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Moving beyond cinder block chic

Move over, milk crates. Dorm rooms are fast becoming a teenager's first crack at carving out an identity.

By ELIZABETH BETTENDORF

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TAMPA - When Amanda Keen starts her freshman year at Florida State University in a few weeks, the 18-year-old Armwood High School honors student will deck out her dorm room with the savvy eye of a seasoned interior decorator.

In fact, Keen, who plans on majoring in interior design, has already drawn up a plan for her unseen dorm room, hopefully a suite where she'll configure the beds into an L-shaped, pillow-tossed daybed that will lend the space a multipurpose feel.

"The thing I'm most concerned about is comfort: the floors are tile, for example, so I don't want to get out of bed in the morning and have my feet freeze," said Keen, who's planning to buy an area rug that will work with her color scheme: most likely this season's coolest colors, vibrant orange and green.

Keen, who will shop this weekend for school supplies with her mother, Becky Keen, isn't alone in her cultivated sense of comfort and aesthetics.

This month, as millions of American teens flock to universities and colleges, many are setting up home away from home for the first time.

Unlike previous generations of students who made do with milk crates, unframed museum posters and cinder block bookshelves, today's furniture and accessories for the college-bound rival grownup home decor in both stylishness and value.

Stores like Ikea, Target and Bed Bath & Beyond offer a plethora of goods aimed at the decorating-minded college student. Who hasn't noticed the



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displays of hip moon chairs, multicolored five-light floor lamps, collapsible storage containers, cute canvas shower totes and the latest MP3 accessories?

In fact, Bed Bath & Beyond devotes a portion of its Web site, www.bedbathandbeyond.com, to college shoppers.

Roommates can e-mail each other pictures of comforters and other items from the site for a totally coordinated look.

It's a sophisticated generation weaned on Martha Stewart, HGTV and MTV's Cribs.

Stores like the hip Swedish furniture giant Ikea www.ikea.com have made good design more affordable and accessible.

"Dorm rooms are really a calling card to a student's personality - a way they can really express themselves," said Janice Simonsen, a design spokesman for Ikea, which has taken note of the increased need among students for attractive technology storage for laptops, printers, iPod equipment and other accessories. Simonsen said there has been much more emphasis on the dorm room interiors in recent years, even though dorms typically provide the basics.

In fact, the trend has boomed in the past five or six years, according to Michael Wood of Teenage Research Unlimited, a Chicago-area full-service market research firm specializing in teens.

"This is a group who grew up watching Trading Spaces," said Wood, adding that the wealth of home decor products and new technology has prompted this boom, along with the fact that going off to college is a significant life transition for graduating high school seniors.

"Many parents want to make this nest as comfy as possible. They're willing to spend the money to give their kids the comforts of home. In many ways this is a coddled generation, and parents are holding their hands pretty tightly."

Wood says the decorating-buying excursions probably start when kids are in high school and want to emulate older, college-age brothers and sisters by decking out their bedrooms at home.

Still, no matter how much cool-looking stuff is out there, the key is not blowing the tuition money on overdecorating, experts say. Buy just what you need, improvise and plan out your space ahead of time.

"One of the most important things students need to think about is storage and knowing how to share your space because the spaces are usually so small," said Tammy Jo Schoppet, founder of Rental Decorating Digest and the Web site www.rentaldecorating.com, which is devoted to well-designed tight



quarters like dorm rooms.

Schoppet advises students to "think vertical" and go for stackable storage containers, even if they can't splurge on the pricey ones.

"Fruit and vegetable crates still work well for storing socks and shirts, and you can cover them with fabric," she says.

A loft bed, which hoists the bed up high allowing for living or work space underneath, is perhaps one of the best investments a college student can make, providing the school allows it.

"It really gives you two rooms in one," Schoppet said.

Removable hooks are a great idea, she said, since most schools don't want nails in the walls.

Inexpensive poster frames also give wall art a finished look and allow you to change out posters for a new look the next year.

Ideally, she says, a well-designed dorm room should be "a place to sit, snack, study and sleep."

Sleep, jokes Amanda Keen, interior design student at FSU, is the operative word.

Though she plans to conserve by buying organizing bins, file holders and \$10 study lamps with pencil holders at places like Wal-Mart, she's saving for her one big splurge: "I've got to have Egyptian cotton sheets."

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