

House Beautiful

What Is Retro Design? Experts Reveal Why It's Having SUCH a Moment Right Now

Here's how to nail nostalgic style without your home looking dated.



What is retro design, exactly? It's easy to assume that it's used as an umbrella term, referring to older styles and aesthetics in general. However, that's not the case at all. Retro design is a specific style that draws inspiration from a certain period in time, but it's still a common—and growing—aesthetic commonly seen today. Retro style is similar to **midcentury modern** in the way that it's a label for **a certain design style**, but it's not about recreating a specific timeframe (and that's not the only similarity the two styles share, as you'll learn below).

How Is Retro Design Different Than Midcentury Modern?

Retro design is different than **midcentury modern design**. They can overlap in some aspects, like their shared focus on natural wood and rich textiles, but think of it in the same way that rustic and Japandi design styles overlap: using natural materials is a key design pillar for both, but that's about all they have in common.

As designer Sarah Randolph of **Randolph Interior Design** puts it, "Midcentury modern design took itself more seriously than retro design." Many designers, architects, and artists were involved in the midcentury modern movement, known for its sleek lines, functionality, and futuristic flair. Retro design, by contrast, has always been less structured—it's playful, vibrant, and full of curves. "Think of retro as midcentury's more glamorous, more bohemian sister," Curtis adds.

What Are the Defining Features of Retro Design?

Like with any other aesthetic, certain key pillars characterize this style. Here's why designers think retro design is so unique and beautiful.

Saturated Color Palettes

Rich, saturated hues are always found in true retro design. Randolph also makes sure to point out there's a lot of stained wood in this aesthetic. The colors you'll most often see are deep reds, rusts, olives and avocados, and golden tones like amber and caramel.



Conversation Pits

Sunken living rooms that invite guests to kick back and stay awhile are emblematic of a more relaxed time. "Furniture was not overstuffed and still carried some design elements from the midcentury era before it," says Randolph. She also recalls a recent 1970s-era project that allowed her to fully embrace this sensibility: "We leaned into bright colors, stained millwork, shag carpet, fun lighting, and a huge conversation-pit sectional in the living room."



How to Incorporate Retro Design Into Your Home

Now that you know the design pillars of retro style, it's time to incorporate them into your own space. You don't have to dive headfirst into the style—start small with boldly colored throw pillows, vibrant artwork, or even a bright and patterned accent chair.

"Additionally, the incorporation of warm stained wood, whether through paneling on a wall or ceiling, or with clean-lined, stained case goods, can help create a retro feel," Randolph says. Once you're ready, paint your walls a rich tone to capture the vibe even better.