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THIS PAGE a detail from the Soft Serve project designed by YSG.



Reading the room

After so long stuck in the one spot, can the four walls we call home ever be our happy place again? By Ceri David

Anyone who's witnessed their child building a fort out of sofa cushions understands the power of interior design. With just a blanket over the top and a 'keep out' warning in crayon, they've engineered the perfect space: bespoke, adaptable and invitation-only. While the form may be basic, its function is spot-on but even more important is how it makes them feel: cosy, independent, in control.

Our adult homes may be more complex of material and more ruinous of budget, but Yasmine Ghoniem, founder of Sydney-based design studio YSG, believes the desired outcome is no different. "For me, interiors are emotions. They're not actual spaces with objects in them," she says. "It's that sense of warmth and safety that makes me feel at home. I think it's the same for everybody, subconsciously."

Of course, the concept of 'home' has undergone a monumental case of scope creep over the past 18 months, the original brief now scribbled with extra clauses (gym, classroom, DIY hair salon). Worse: we're held in captivity with our nearest and (fingers crossed, still) dearest. Home, it's fair to say, has strayed a long way from cushion-cubby status.

"That's a problem," confirms associate professor Dr Kerry McBain, environmental psychologist and head of psychology at James Cook University. "Our day-to-day habitat has a huge impact on our mood, motivation, behaviour and how we feel about the world in general, so we have to embrace that."

The likes of Feng Shui and Vastu Shastra have explored the impact of design and space on our energy and emotions for millennia. Western society has been slow to join in, but now our hand has been forced. "Thinking 'I'm stuck and I don't want to be here' doesn't >>



THIS PAGE a closer look at the Fantales kitchen designed by YSG in collaboration with Laminex.

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« get us anywhere,” says McBain. “The best way of dealing with it is to take control of what you can control, and that’s where you live. Our world has changed forever, and our home environments must adapt to suit.”

Right now, *chez nous*, we feel trapped, disorganised and crowded. Can a spot of interior design really fix such a forceful trifecta? Let’s see.

First up: feeling trapped. Granted, it’s not possible to design your way to freedom, *Shawshank Redemption*-style, but McBain says the next best thing is change.

“Humans like dynamic quality in their lives,” she explains. Usually, we’d get that from things like travel, social interactions and eating out — but you can introduce this dynamic quality at home

by deepening your connection with nature. Officially branded biophilia, it’s a desire to embrace Mother Nature via daylight, fresh air and organic materials to name a few examples, and is proven to boost physical and mental health.

Whether you do it with indoor plants, timber or a glimpse of passing clouds, natural elements bring notions of evolution indoors, disrupting your cabin fever. Chef Sean Moran of iconic Sydney beachfront restaurant Sean’s paints vegetables on his dining-room walls. McBain herself is drawn to fish. “I started lockdown with one tank. I now have five, and I’ve learned to landscape them, so they’re quite beautiful,” she details. “I can sit for hours watching fish. It’s so relaxing.”

And it even works in abstract form. “It can simply be a representation of nature,” says trend forecaster Philip Fimmano. “A rounded edge that reminds us of a pebble, or the way some finishes mimic the texture of stone. It’s also about touch, because the more digital we become, the more we need tactility.”

As for pain point number two, the disorganised state of mind at home is due to being forced to multitask. With a little help, you and your home can rise to the challenge. Start by kicking out the kids and converting their rooms into a yoga studio and a workspace. Otherwise, try zoning.

“Do an analysis of what happens at home each day for a week to see how your spaces are used,” says McBain. “From there you can work towards developing rotatable work/life stations. When the work day is over, elements can transition so an area turns back into a personal zone.”

Ghoniem’s designs often include sectioning, a design tool that works wonders on how a space feels as well as its utility. “We love screening devices that conceal something and open it back up again, or change the elevation of a room,” she says.

Consider finding a balance between positive and negative space; a middle ground that’s neither hoarder’s paradise nor forensic lab. Tipping points vary wildly vis-a-vis to clutter; exceeding your own level of tolerance will induce anxiety, so box up anything unnecessary and store it for a few months to make space.

Next on the agenda: the sense that we’re being crowded, by having to share all of the above with other humans 24/7. “We need time alone,” insists McBain. “Without it, your brain is constantly moving, observing other people, trying to figure out what they’ll do next and how it affects you. And it doesn’t matter how much you love these people.”

The design fix for this necessary me-time? Designated solitary nooks. (Crayoned ‘keep out’ sign optional.)

“People are creating areas that are like a small set,” says Fimmano. “An interesting lamp, a chair or a daybed, a side table. It’s a harmonious composition that creates that little moment of ‘I’m going over there to be alone,’ whether you’re writing an email, reading, thinking about leaving your husband...”

Combine these last two solutions, and plan your day as you would in a real office, booking areas to avoid colliding with your colleagues-slash-loved-ones.

If all else fails, move house. It may sound like an extreme flex, but it does offer a semblance of choice and action during these, yes, unprecedented times. “We’re seeing a lot more of that with clients we’ve just finished significant homes for, where you’d think they might stay for five to 10 years,” says Ghoniem. “It’s drastic, but people want a new project. And it’s almost like travelling, moving to a new suburb.”

The point is, home is your cushion fort. Whether you find a way to fall back in love with your current one, or find a new one to nest in, think back to how it once made you feel — safe, warm, in control — and do whatever it takes to make that happen again. **VL**