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Real estate Q&A: Maxwell Ryan, Apartment Therapy founder

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The Apartment Therapy website aims to be the one-stop resource to help people make their homes — apartments, houses or otherwise — more attractive and more organized. That mission continues in their latest book, "Apartment Therapy: Complete + Happy Home," written by Apartment Therapy founder Maxwell Ryan and Executive Editor Janel Laban.

The book, illustrated with photographs from 28 homes — including one in Maplewood and one in Millburn — offers room-by-room design tips, tricks and ideas to beautify and declutter the home, and describes eight types of styles (from "eclectic collector" to "contemporary cottage") to help people determine what look appeals to them. There's also a monthly calendar to follow for home upkeep and design updates, a "cheat sheet" for getting rid of all kinds of stains and easy-to-follow breakdowns on everything from types of flooring to making a small room look bigger.

Apartment Therapy began in 2004 as an email list and then a blog for Ryan's interior design subscribers. As readership grew, so did the company and its associated sites (also including the recipe and food-advice site The Kitchn). The first book, "Apartment Therapy: The Eight-Step Home Cure," was published in 2006. Ryan recently spoke to The Record by phone about "Complete + Happy Home."

Q. How did you select the homes used in the book?

We solicit readers and have them submit to us. ... Apartment Therapy has grown a lot over the last 11 years, and so when I started, I was in New York apartments, and now we're all over the country, and we're actually pulling in homes from all over the world. ... So we looked for homes from the North, the South, the East and the West, big, small, traditional, modern, mountain to beach, and vintage to sort of newer structures, and we found them amongst our readers. And then ... I went to friends, and then I went to Airbnb. Airbnb is a wonderful way to look for homes when you're shooting a book, because everyone's taking such beautiful pictures these days.

Q. What's the one element of room design that most homeowners overlook?

I think the one that's most noticeable to me, and also the easiest to fix, is the lack of lighting. Because nothing really looks good if it's not lit, and your sense of a room is incomplete. When you walk into a room, you don't walk around and touch the walls and sit on the floor and then say, 'I like this room.' You walk into the room, your eye moves around the room swiftly, and that's your feeling of the room. But your eye will only go where there's light.

Q. When you say poorly lit, do you mean not enough light, or it's not the right type of light?

Literally, not enough light. Some people have a relatively nice room and they'll just have a ceiling fixture. They're good if you need to go into a room and find your keys, but not for living with it. You want light to be down where you're living in the room, down below eye level. You want it to be indirect, so you want it to be bouncing off the wall if it's going to be coming from the ceiling. ... The basic rule is, have three points of light in every room, and they should be, generally, at floor or table lamp level. So if you have a bedroom, either side of the bed, and then opposite, on your dresser. Living room, either side of your sofa, and then opposite, on your console or TV. And if you use track lighting, which can be great and useful in smaller spaces, you direct the fixture at the wall so the light bounces and comes into the room. You never see a bare bulb.



PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE

Maxwell Ryan of the Apartment Therapy blog says people want to make their homes cozier, whether it's using dark colors, or setting up bar areas. His new book is "Apartment Therapy: Complete + Happy Home," and it features houses as well as apartments.

Q. What was the most surprising thing you ever saw in a home?

One thing I noticed which does surprise me is that everybody now has a bar. When I started in 2001, people didn't have bars. Now it's a fixture, it's a decorative element, people have a space dedicated for bottles of liquor and for wine. Because people are mixing drinks, people are drinking cocktails again, and there's a whole sort of cool, hip, young trend around that. And so as a result, every home that we photographed had a bar, and they were beautiful.

Q. Is there a room that the bar is replacing?

No, the bar is usually fit into a room, so it's often in the living room or the dining room. But it becomes this little design moment. ... Not a bar like sitting at a bar. Like a table with a beautiful little assembly of bottles and wine openers and glasses.

I don't know if it was totally surprising, but it was definitely something that was confirmed by shooting all these houses, that darker, saturated colors are definitely super popular right now. When I started everything was light and bright in terms of color. Now, with the book, you'll see really dark rooms, dark wallpapers. Deep blue, a lot of blue. It's beautiful, lovely, but it's a shift.

Q. Why do you think the shift happened?

People get tired. They move from one pole to another. But I think what happened to this country was that the dark colors are comforting. To my mind, they're the equivalent of comfort food. They're a little bit meatloaf. They're dark and juicy and generally warming, and a little indulgent. And I think in this country after 9/11, and after the recession, people wanted to make their homes cozier. They wanted more comfort. That was a word that just came up again and again and again. And one way of doing it in a sort of fresh way was to start to experiment with darker and darker color.

Q. Is it possible to achieve these looks on a budget?

Totally. If you want to buy paint, you could buy paint at any price point, and you can do it yourself, so that's usually a very easy thing to afford. And most people have too much stuff ... so I rarely tell people they need to buy something. That said, on this [book] tour for the last few weeks, we've been working with people who do need furniture, they're sort of new in their homes, and the [opportunities] from Craigslist to classifieds — we have a classifieds now, too — used furniture has just exploded. It's much easier than ever before to find nice things on a budget.

Q. The rooms in the book are beautiful, but it seems like if they got cluttered with any extra things, that the effect would be destroyed. How do people keep these rooms decluttered?

The book's meant to inspire you, and ideally, once you get into our mode of thinking about your home ... you are sort of constantly tweaking and arranging and thinking about your home. The more you use your home, the easier to stay on top of decluttering it. That's the first thing. Second thing, everyone's home fills up within seven years. ... We're very good at bringing stuff in, and we're not very good about putting stuff out. To get in the habit of taking stuff out as you are aware that it's coming in is a very important habit.

The other thing that's really helpful is to build what I call a landing strip by the front door. A place where you land when you come home in the evening or the afternoon, and that always has a wastebasket and a table. ... It allows you to sort through your mail and your packages and magazines, right at your front door, and throw stuff away right away. Sort of your first line of defense.

Q. You said the book was for people who are just starting out, or are still learning the principles of design. Does that mean new homeowners, or people who have never thought about these things before?

I think our readers are say, 25 to 35, 40. We don't think about homes when we're 20. ... But when you start thinking about it, it doesn't matter if you rent or you own, you start to build a nest and you start to want to care for it and realize it's a foundation that's supporting you in doing whatever you're going to be doing in your life, socially or professionally. ... There's a big segment of readers who are older empty nesters. The kids are gone, and they're downsizing and moving to a new home, and that's another fresh start.

Q. You also in the book recommend moving artwork around frequently. Why do you recommend that, and how would people get a sense of where and when to move it?

Generally, once a year you want to make some moves in your home to refresh it or change it or keep the energy flowing. As you grow, you want your house to grow. Artwork is the easiest thing to move. Any time you keep something in one space for a long time, eventually you don't see it. It doesn't catch your eye anymore. ... Moving things around is the easiest way to redo your home, give it a fresh feeling. You don't have to buy anything.