

Why health-improving homes are the new green, and the designers helping you sleep better than anyone you know

How choosing the right paint, building and furniture materials, air and lighting systems, and even shower head can turn a home into a restorative oasis that contributes to your overall well-being.



For the better part of a decade, furniture designer Enrico Marone Cinzano has lived mostly in five-star hotels around the world. But although he had access to every conceivable luxury, it felt like there was something missing.

“I still did not feel as energetic, bright eyed and bushy tailed as I should have,” the London-based designer says. “I realised I was living an unsustainable and toxic life.”

So Cinzano threw himself into exhaustive research into how to create a home environment that not only does no harm, but actually elevates the feeling of well-being. The more he thought about it, the more he realised that creating healthful interiors should almost be a given these days: people spend most of their time indoors – and much of that in their bedrooms. And while products such as non-toxic paint and air purifiers are commonplace, he didn’t want to stop at just keeping the bad at bay. Instead, he focussed on creating a home that felt restorative.

[Electric lighting interferes with the body's circadian clock, researchers say](#) [1]

“I’m a Mediterranean person and I live in London, where most people get depressed when the weather is bad. But I never get depressed. I sleep better than anyone I know. I believe my surroundings have done that for me,” he says.

Last year, Cinzano completed a radical home improvement process that not only guards against common indoor-pollution issues – allergies, excessive humidity, contact with formaldehyde, bathing in chlorine-filled water – but also, he says, makes him feel better than ever.



Lighting was an obvious detail that needed attention. He altered the illumination in his 485 sq ft flat so that daytime lighting replicates a beautiful summer’s morning – the sort that boosts serotonin levels in the body and helps to ward off the blues. At night, a master switch cuts off all lighting throughout the flat, so it is perfectly dark.

[Bedtime habits of unsuccessful people](#) [2]

His mattress is made from organic materials and not coated with the usual flame retardant, which he says causes an “off-gassing” every time a person rests their weight on it. He also coated the walls of his bedroom with paint containing colloidal silver – regarded as an effective antibacterial substance. In some circles, it’s believed to protect the body from the electromagnetic frequencies caused by constant exposure to Wi-fi.

“When you make that kind of effort, it generates a vibe that feeds on itself,” he says. “The cumulative benefits are obvious.”

[Scientists warn of ‘global sleep crisis’ after research gathered from smartphone app](#) [3]

Cinzano, whose furniture – made using sustainable wood – is available at Pearl Lam Galleries in Shanghai, is aware his home makeover could possibly be considered extreme. But he says there is a slow but gradual movement brewing among forward-thinking homeowners, designers and developers who believe that health-improving homes are the new green.



At the luxury development Eleven on Lenox, in South Beach, Florida, the 11 townhouses – slated for completion in early 2018 and to cost between US\$3 million and US\$4 million – will feature lighting systems that automatically harmonise with the body’s natural circadian rhythms, complementing the biological clock to help occupants sleep better and feel well rested.

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Rowena Gonzales

“Buyers are responding well, because this is something new, and can help people feel better every day,” says Masoud Shojaee, president and chairman of the Shoma Group, which is developing Eleven on Lenox. “Properly maintaining these internal systems by replicating natural light can take us to another level in our health. It’s another luxury that is more about wellness.”

It may also be the next big thing in luxury real estate. The Wellness Habitat Company, with offices in Miami and Mexico City, was founded by property industry veterans and works on transforming interior spaces into what it describes as “healthy habitats”: its advisory board members include a nephrologist and internal medicine specialist, an ear, nose and throat doctor, a water quality specialist, and even an expert in lighting and circadian rhythm technology.

[Buildings that blend with nature: why Singapore has them in abundance and Hong Kong doesn’t yet](#)
[4]

One of its strongest recommendations is installing a vitamin C shower head – water goes through filters lined with ascorbic acid, neutralising the chlorine and moisturising instead of drying out the skin.



Designers in other parts of the world are also trying to get the message across. “People still think that it’s a normal reaction to be allergic to fresh paint for six months,” says Rowena Gonzales, principal and founder of Hong Kong-based Liquid Interiors, an interior design firm that specialises in eco-friendly and non-toxic spaces. “It’s not normal. We want to show people that it doesn’t have to be like that, that there are ways to design and build your home environment where you feel good as soon as you come in.”

