

MAKING SENSE OF DESIGN

A home's design can affect our minds just as drugs do

BY TRACEY MACKENZIE PHOTOGRAPHY SHAUNE THOMPSON



Claire Vessot's living room is decorated with such sensual elements as faux-fur throws, jeweled cushions, raw silk drapes and muted lighting. The room's accessories, including the silver lamps, decorative balls and vase, were chosen to reflect her metier as a jewelry designer.



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FLUFFY CUSHIONS, A DOWN-FILLED SOFA, A BOWL OF seashells, scented candles and a Zen fountain. They’re all elements that feed the senses.

Nourishing the senses is the big idea behind a new field called “neuroscience for design.” While the convergence of interior design and neuroscience may seem unlikely, there’s plenty of research that suggests a home’s design can have a major effect on the emotional and psychological well-being of its inhabitants.

“Architects have long been talking about the brain and how it responds to environments but they didn’t know why,” says John Zeisel, a sociologist who has pioneered the study of neuroscience for architecture. “We didn’t have the neuroscience to explain it until 15 years ago. Now we know the environment affects our brains just as drugs do.” Zeisel, who has taught at McGill and Harvard universities, is the founder and president of Hearthstone Alzheimer Care Ltd. He lectures on the company’s non-pharmacological treatment of Alzheimer’s disease, which uses design to reduce the disease’s symptoms.

As an interior designer, I have long been aware of how people’s environments affect the quality of their lives. I became keenly interested in Zeisel’s philosophy after my mother had a stroke. Spending each day with her, I noticed something interesting. While she was in her dull, unstimulating hospital room, her speech was slurred and she was anxious and frightened. But the minute I took her to the ward’s common room, with its piano, television, comfy sofa and armchair, she would smile, interact with other patients and speak more clearly. Moreover, she seemed happy and secure in the common room, where there was music and soft lighting. These homey, cozy surroundings had a big effect on her psyche.

Zeisel, a member of the u.s.-based Academy of Neuroscience for Architecture and author of *Inquiry By Design* (W.W. Norton and Co., 2006), says sick people are not the only ones who react to their surroundings. We all do, whether or not we are consciously aware of it. “The environment plays an important role in our behavior, perception and actions,” he said during an interview in his Montreal home.

That means that home is not just a functional shelter from the elements as it was for our ancestors. It’s a refuge from the chaos of modern life. It’s become a cocoon and each room should be carefully designed.

So what does a neuro designed room look and feel like? It may look a lot like two rooms I created for Claire Vessot.

In her bedroom, I gave the bed a tapestry of textures that include silk pillows and coverlet, bamboo

sheets and a faux-fur blanket for the winter. It’s all very tactile. Delicate antique chairs are a feminine element that contrasts with a large, masculine armoire. Because Claire is a jewelry designer, we integrated elements that recall her métier: silver lamps, crystal accessories and metallic wall panels.

I moved Claire’s bed to a wall to give her a window view of her backyard garden when she awakens. And that brings me to an important facet of the neuro design philosophy. “There should be access to the outdoors,” says Zeisel. “Seeing sun and weather gives us a sense of time and it helps to regulate our circadian rhythms. Access to the sun is a key aligner of time.”

I agree with Zeisel. That’s why I tell my clients who don’t have beautiful views to create their own by hanging pictures of things that inspire them. (I love pictures of Buddha in my own space.) The first thing you see when you wake up is important, too, because it sets the mood for the day.

In Claire’s living room, we continued the metallic theme. Silver lamp bases, a couple of shiny disco balls, sequined cushions, silver-framed mirrors and metal vases are reminders for Claire of the beautiful silver jewelry she designs.

We also introduced candles to give the room a warm glow in the evening and faux fur throws on the leather sofas to provide a textured element. Raw silk drapes frame the greenery of shrubs beyond the lead-paned windows.

“There are certain emotional triggers that you respond to in your environment,” Zeisel says. Spaces are no longer just spaces; they are representations of yourself and your experiences.”

Your home’s design can also influence such brain processes as the release of serotonin, a neurotransmitter that regulates mood, appetite and sleep. Colours, textures, lighting, scent and sound all affect your psyche.

One of the goals of neuro design is to create spaces in which people feel secure and loved. Everyone I know loves the glow of candlelight, the smell of bread baking, a crackling fire in a hearth, grass rustling in the wind or rain pelting on a tin roof. These stimuli tap into the brain’s hardwiring.

At a time in which most of humanity lives in towns or cities, an environment that severs our connection with the natural world, wood, stone, plants and flowing water in the home can restore a sense of connection with the earth.

I have chosen everything in my home with much thought, never buying anything without considering how it will fit in with my decor and whether it will nurture my soul. And, yes, I do have a bowl of seashells, scented candles and a Zen fountain. ♠



Claire Vessot's bedroom.

Lighten up, in more senses than one

HOW DO YOU CREATE A NEURO-RICH ENVIRONMENT IN YOUR HOME, ONE THAT FEEDS YOUR SENSES? HERE ARE DESIGNER TRACEY MACKENZIE'S RECOMMENDATIONS.

REMOVE all objects from your home that lack purpose or personal meaning for you. Add items that do. **PERSONALIZE** your space with items that evoke fond memories. Hang pictures that inspire you, such as vacation photos, family pictures and images of nature. **BRING NATURE INDOORS.** Use tall plants, table fountains or river rocks to recall the natural environment. **INCORPORATE,** elements into your space that represent who you are. Choose accents that recall activities you love, including your métier. **COMBINE** texture, light, colour, scent and sound in your space. Fluffy cushions, soft lighting, scented candles, music, flowing water and colourful accessories engage the senses. **ADMIT** natural light into your home by opening curtains or blinds. Light regulates the body's time clock.