so-so.

Wiener's dedication to ferreting out value-added pieces doesn't, however, automatically translate to a cheap price tag for her services. She has worked on projects ranging from \$15,000 to \$650,000. Says Wiener: “Don't hire me because you think you're going to save money. What I'll save you is aggravation.” For families short on time, energy and patience, that may just be worth every penny.



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