



VITAMIN



It's the most widely known of that essential group of nutrients that are vital for our health, well-being and development. Now the world of design seems to be getting a booster dose of Vitamin C too – a raft of trends representing new ways of living, including the following C's.

By Paul Taylor



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It's the year of having your conscience pricked. More and more people are becoming conscious of how their lifestyle might be contributing to the climate changes we're experiencing. What effect did today's car journey have on global warming? If I buy that particular product, am I part of the problem of resource depletion and accumulation of waste materials?

Karey Durante, co-owner of Durante Furniture, had her consciousness raised by her seven-year-old son. On a visit to the veneer shop of the family furniture business, he complained that his eyes were burning. When his mother explained that the cause was off-gassing from the heat combined with the adhesive going into the air, but that his eyes would stop burning soon, his response was "Is that good for the air?"

Out of the mouths of babes...

CONSCIENCE & CONSCIOUSNESS

Durante was spurred into looking at her company's manufacturing processes. "We started examining small things, and there was a ripple effect. Our awareness was elevated when we realized what our business practices had been over the past half century."

But Durante Furniture is in the high-end, luxury furniture market, and she knew her clients wouldn't want the traditional 'green' response to furniture – products made out of recycled and reclaimed materials. "We set out to show that green design doesn't have to mean sacrificing aesthetics or quality," she says.

Now all manufacturing is carried out and controlled in-house, so her furniture lines comply with the rigorous process of Forest Stewardship Certification. Sustainability principles are also applied to other products and processes used.

There's a premium to pay for this—Durante puts it at 10-30% extra for material costs, depending on the pieces—but she sees this financial impact reducing as green applications become more mainstream. "We'll see further expansion of this market through more specifiers deciding to change, increasing demands on manufacturers as well as of regulations such as LEED. Currently green is very fashionable. But ultimately, if it has a positive impact on the environment, does that really matter?"

Jill Salisbury, founder and principal of el: Environmental Language, set up her business when, as an interior designer, she was having difficulty sourcing stylish furniture manufactured using sustainability principles.

"We began with the aim of merging style and environmental integrity in furniture design," Salisbury says. "We first investigated environmental protocols, and then used those to establish manufacturing principles and to determine which materials would be appropriate."

The furniture lines she developed use environmental nutrients in their manufacture – natural products that can be harvested appropriately and can be returned to the earth naturally at the end of their lifespan.

Salisbury believes we'll soon see sustainability become integral to the definition of good design and it will become more and more expected. But while she sees that process already underway, she says interior designers still have some work to do. "Currently, the architectural community has a far more advanced understanding of environmental design. This will lead to pressure on designers to incorporate these principles into their interiors as well."

The design process is no longer the domain of individual experts working in isolation. Collaboration is the name of the game.

At one end of the process, we see manufacturers working closely with their sources to develop the best possible products. At the other end are increasingly sophisticated and knowledgeable clients who want to play an active part in the design of their home.

Linking these two are design professionals, who also find themselves entering into collaborations between disciplines. Today's home may be designed by a combination of talents including architect—interior designer, kitchen designer and landscape architect—all contributing their own skills to the project from the start.

Eve Blossom, founder and president of fabric company Lulan Artisans, says that collaboration is a cornerstone of her company. After gaining her Masters degree in architecture, Blossom spent two years in Vietnam restoring French colonial villas for corporate and government offices in Hanoi. While in Southeast Asia, she discovered her passion for hand-weaving from the outlying villages and decided to start her own company.

Twelve years later, she launched Lulan as a business creating handmade luxury textiles for the US market. "I researched the best weavers in four different countries and stayed in touch over the years to see when they would be ready to weave to international standards," says Blossom. "When they were ready, I started my company."

The philosophy behind Lulan means it's based on much more than the usual commercial arrangement between supplier and buyer. "Our artisans are our partners, not thought of as just sourcers," she says.

