

# Wholly holistic

by Kay Hill

**The word 'holistic' is being increasingly used by interior designers and architects to describe the way they work. Kay Hill speaks to professionals who use the term to learn more about their methods**

**THE DICTIONARY DEFINITION** of holistic is straightforward: "characterised by the belief that the parts of something are intimately interconnected and explicable only by reference to the whole". But when it comes to design, it's more complex. For some, it simply means taking every aspect of a client's life into consideration and possibly including elements of biophilia, colour therapy, wellness and self care. For others it moves into considering sustainability, the wider community and the environment. And for yet another group, holistic design moves naturally into philosophical or even spiritual dimensions, taking in elements of intuitive design and practices such as Feng Shui.

The variety of definitions can be frustrating for both clients and designers. "Holistic is a word that has been commandeered by the alternative therapy people, and I sometimes get weird phonecalls asking if I do spiritual cleansing. But it's not about running around waving sage sticks," says Phoebe Oldrey, founder of Smartstyle Interiors. "It's about looking a bit deeper into how to design spaces better. Holistic means everything is connected, so we think firstly, as any interior designer does, about how a space supports you practically with its function. At the end, it should be visually beautiful, which is the icing on the cake. In the middle sits this whole area where it needs to support you emotionally - that's where it can seem really hippy trippy.

"A space affects people on a functional and emotional level - we can create rooms that are literally depressing. I get called in sometimes after the architect has left and people have their lovely kitchen or extension, but are really uncomfortable and can't put their finger on why. When you create a positive space, people won't notice it - they just know it supports

them. Designing comfort isn't just about the fluff on the couch; it's about creating a space where people feel contented."

For Phoebe, that means looking at diverse criteria - from whether a design encourages and supports physical health - perhaps by encouraging walking up the stairs rather than using a lift in an office building - to avoiding air pollution, encouraging biophilia and taking on board ideas from colour therapy. "There's a lot of science and neuroscience about how we behave in a space," Oldrey says, but notes it tends to be retail designers who make more use of the research.

Cinzia Moretti, creative director at Moretti Interior Design, uses a system she calls bio-design. "The term holistic can be used for many different things; for me it means to help the client with improving their lifestyle and wellbeing and living a better life inside their own environment," she says. Her methods appeal to all five senses, using principles from colour psychology and biophilia to help to reconnect clients with nature and create a home that is both relaxing and reenergising. To make this possible, she feels interior designers need to think more like product designers.

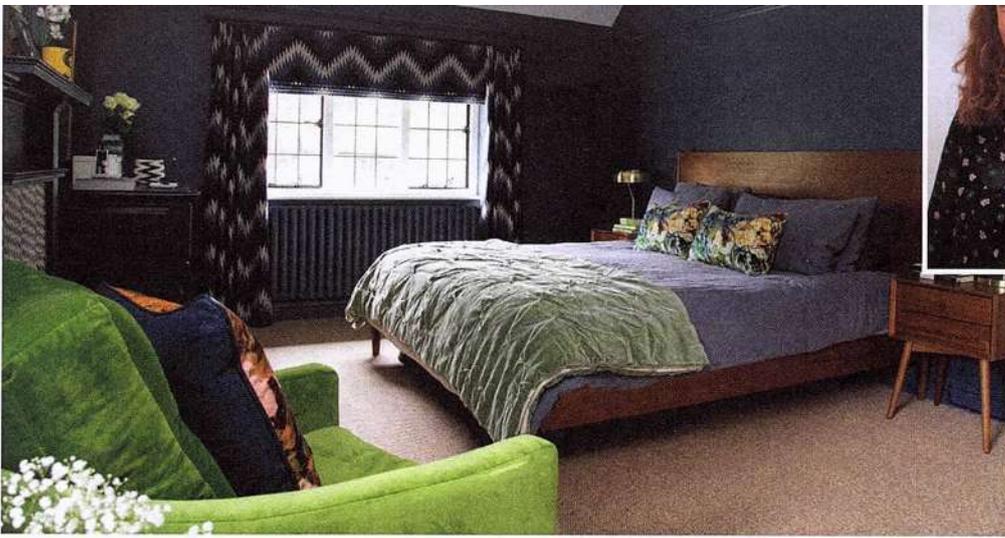
"Items you buy are designed with ergonomics and psychology in mind and it needs the same approach to the home, which is a client's nest and sanctuary. We are animals and are connected to the earth and nature - that's a part of being human. Ancient populations knew this. They always lived with nature, but we have forgotten about it. That's my ideology; to bring nature back inside the house to reconnect and reenergise," she says.

For Moretti, those aims are often achieved through creating an airy indoor-outdoor look, with plenty of natural light or illumination



**Above and right:** Phoebe Oldrey used elements of biophilic design in this child's bedroom, using representations of nature to make up for the lack of views

effects to help people relax and maintain their circadian rhythm. Doing away with clutter is also important. "The things we have around us have energy and we take on the energy of that stuff," Moretti says. "In a house full of clutter you feel you don't have enough air. To me, holistic design includes philosophy, psychology and science."



designer does, about how a space supports you practically with its function. At the end, it should be visually beautiful, which is the icing on the cake."