[No more sick building syndrome with homes designed to make you healthier](#) [5]

In Beijing, battling indoor air pollution is challenging enough, without having to worry about mattresses coated with the same poison (boric acid) that kills cockroaches and antimony (more toxic than mercury). Air purifiers are not the solution, says Gonzales; people should also be investing in a system that alerts them if there is an excessive amount of dust pollution, pollen or carbon monoxide in the air.

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Enrico Marone Cinzano

“The sustainable movement helped people become more aware,” says Sara Abate Rezvanifar, branding and communications director of Ontario, Canada-based Ambience, a design firm that specialises in healthful interiors. “If someone is having an issue with asthma, it’s probably related to what they’re breathing indoors in their own homes.”

JZA+D, a design firm based in Princeton, New Jersey, has been spearheading the movement towards healthier homes; at two of its finished projects, the company has ensured that even the components in the cabinetry and the adhesives in tiles and flooring, have low or no VOCs (volatile organic compounds, such as formaldehyde and benzene).

“VOCs can cause dizziness, trigger asthma attacks, inhibit our immune systems and may even be carcinogenic,” says Joshua Zinder, founding principal of JZA+D. “When selecting paint, plywood,

carpeting, even cabinets, it's critical to make sure the product is 'low-VOC' or 'zero-VOC', which indicate that the product isn't a significant source of VOC emissions."



Experts say those dedicated to using their homes as a jumping off point to better health should be in it for the long run. "There is no silver bullet," says Nate Adams, whose Ohio company, Energy Smart Home Performance, specialises in – among other things – protecting indoor air quality.

[Joakim Cimmerbeck on the benefits of his non-toxic Eico paints](#) [6]

"The way to make a home healthy is to bring its systems into balance. Get good control over air, heat and moisture flows. The basics are: filter particles out of the air. Keep humidity not too high and not too low. Keep enough fresh air in a building to keep carbon dioxide levels between 500 to 700 parts per million. Truly making a home healthy is not the result of a few gadgets."

Probably not, but Cinzano says he wants to share what he's learned with a wider audience; his goal is to create an international design firm that helps build affordable living spaces that are truly healthful.

"It would be the coolest thing," he says. "If you live in a healthy environment, it can really change who you are on every level. It can extend your life, and give you more quality of life."

Nine ways you can start making your home healthier - designers' tips

1. Use an organic mattress and bedding, such as sheets made from organic cotton, natural latex pillows, and pillow cases that repel dust mites.
2. Hook up all your light switches to a main switch so that, when you turn off the lights at night, everything goes off and you can rest in darkness.
3. Get rid of those PVC shower curtains – mould spores love living in them. Instead, use waterproof fabric, if you need to.
4. Invest in a dehumidifier. That goes without saying in Hong Kong, but get one that has been rated for performance.
5. Deep-clean with certified green cleaning products; it's essential to do this before moving into a new or renovated space, but should be carried out regularly in any case.

6. Cedar wood can be used to keep the air fresh and naturally repel bugs.
7. LED lighting should match the early morning sun in the first part of the day, and be dimmed down to a warmer light for evening.
8. Look for recycled or antique wood furniture: chances are the chemicals they once emitted have long since evaporated.
9. There is such a thing as organic furniture – using fabrics certified as meeting the Global Organic Textile Standard for being free of toxins: they could be made of 100 per cent organic wool and dyed with a non-toxic dye, and then used with alder or maple woods certified by the FSC (Forest Stewardship Council).

[1] <https://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/health/article/1295548/electric-lighting-interferes-bodys-circadian-clock-researchers-say>

[2] <https://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/health/article/2011980/bedtime-habits-unsuccessful-people>

[3] <https://www.scmp.com/news/world/article/1942172/scientists-warn-global-sleep-crisis-after-research-gathered-smartphone>

[4] <https://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/article/2057445/buildings-blend-nature-why-singapore-has-them-abundance-and-hong-kong>

[5] <https://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/article/1660388/no-more-sick-building-syndrome-homes-designed-make-you-healthier>

[6] <https://www.scmp.com/magazines/post-magazine/article/1810470/joakim-cimmerbeck-benefits-his-non-toxic-eico-paints>