

Talk about really working a room

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An interior refiner works with heat's there, and tucked away, to create a whole new look.

You love your stuff. You hate your living space. Well, maybe you don't hate it exactly; it's just not the room of your dreams. Too prim, too plain, too perfectly peach. For some reason, it just doesn't look right. New stuff won't exactly cure your decorating dilemmas, so why not save money and work with what you have?

Enter Roma Starkey. She's a cucumber-cool Texas panhandle kind of girl who's kept her twang and steely sweet toughness long enough to seriously rearrange some really bad rooms.

Big rooms, small rooms, rooms that nobody ever noticed before. Rooms her clients hated but didn't want anyone to touch. Rooms that were so, uh, how can a nice girl from the South put this delicately, "unattractive" that they hindered the sale of a house. Rooms where furniture arrangements were so far from cozy, the sofas and chair were actually within screaming distance.

"It's all about placement and scale," explains Starkey, a professional interior "arranger" who comes into a client's home and moves around sofas, chairs, ottomans, beds, tables, dressers, pianos, buffets, mirrors, art and anything that might be lurking in the attics and garages.

You've seen it done a dozen times on *Oprah*. Design-challenged viewers allow professional room arrangers to spend

a few hours reconfiguring their family rooms, and voila, a fresh new look emerges with all the stuff they shoved into the guest-room closet the last time company came over.

"I have found gorgeous things in cabinets, drawers, and closets," Starkey said. The hunt takes her into attics and garages. When she's done usually there to four hours later for one room the result is usually drop dead decorating magazine gorgeous. There's just one rule: "The homeowner has to leave," Starkey says. On this subject she mince no words. Julie Johnson left immediately. The Bayshore Beautiful client didn't have the money to spend on new furniture or a professional decorator for her two-story, traditional Tampa home. But she wanted a décor that incorporated a subtle blend of family heirlooms, antiques, tropical knick-knacks, and elegant but electric furnishings she had carried with her into adulthood.

The small loving room to the right of the front door had essentially been a repository for toys and wayward household stuff for years. Johnson, who is raising and 13-year-old daughter and 11-year-old son, knew she needed help. "I had some nice things; I just didn't know what to do with them," she said. But Johnson also knew she couldn't bear the sight of someone rooting around in her garage for stuff she had put there for a reason.

So it was a good thing she wasn't there when Starkey discovered the antique, tiger-wood fireplace mantel that Johnson has saved from her old house, a 1920's bungalow that had been torn down. Starkey made the mantel the focal point on the living room. She lugged a bedroom side table and dainty Victorian chair downstairs to the living room. In the dining room, Starkey hung an eye-catching, 3 by 4 foot portrait of Johnson's grandmother wearing a blue evening gown and pensive expression over the Shaker-style buffet. It was one of those quirky family heirlooms that a home owner love but "doesn't quite know what to do with," Starkey says. Now it's a focal point. As is the antique dining room furniture that Johnson once arranged in perfect symmetry. It's now angled. And noticeable. "I don't do straight lines," Starkey jokes. "Of course, it does depend on room size and ceiling height, but a really large room can accommodate a cozier setting around a focal point."

For Johnson, it worked out well. Starkey arranged three rooms, two of which are immediately visible from the front foyer. Friends who had grown accustomed to the decorating mishmash now come over and rave. "I have my talents," Johnson says. "Decorating isn't one of them. Roma and I were the perfect match.



Roma Starkey prepares to hang a picture in the home of her Bayshore Beautiful client, Julie Johnson, who lingers for a moment in the mirror. Starkey insists that homeowners leave while she performs her magic, which usually takes three to four hours per room.