

An Energetic Approach

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Can your living environment change your life? Homeowners around the world seem to think so and are now asking specialist interior designers to do far more than make their homes more attractive.

“Some clients treat me like a therapist,” says Oslo-based Siv Amundsen-Lack.

“They’re looking for advice that relates as much to themselves personally as their homes,” adds London’s Amanda Kenton.

Debbie Buckland, in Ontario, Canada, agrees. “Homeowners are becoming aware of the profound effect that their environment and possessions can have so they’re turning to interior designers for help in improving areas of their life in which they’re currently experiencing difficulties.”

Take the homeowner whose daughter was laid low by myalgic encephalitis (also known as ME and post-viral fatigue syndrome). She contacted London-based holistic interior designer Sofia Stainton, who established that the daughter’s bedroom was located above crossed water pipes and suggested moving her to another room; the woman did and the girl recovered within a month.

For another client, whose house had languished on the market for two years, Stainton used dowsing rods to divine an “energy blockage” at the front door caused by underground pipes. Copper coils were fitted on either side of the door to deflect the electro-magnetic force and along with the free flow of energy came a stream of buyers.

Both scenarios sound incredibly far-fetched, of course. And Stainton does not always present the best defence for herself. (“Grass grows effortlessly. Do we understand that? Or how electricity really works?” Um, yes, actually.) Still, she’s

employed by many successful business people (interior designer and retailer Kelly Hoppen brings her in on projects to get the “energies” right) and, in person, she doesn’t seem the least bit off the wall. “I’m a very down-to-earth, practical person who has run an interior design business for 25 years but I’ve always been interested in the healing arts,” she explains. “Clients come to me when something isn’t working in their life. Later, they say: ‘I don’t know how it works but my life has improved.’ ”

Stainton was apprenticed for six years to some of the grand masters of feng shui (the Chinese art of directing energy flow), including Professor Lin Yun and Lillian Too. She is also a member of the British Society of Dowsing – “farmers have used this method for thousands of years and water is still found this way in Africa” – and qualified in Bau Biology, which involves understanding building materials and electrical, magnetic and geological interference. “Some building materials give off toxic chemicals and can make anyone who is sensitive feel ill,” she says, noting that Germany, Switzerland and Scandinavian countries have stricter regulations than the UK in this area.

Athens-based Eleni Kairi-Bartels is another “holistic” designer whose methods are based on feng shui and well-being principles derived from ancient Greek philosophy. Her first priority is to determine whether a building suffers from geopathic stress (electro-magnetic fields in which sewers, water pipes, underground streams and electrical appliances distort the earth’s natural resonance of 7.83 hertz – similar to human brainwaves). “Our homes can directly affect our personal energy and effectiveness,” she says.

She claims to have saved two Greek architects from financial ruin after a group of apartments they built failed to sell. A week after taking her advice, they started finding buyers. “The apartments had a lot of geopathic stress caused by subterranean water penetrating the insulation materials and this drained the energy of the place and that of potential

buyers,” she explains. “I suggested the architects build a discreet dam around the foundations and use an electrical device, plugged into a domestic socket, to neutralise the stress.”

Amanda Kenton, whose consultations draw on Chinese and Japanese astrology, feng shui and electro-biology, also believes that “negative earth energies” have a detrimental effect on homeowners. So she arrives at clients’ houses with devices to test and rebalance the property’s electro-magnetic field. “We have all these electrical appliances – computers, mobile phones, microwaves, halogen lighting – whose magnetic fields need to be neutralised because our bodies often can’t cope with the magnetic resonance,” she explains. For many, a plug-in electro-magnetic pollution harmoniser can solve the problem.

Heather Thatcher credits Kenton with helping sell her terraced cottage in Pinner, a London suburb. “It was on a main road and the house next door had stuck for 18 months. She advised me to change a number of things, such as replacing the metal bed with a wooden one and hanging lights along the staircase to create a closed-in feeling because there was no banister. Without doubt [it worked] because we got the full asking price within a week. My husband was sceptical until it sold so quickly. So before we did anything to our new property I got Amanda in.”

