

HOME

DID IT MYSELF by Gwendolyn Bounds

New Reasons to Flip Your Switches

Makers roll out high-design wall outlets—but the cost can be shocking if you hire someone for the job

IT'S ONE OF the best-kept secrets of the do-it-yourself world: a project that dramatically enhances a room's appearance, may cost less than \$50 and can be completed in an afternoon.

The task: replacing electrical switches and receptacles—the place where you plug stuff in—with a new generation of sleeker devices now in many mainstream home-improvement stores. While they take up only a sliver of wall space, decorators and electricians say upgrading these tiny items can subtly refresh almost any room. I recently did it myself in several parts of the house, and was pleasantly surprised at the results.

One reason to consider swapping now is that electrical manufacturers are finally seeing the light and introducing cool designs that keep pace with the rest of the \$150 billion remodeling industry. They have taken a cue from appliance makers and cabinet hardware designers who sell a variety of styles and finishes to complement most décors, the idea being that utilitarian doesn't have to mean ugly.

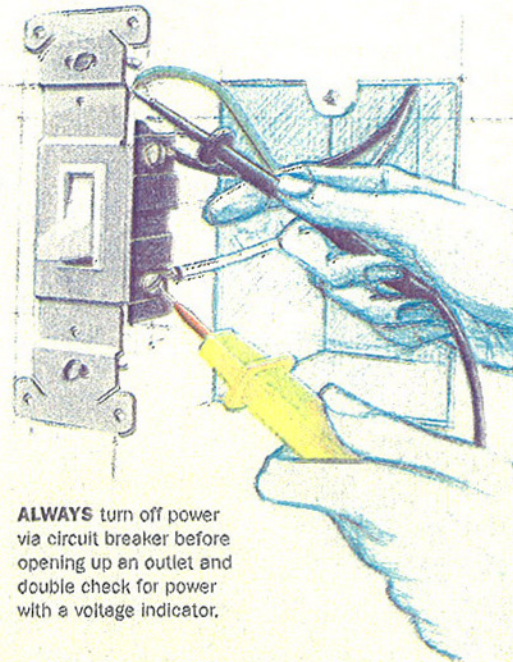
Over the past year or so, makers have been rolling out switches, receptacles, and phone and cable jacks that mimic everything from oak and walnut to marble. There are screwless wall plates and “return-to-neutral” switches that stay flush whether on or off. One major manufacturer, Leviton, hired the design firm responsible for the Apple mouse and Palm V to overhaul the shape of its switches.

Functionality is improving, too. Consider the new 360-outlet due out this June from 360electrical.com; its receptacles rotate in a full circle to accommodate two fat-headed plugs. The futuristic “triplex” receptacles from Leviton hold three plugs at 90-degree angles. And many new wall outlets now have built-in surge protection, so you don't need floor strips.

Small electrical projects sometimes get short shrift from retailers, magazines and TV shows, which can seem intent on getting homeowners to take on costlier projects that are harder to handle, such as putting down new floors. And while countertop and cabinet displays command lavish space in stores, electrical components are often relegated to a handful of poorly labeled bins. Yet these smaller jobs may deliver a better return on your investment, both in time and money. Electricians I checked with said they charge about \$70 to \$80 an hour and estimated that each device would take five to 15 minutes; my guy, Andrew Pidala in Garrison, N.Y., guessed \$800 to \$1,000 for my 2,000-square-

Creative Outlets

The newest generation of electrical devices has cleaner lines and smart features.



ALWAYS turn off power via circuit breaker before opening up an outlet and double check for power with a voltage indicator.

Changing a basic switch typically takes about 15 minutes and involves little more than removing wires from screws on an old model and reconnecting them to a new one using a wire stripper and screwdriver. When lights are controlled from only one switch, buy a “single pole” model (shown above). Fixtures operated from multiple locations require different switches and more fiddling, so mark old wires with masking tape before swapping.

foot home, not including parts.

Recently I cleaned up an unsightly nest of cords in my media room with Leviton's Acenti triplex receptacle and subbed out boring brown toggle switches with some curved ones in a silvery granite hue from Cooper Wiring's Aspire line. I put my bathroom fan on a timer and installed a sensor in the hall to eliminate groping for the switch at night. None of it was difficult—and my prior electrical expertise was changing a light bulb.

The updated models are definitely pricier—from a few dollars for a basic switch (an old toggle model costs less than a buck) to \$54 for a dimmer with a remote that resembles an iPod nano. But it's still chump change compared with new marble tile or hardwood planks.

