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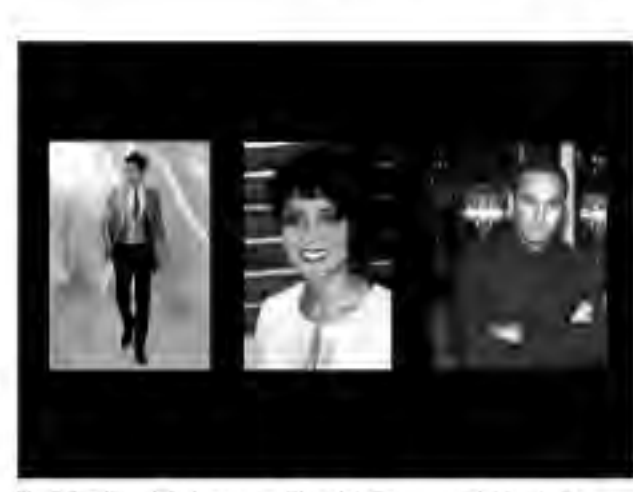
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Eastern promise
by Selina Denman on Feb 9, 2010

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Interior design

When it comes to interiors, Eastern design principles are more relevant than ever, Selina Denman discovers



[L-R] Alfred Johnson, Shashi Caan and Mustafa Khamash

With space becoming an ever-more valuable resource and sustainability becoming increasingly important, 'eastern' design principles are more prevalent – and relevant – than ever.

Interior design education has traditionally been very Euro-centric, noted Shashi Caan, president of the International Federation of Interior Architects and Designers (IFI), and founder of the Shashi Caan Collective – but there is still plenty to learn from the East.

"Western interior design education, like that of architecture, has been strongly tied to Euro-Mediterranean history. Eastern philosophy, however, holds a radically different set of design foundations and offers fascinating insights for the western designer.

"Most importantly, having developed from entirely different cultural and geographic conditions, the East challenges us to reconsider our concept of human needs and the conditions required to enhance human life – these being the central concerns of interior designers," said Caan.

While a number of countries are proving influential, Japan has emerged as a particularly important source of inspiration. "Japan is probably one of the most notable influencers at present. It may be because space and resources are becoming scarce," said Marie-Noelle Swiderski, managing director, Blanchard.

Japanese design is built upon a series of basic principles – and these are resonating with western audiences more strongly than ever. "Japanese design is very distinctive because of its culture-based philosophy and strong ties to historic tradition. It is also distinguished by a number of principals, or aesthetic terms, which include practical design elements as well as qualitative concerns such as 'building sincerity into products', Makoto, and 'peace of mind and body', Heisei, which the West might like to call wellbeing," said Caan.

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"It is only recently, perhaps through a greater sense of the word sustainability, that the West has begun to consider these broad – and vital – impacts of design. Sustainable philosophies answer to growing concerns, not only for environmental ecosystems and resource management, but also social awareness and cultural responsibility," she continued.

For many, Japanese design is defined by its simplicity. "Personally, I believe the characteristics of Japanese design are based on balance and harmony, using a simple material to create a perfect, peaceful space," noted Mustafa Khamash, managing director of Kart Design.

Balance is key, agreed Alfred Johnson, managing partner, Imagination. "Eastern design revolves around the balancing of the universe and everything within. Our interiors have taken strong cues from the Japanese, such as the use of pastel shades with strong lines to create a visual balance.

"Clean lines and a clutter-free environment full of simplicity and form are some of the defining characteristics in Eastern design. Vintage Japanese design aesthetic revolves around making the centre of a room the focal point, whilst creating a free-flowing space around it," he continued.

Understated design elements, such as shoji screens that act as room dividers or sliding doors for wardrobes, contribute in creating an overwhelming sense of calm. And at a time when over-indulgence is being shunned, such understatement is incredibly alluring.

"Simplicity, sobriety, focus and discreet elegance in moderation can only appeal to contemporary trends where excess, overstatement and flaunting are no longer fashionable or appealing," Swiderski pointed out. "We are far from Victorian drawing rooms, although that does not take anything away from their charm!

"There is true refinement in a product or a design that has obviously been thought through, to allow just the right use of material, detail and space, to achieve optimal functional, sensorial or even sensual impact and result.

"Beyond the scope of interior design or even architecture, the global love affair with sushi, in particular, and Japanese food in general, denotes a yearning for simpler choices. We all need purity, simplicity, honesty and integrity," Swiderski continued.

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