Phoebe Oldrey, founder, Smartstyle Interiors

Left: Phoebe Oldrey used dark blue in this bedroom, as the neuroscience of sleep says the body needs a temperature drop and cool spectrum colours help with this.



Above and below: Moretti likes to use natural light and lighting effects to help maintain a natural circadian rhythm, as in these kitchens.

Below right: Moretti International Design has been shortlisted for an International Design and Architecture award for this calming bedroom in a West London home.

Simon Bodsworth, managing director at bespoke furniture company Daval, which has created storage ranges designed to appeal to the holistic market, notes: "How you design and furnish a space really can impact you on a visual and emotional level, with poor arrangement and a lack of storage topping the leader board." His understanding is that holistic design not only includes the classic functional and aesthetic elements, but adds in biophilia, sustainability, multi-generational design, colour psychology and Feng Shui.

For Sheena Murphy, founder of interior design studio Nune, it is about looking beyond aesthetics and into ethics. "We are thinking about architecture and aesthetics when we are designing, but we are equally mindful about sourcing the materials, how the producers are making them, the effect they have on the environment and the impact on human health. We try to avoid a lot of synthetic materials, things that have toxic finishes like formaldehyde, or paints that are off-gassing. We don't want to use anything that could affect people in their homes.

"Usually you end up with more natural materials, but it can be both a very elevated or rustic look. It's not limiting in any way. We are not thinking about it as a philosophy, and there's nothing spiritual about it, but wellness

and self care feed into the concept of holistic design," Murphy says. "Your home should be a refuge and as we usually work in urban environments, stress levels can be super high. It's about creating a sense of calm and place, and because we use natural materials and mainly neutral colours, our designs are naturally calming."

Ash Chawla, chief operating officer at Duke of Design, believes the design role has expanded: "Ten years ago clients would ask us to create a living room and we would put up some wallpaper, look at the furniture and be done with it. Now we go a step further and try to understand the client more." His interpretation is to meet the needs of every family member in all circumstances through personalised design such as height-adjustable kitchens and ambient lighting. The common wisdom is that millennials are demanding personalisation, but Chawla disagrees. "Rather than responding to their demands, nine out of 10 times we have to convince clients to think about these things at all - their demand is just for the aesthetics and even then it's not thought through and is highly influenced by social media," he says. "When we get a new client they often come in with 100 very different pictures they have seen online and they want everything."



Studio.

Right: Michael Schienke used Feng Shui to advise clients on how to make the best of a complex floorplan in this North London church conversion

For him, holistic design means getting to the root of what makes each client feel comfortable. "Earth tones are definitely much calmer and sharp colours make you feel lively; I can feel the difference personally," he says. "We try to understand the client's associations with colours, but we rely on them to communicate with us. There's isn't one particular look that will make everybody feel comfortable; people from different countries, for example, may feel completely different about colours."

Architect Michael Schienke, director of Vorbild, offers conventional design alongside Feng Shui and Vastu Shastra, its 8000-year-old Hindu equivalent. All cases require a deep understanding of the client: "It's important at the very first stage to go through the whole house and talk about it holistically - how they use the space or hope to use it. The design phase may take longer, but I want to engage in a deeper conversation. If you explore multiple possibilities at the beginning it limits changes later on and sometimes the client finds something that instinctively works for them." Interestingly, he combines this with the latest in virtual reality walk-throughs: "Architects need to spend a bit more time to help clients visualise the property. It will take a bit longer, but you will have a happier client."

A similar process, but with an added dash of intuition, is how Hollie Bowden would describe her work. "My design process and interior schemes are holistic on many levels. I start with the practicalities - I'll do a room-by-room with the client. We'll discuss how they use the space and what they want and need from the place as a whole and then we start working out solutions. I'm initially led by the architecture, the bones of the building - this is a key consideration. Everything else is mostly intuition. I'm led by my instincts. It is a sensory thing - I let the space speak to me, I contemplate the flow of the place and the way in which it will be inhabited and how much light there is, the proportions, and start thinking of textures and composition and tones and shades."

If you type holistic design (or Hygge or mindful design) into Pinterest, the results form a sea of pale Scandi-style schemes - but it doesn't have to be that way. "Hygge is not an aesthetic, it's a state of mind," says Oldrey. "But it got grabbed as a way of selling stuff. It's about being happy in the present you are in. Mindfulness isn't an aesthetic either, it's a state of mind. It doesn't have to go hand in hand with that Scandi look."

"I work with a lot of colour, which brings its own psychological element into it. Rainbow shades make people happy, round shapes like balloons make them happy, so I might have a yellow wall to a stairway which would work as a gallery. However, if the client can't abide yellow it's not going to work - it's not one size fits all. People's goals will be different. For me, holistic design is a philosophy backed by both spirituality and science - I want to design spaces which function emotionally and aesthetically. You can't look at a photo and say 'that's a holistically designed space', because it's not visual, it's about what it's like to be in it. If



**"It's important at the very first stage to go through the whole house and talk about it holistically; how they use the space or hope to use it. The design phase may take longer, but I want to engage in a deeper conversation."**

Michael Schienke, director, Vorbild



Above and below: Michael Schienke's calming design for this London garden apartment used elements of Feng Shui alongside modern design techniques.