Corrado Cammamata is similarly enthusiastic about his experience with Stainton, who he called in after having problems with the refurbishment of his Victorian house in London. “I was on the point of firing the surveyor, contractor and builders,” he says. “Sofia said there was an energy blockage at the basement front door. I am not a superstitious person but I can clearly say that everything started to improve almost immediately after her visit. The work progressed smoothly and I moved in 18 months ago.”

Geopathic stress, electro-magnetic pollution and energy blockages aside, holistic designers also point to more basic ways in which a home can be made to give off positive vibes.

Contradicting the current trend for open-plan living, Kairi-Bartels says that “each room should have a clear definition, so square or rectangular spaces are best”. Furnishings, she adds, should have round (“warm”) shapes, while “sensual” wood is better than “cold and aggressive” glass or metal. She also prefers representational paintings to “confusing” abstract art. “Our sub-conscious is very subtle and we must give it messages,” she explains.

Stainton also favours “rounded edges” over “triangular” or “very pointed” shapes but says minimising clutter – the external equivalent of internal psychological insecurities – is an even bigger priority. “Objects that haven’t been moved around for a long time maintain a stagnant energy,” she explains.

“I have had clients meet new mates, find new careers, improve their sense of well-being and even their cash flow by clearing clutter and creating a space for something new to come into their lives,” adds Dublin-based holistic designer Edel Cleary. “The goal is to have our personal environment imitate the harmony and balance found in nature. Aesthetics, energy flow and common sense are the basis for achieving this.”

Feng shui practitioner Paul Darby, who has worked in the US, Canada, Japan, India and throughout Europe, has some equally easy-to-follow directions for people trying to sell their homes. “If you need to sell fast then depersonalise it,” he says. “You must allow people to see a canvas on which they can put their own stamp. Put boxes with personal items in rooms you rarely use. It generates energy and prospective buyers think you’re half moved-out. Paint the hallway a vibrant red or yellow. It helps the energy flow and will make [people] more sociable. But balance it with earthier colours in the property’s south-western part to stabilise energy and make them feel

they want to stay. You can achieve the same effect with rugs, cushions and decorative objects.”

Buckland, a student of feng shui expert William Spear, recommends “natural elements, such as water features, plants and mineral crystals, which add life and energy” to living spaces. “Mirrors also attract energy while reflecting light.” And colours and textures should be chosen to stimulate or soothe, depending on a room’s function and the homeowner’s personality.

“Everything in the home has a positive, negative or neutral effect,” she explains. “Our homes are extensions of ourselves, mirroring our ideas, interests and beliefs. By changing our surroundings we can change our lives by letting our home reflect not only who we are but also who we choose to become.”

Stainton agrees. “Your home definitely reflects what is going on in your life,” she says. “When I’ve visited the homes of single women looking for a relationship I often find they have pictures of single women on the walls. When they replace them with images of men, or couples, things sometimes change overnight.”

Kavida Rei certainly thinks her happy relationship with her partner was kick-started by the decorative changes she made after moving into a new home in London. “I put it down to following Amanda Kenton’s advice and to my firm intention to have a better life,” she says.

This last point is key, and perhaps one of the most logical explanations for the success of holistic design. As Darby says: “Feng shui is not a miracle but a tuning of energies, a bit like tuning a guitar. I [can make it] sound better but I can’t play it for you.”

He cites a San Francisco client who consulted him about setting up an office at home. He suggested locating it in the

property's south-east corner (to boost connections with the outside world) and advised on layout and furnishings. A year later, she e-mailed him to say her turnover had increased by more than 50 per cent. The feng shui helped but her own hard work obviously had something to do with it too.

“People come to me when they're ready to change,” acknowledges Amundsen-Lack. “For example, a lot of young men ask me to help set up their first home. But they are also looking for advice about a work or relationship problem. Often their home is messy and unsystematic. So I suggest they clear wardrobe space for a potential girlfriend's clothes and dispense with clutter from the past. It's a mental process – using the interior as a reminder of your own clear intent. The subconscious takes this in and things start moving.