

Wellness  
in the Home

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Building a  
Profitable Practice

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**DESIGN  
WITHOUT  
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## WAKING UP TO WELLNESS

Consumers are craving healthier homes and knowledgeable design professionals who can help them get there

BY DIANA MOSHER

**F**rom zero-VOC paint to household cleaners made of natural ingredients, the selection of eco-friendly products available in the marketplace grows every year. And while some of us still enjoy that new car smell, who today can disregard the scent is really the result of unhealthy off-gassing? The green living movement has opened our collective eyes to some unpleasant truths. And now, wellness design is picking up the baton and heading for the mainstream as consumers clamor for wellness in all aspects of the built environment, from workplaces to hotels to homes.

“I believe the wellness movement started about 12 years ago when the farm-to-fork movement started gaining momentum,” says Jillian Pritchard Cooke, founder of Wellness Within Your Walls (WWYW), a certification program for healthy homes. “It’s only natural that we should want to know what is in our food. Equally as important, we need to know what our homes are built of and the furnishings inside.”

It’s concerning and disheartening to think the air inside our homes can actually be much more polluted than the air outside. According to Cooke, while the building industry strives for net-zero energy, it inadvertently has created the tight box syndrome: the tighter the box, the harder it is for toxins to escape. Elevated levels of CO<sub>2</sub> can affect cognitive abilities, and a variety of toxins in our living

environments can leach into furniture, draperies, and textiles. The result is a toxic cocktail when too many substances off-gas at the same time.

The interior design profession is perfectly poised to lead the way as consumers grapple with these realities and seek wellness in their homes. Cooke became acutely aware of the designer’s role in the wellness dialogue 11 years ago when she was awarded the interior design of EcoManor, which became the nation’s first LEED Gold-certified home from the U.S. Green Building Council. While working on this high-profile project, she was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer thought to be environmentally caused.

“I personally believe it was due to the harmful toxins I was exposed to on a regular basis as an interior designer,” notes Cooke. During the selection of finishes for EcoManor, her team focused on selecting products that were free of harmful toxins.

Cooke launched WWYW in 2006. Designed for low-rise residential buildings to certify people, places, products, and programs, WWYW is aligned with the National Association of Home Builders and the Sustainable Furnishings Council.

### VETTING HEALTHY PRODUCTS

“More than 60 million Americans suffer from asthma or allergies or both. That’s one in five people,” explains

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Wellness Within Your Walls put its research to work for the Organic Life House in the Serenbe community in Georgia.



Robin Wilson urges clients to consider wellness decisions as lifetime solutions.

“Wellness and sustainability are design disruptors. It’s truly a requirement for so many families.”

ROBIN WILSON

Robin Wilson, principal of Robin Wilson Home and pro bono ambassador for the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America. The New York City-based interior designer, author of *Clean Design: Wellness for Your Home* and HGTV regular, has been practicing clean design for 16 years.

“Wellness and sustainability are design disruptors. It’s truly a requirement for so many families,” says Wilson. One resource to help narrow down healthy choices is the not-for-profit Sustainable Furnishings Council. The organization’s website lists the companies that have agreed to use no- to low-VOC paints and stains, to have proper disposal practices, to make sure their workers are protected, and to minimize packing materials. “Manufacturers have to go through a vetting process. I really like that,” adds Wilson.

Staying current with GREENGUARD Certification from UL Environment (a business unit of UL Laboratories) also is a must for designers specializing in wellness. GREENGUARD Certification helps manufacturers create—and helps buyers identify—interior products and materials with low chemical emissions in order to improve the quality of the air in which the products are used.

Wilson’s view is that wellness is priceless—and it’s a lifetime solution. She helps her clients understand how much is at stake by asking a simple question: “Would you raise your baby in a chemical factory?” The answer is always, “no.”

Imagine this scenario, says Wilson. “You just did the nursery one week before the baby is born. You installed petroleum-based carpet and a brand new mattress that you got for \$9 somewhere. You put that in a crib where you don’t know what kind of stain was used, you painted the walls with any old kind of paint, and then you closed it up and sealed it up. You didn’t even open the windows and let it off-gas.” We can make better, healthier decisions than that.

#### A LIVING LABORATORY IN HER HOME

When Laura Britt, ASID, owner and principal of Laura Britt Design in Austin, Texas, designed and constructed her new home last year, she wanted “super healthy” interiors for her family. The LEED Platinum project incorporates many of the principles of the WELL Building Standard set forth by wellness pioneer Delos’ International WELL Building Institute.

IMAGE: ROBIN WILSON HOME



Laura Britt considers her home a "living laboratory" where she is able to experiment with healthy materials.

Britt had upper respiratory issues as an infant and continues to be sensitive to off-gassing. "Since this project is our living laboratory, I really got to experiment a lot—push the envelope and try new materials—to see what works and what doesn't," she notes. This resulted in such a clean job site that if even a tiny amount of adhesive was used, Britt could immediately smell it and address it.

Only water-based adhesives were used in the cabinetry millwork, and hardwood floors. They contribute no formaldehyde or VOCs. Britt even reimaged the shower pans to her own healthy specifications. The project also includes pieces from Vervano, a sustainably produced, healthy furniture line created by Britt for residential and contract applications. Made with such renewable resources as wood and water-based adhesives and finishes, Vervano's [residential] foams aren't treated with a flame-retardant chemical which, according to Britt, is something designers working on residential projects have the luxury of *not* including.

Of course, Britt's healthy home features dual-flush toilets to limit unnecessary water usage; all the appliances are low energy consumption, too. "We experimented with induction cooking," she says. "We don't have that residue that comes with gas

and we're not generating more heat into the atmosphere that will need to be cooled down by pumping in more air-conditioning."

Specifying a glass cooking surface that doesn't heat up anywhere except directly under the pot or pan also means there are no open flames when sword fighting is going on. "We have a very open kitchen and a young child," explains Britt. Ventilating the humidity out of the house while cooking or showering/bathing is another key feature of the healthy home. Also, a water filtration system takes out any remaining elements like heavy metals that haven't been filtered from the Austin water system.

#### CLEAN LIVING TAKES OFF

Despite a growing popularity, the move to healthy home choices still often requires a conversation to help homeowners understand how wide reaching the benefits can be.

"Helping clients with both interiors and gardens gives me a unique opportunity to talk to them about our human connection to nature and the outdoors," says Amy Vail, Allied ASID, LEED Green Associate. The principal of Amy Vail Design, a Portland, Oregon-based interior architecture and

garden design firm, Vail believes the more we reconnect ourselves with nature, the more likely we are as a species to protect and value it.

She always recommends sustainable, healthy products and finishes first. "Often clients aren't familiar with what's out there, or they're concerned with the expense," says Vail. "I find that once they see the wide variety of options and how those products and practices will positively affect their lives, they realize the cost isn't a deal breaker."

Currently, Vail is working with a client who started the process by expressing her family's need for an allergen- and toxin-free environment. "I think the public is starting to understand what wellness in design really means," Vail also has had clients she didn't think would be interested decide to go that route because "it's what everyone is doing now, right?" Becoming trendy might not be a desirable trait—normally, she adds. "But if it's wellness in design we're talking about, I'm all for it becoming ubiquitous." ☐

Diana Mosher is a New York City-based communications professional specializing in content creation and brand strategy for the real estate and design industries. She also is an interior design consultant.