The good news is that everything I installed works. However, I did find that

manufacturers still need to improve their installation instructions, which are peppered with trade-riddled lingo. I turned to the Internet and books, and found pictures and detailed explanations that cleared up most questions and explained important terms such as “amperage” and “common wire.” While variations do crop up, at day's end, changing switches and receptacles essentially involves taking a few wires off an old device and reconnecting them to a new one.

Tom Silva, the general contractor for the “This Old House” TV series, says, while rules can vary, most homeowners can safely change switches without running afoul of building codes, so long as they don't fool with wires inside the walls. “Just do it one wire at a time,” he says.

A couple of cautions: Homes built even into the late 1950s may not have grounding

wires that reduce the danger of getting shocked if current goes awry. Look at your receptacles—if they fit only two-prong plugs, they probably aren't grounded. (Even with three-prong outlets, use a receptacle analyzer to be sure.) And if what you see doesn't resemble what's in the books, previous work might have been shoddy. In either case, call a licensed electrician.

One more strategy I recommend is learning from a local pro when you are having bigger work done. I did this with my electrician and his team while they rewired a gutted bathroom and installed new outlets. That not only gave me confidence later but also cemented my loyalty to him for those things I can't do myself.

Ever loaned tools to a friend or neighbor? Email horror stories to Wendy. Bounds@wsj.com.

PRODUCT

360 ELECTRICAL'S
RECEPTACLEAPPROXIMATE PRICE¹\$8 to \$10
360electrical.com

COMMENT

Out in June, this outlet's holes spin to fit bulky plugs.

COOPER WIRING'S
ASPIRE SMART
DIMMER\$29.97
Lowe's

New Aspire line has curvy lines and comes in three, dual-toned hues.

LEVITON'S DECORA
ELEMENTS SWITCH\$9.99
Home Depot²

Elements line mimics stone and wood finishes.

LEVITON'S ACENTI
TRIPLEX
RECEPTACLE\$23
Gracious Home and
Home Depot²

Futuristic outlet has spots for three plugs.

LEVITON'S ACENTI
INCANDESCENT
DIMMER\$51
Gracious Home and
Home Depot²

New design with push-pad fits in standard openings.

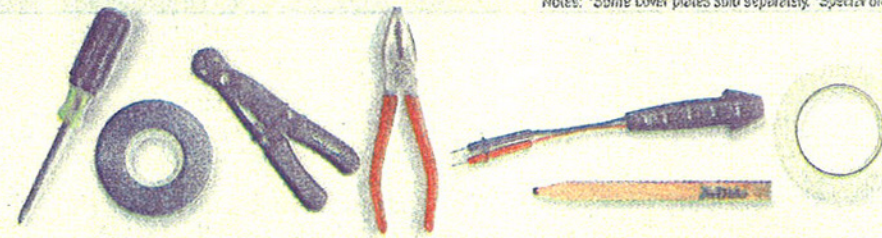
LUTRON'S MAESTRO
SMART DIMMER
WITH REMOTE\$54
Home Depot, Lowe's

Controls lights with sleek remote from up to 30 feet.

Notes: ¹Some cover plates sold separately. ²Special order

Tools We Used

Left to right: flathead screwdriver; electrical tape; wire strippers; lineman's pliers; voltage tester; pencil; masking tape

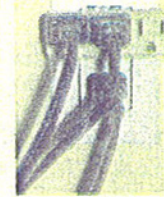


TIP SHEET

Light Work

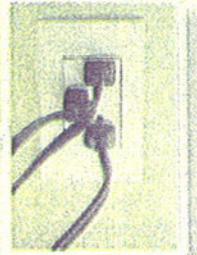
BEFORE

Three plugs squeezed onto a duplex receptacle



AFTER

All fit easily on Acenti's Triplex model



SHUT OFF POWER: Inside the electrical panel, turn off the breaker that controls the spot where you're working. If in doubt, turn the main breaker off.

BUY A RECEPTACLE ANALYZER: This \$10 device tells if wiring is correct and grounded.

KEEP IT NEAT: Take time to fold newly attached wires, accordion style, back into the box.

RECOMMENDED READING: Black & Decker's “Complete Guide to Home Wiring”; Stanley's “Complete Wiring”; “Dare to Repair” by Julie Sussman and Stephanie Glakas-Tenet; and Home Depot's “Wiring 1-2-3.” Helpful Web sites include: www.hometime.com; www.thisoldhouse.com; www.diynetwork.com; www.doityourself.com

Don Pepler (Illustration)

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