Blossom acknowledges the increasing collaborative process between suppliers and interior designers, but also points to end-users becoming much more design conscious. "There's an increasing design awareness – even at the mass market level where you can now buy products by Michael Graves and Martha Stewart. That leads to customers who are more savvy and so, want to work collaboratively with a designer."

San Francisco architect David Baker has some very pointed views on factors that have contributed to a breakdown in the concept of community. His criticism is levelled squarely at the suburbs and the car.

COMMUNITY

"People may have originally moved to the suburbs because they had good schools and so were seen as a better place for the kids," says Baker. "But when the kids leave home, the parents become bored."

That's one reason he cites for the shift from the suburbs back into city centers. "People can feel too isolated in the suburbs."

On the flip side, he points to the city as having a greater sense of community. "When you throw people together, they have to interact," he says. "There are more chance meetings, when you run into acquaintances and friends. It's a more spontaneous feeling."

And that's where Baker's criticism of our overuse of cars comes in. It's not just the environmental impact, but the isolation and lack of interaction that comes from sitting behind the wheel for long periods each day.

But the design of the suburbs often means there's no choice. The distances between places force you to use your car all the time. "You even have to use your car to go to the gym," he points out ironically. "And if you're always in the car, you don't experience those chance meetings."

He's enthusiastic about San Francisco's vibrant central city that encourages people to walk and interact. "The city's Better Streets program views the streets not just as engineering projects, but also as open public spaces," he says. "It's developing places for pedestrians to interact as part of the street system – widening sidewalks and refurbishing street furniture."

What can happen in places that lack this type of community interaction on a regular basis? "A lot of conservatism comes from isolation—people can become angry or judgemental simply because they don't meet other people who are different from themselves," says Baker. "This can result in something like xenophobia."

COMFORT & COCOONING

The increasing variety and portability of technology and communication systems are creating a '24/7' mentality and lifestyle. It's becoming increasingly difficult to shut off and relax, putting many of us on the track to burn-out.

Luckily, we're starting to recognize the danger signals, and realize that we need to take time out to focus on a healthy lifestyle as well as professional achievements. That's one of the factors behind the booming spa industry.

Tracey Welsh, general manager and director of operations at Red Mountain Spa in Utah, says spas used to be places to go for specific health issues such as weight loss. "Now you're just as likely to go to a spa purely for relaxation and rejuvenation," she says. "People want to be pampered. They want to reward themselves."

So the spa has become a destination in its own right. And when people have completed the 'experience', they want to take a slice of that comfort back into their everyday lives. "They're incorporating elements of spa design into their homes," says Welsh. "It might be something as simple as buying the same luxury linen that we use. They may ask about the deep tubs we have, or the pebble floor showers for reflexology. Or they may want a new bathroom that reflects spa design."

But it's not all one-way traffic. Companies in the lifestyle products and experiences market are now creating residential developments for their clientele. Red Mountain Spa now has 12 privately-owned, two-bedroom villas on the premises – vacation home properties for guests who want to spend more time at the spa.

Designers are drawing on influences from around the world. It's no longer just a case of East meets West – these influences can come from any culture anywhere in the world.

CULTURE

The driving force behind this is the notion that our world really has become a smaller place. There's an ever-growing pool of highly mobile and highly specialized professionals who move to wherever the hotspots are – New York, London, Mumbai, Shanghai, Tokyo. That global exposure shapes their understanding of the world and the way they want to live.

Add to that the increasing ease of leisure travel, and the new experiences and knowledge that mobility brings to our worldview. It's also seen in the way that technology has inter-connected diverse cultures and given easy access to music, art and films that would have been almost impossible to source in the past. Now you can find them virtually with the click of a mouse, wherever you are.

All these factors are shaping a wider appreciation of design and a desire to include furniture, art, fabrics and other pieces from around the world in our own homes. These days, the result is less likely to be a 'theme' interior, but rather a subtle blending of elements from diverse cultures.

However, it's not just a process of 'taking' from other cultures, it's also about gaining a better understanding of the beliefs and lifestyles that prevail in other parts of the world.

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