

House & Home



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As the latest popular movement in mental wellbeing finds expression in design, *Lucy Kellaway* invites an expert into her home

The interior world of mindfulness

There are few things in life that one can afford to take for granted, but light switches are one of them. All they require is an almost subliminal flicker from the brain and a touch from the finger, and hey presto, there is light.

Yet the latest fashion is for furniture that forbids passivity and forces us to engage with it more actively. Knauf and Brown, a Canadian design company, has come up with a lamp mounted on a wooden stick that sits in an acrylic vase. To turn it on, you have to lift it out of the vase and put it in a giant, low-voltage copper coil, which connects with a flash of copper on the stick, thus completing the circuit and causing the light to work.

To go with this large, unsightly contraption, the duo have designed a matching mirror that you can't see yourself in – as it is made of suede. It is only when you turn the thing upside down that you get to see your reflection. Similarly, there is an occasional table that you need to tow around with a stick to be able to use at all.

All this hard slog is in the name of mindfulness – the movement that teaches us how to be “in the moment”. Doctors, MPs, and business leaders have seized on it as the answer to the stresses of modern life; it was only going to be a matter of time before furniture designers joined in too. To turn on a light mindfully means being thoroughly caught up in what you are doing – and if the process takes 10 times longer, that's all to the good.

This idea of objects that clamour for our full attention is also behind a collection designed by a group of students from the Swiss university Ecal. They have come up with a light that you switch on by touching its shadow and a fan that is operated by blowing on it. Both are stylish looking if not terribly practical; yet the judges at the Milan Furniture Fair this year were so turned on and blown away they awarded the collection first prize.

It is all very well in the avant-garde design world. But at home do we really want to be down on all fours with our everyday objects?

I have some experience of what it means to be in the moment when turning on a light, having recently bought a lamp base in a car boot sale and wired it up myself. Every time I turn it on I'm mindful of how it works; but far from being a good thing, I worry that I may not have connected the wires properly and might be about to electrocute myself.

Equally, I'm entirely in the moment with my kitchen. That is because I have just finished a cosmetic revamp that has gone awry. The new floor is an egg-yolk yellow, which is so overwhelming that I have had to paint the walls grey to tone it down. Every time I walk into the room I am on full alert, thinking does this work?

What I long for instead is something that fosters passivity. I dream of taking my kitchen for granted once more. But is this unmindful? And is it therefore wrong?

Helen Sanderson is a therapist and designer who is an expert on mindful interiors and founded the Ministry of Calm. Encouragingly, she is not



Helen Sanderson, (left in main picture), with Lucy Kellaway in the latter's kitchen

Photographs: David Sandison

especially impressed by the lamp in the copper coil. She says it might be OK for a real mindfulness freak. But for the rest of us, it is better to do things on autopilot, as it frees our minds to do other things.

Yet what about our homes more generally? Is passivity a good thing, or not? I suspect I am calmest and happiest in a house I don't see at all, which is an irony given the effort I put into making the place look good. It is only when things are wrong that I notice them. Once they are right, I sometimes think “how nice” in the vaguest sort of way, but otherwise I wander about, happily oblivious.

Sanderson replies that houses, like gardens, grow and change and need constant pruning and replanting. You need to tend them every now and then, but not so constantly that you are prevented from getting on with your life. When you have started changing things, you need to finish



Kitchen shelves



Kitchen shelves after being rearranged by Sanderson

the revamp to “release your energy”. To get stuck, like I have, is bad. I must finish my revamp and stop thinking about it.

The first thing that grows in houses is dirt, she says. My house, I'm pretty sure, is spotless as the cleaners had just been in. Sanderson glances at my new lamp and suggests I do something about the grey thatch of dust that has collected on the shade. “Do you have a cleaner?” she asks, glancing at a long, dangling cobweb in the corner of the sitting room.

Now that she has drawn my attention to the dust and the cobweb, I urgently want them gone. Yet when I was blind to them, they didn't matter, which surely proves that dirt is only a problem if you look for it. One of the happiest people I know lives surrounded by filth and half-empty bottles and cans sitting on sticky counters, oblivious to all of it. Sanderson doesn't agree. Even if you aren't conscious of dirt, she says, it still subliminally prevents you from being truly calm.

After dirt, the second enemy of mindfulness is clutter. I am with Sanderson on this, although I explain that for me clutter is other people, and they are rather difficult to take to the rubbish tip.

A family house is inevitably strewn with children's discarded shoes and socks, piles of newspapers, empty yoghurt pots and beer cans. Short of throwing my family away, I've recently adopted the strategy of confining them to their own little pigsties and keep well clear myself. Sanderson suggests I train the children better instead. It is an excellent point, except that since they are grown up, it's a bit late for that.

As for the yellow lino, her verdict is polite, if a little implausible. “Yellow is a good colour for eating. It helps with the digestion.” The problem is less the colour itself than my attempt to make it look deliberate by adding yellow cushions, a vase of sunflowers, a big yellow (chipped) fruit bowl. The effect of this on the mind was very uncalming, she explains. “The eye constantly is looking for the other yellow.” So I swept up all offending items and put them in the hall.

Next she set to work on my shelves, removing half the things I'd arranged there: a pretty, lustreware jug with a broken spout; a bowl of wooden fruit; assorted plates; candlesticks.

Another problem is the refrigerator, which is draining my energy by forcing me to walk to the other end of the room whenever I wanted milk for my tea. “Ease is part of calm. Your house must support you,” says Sanderson. The fridge would be better moved out of its corner, but to do that would attract attention to how ugly it is. The answer, she says, is to buy a Smeg. I have always resisted buying one, partly because the name sounds like Smug and because they cost three times as much as normal ones, but I'll now almost certainly buy one, telling myself it is not an indulgence – I've been prescribed one by a therapist.

“We've taken the temperature down a bit and created more harmony,” Sanderson says, surveying her handiwork. I look around and even though I don't feel calm, I do feel pleased – as well as vaguely annoyed that a mindfulness expert can make a better fist of arranging my kitchen in half an hour than I've made in a decade.

‘Do you have a cleaner?’ she asks, glancing at a dangling cobweb in the corner of the sitting room

Yet to have a properly mindful home, a harmonious kitchen won't do it. What is needed is a special empty space in which to sit quietly and listen to yourself breathe. I suggest a tiny room at the turn of the stairs that used to be my study but I no longer use as, a) I now work in bed or at the kitchen table, and b) it is full of towering piles of unsold and yellowing copies of books I've written. Absolutely everything must go, says Sanderson. All I need in there is a cushion. And maybe a candle. And a blind that will diffuse the light.

After she leaves, I go to work at once throwing things away. Never mind mindfulness: having a jolly good chuck out is one of the surest ways of lifting the spirits ever invented. Even though I'm not quite ready to sit on a cushion and breathe, I could always use the empty room as a refuge from the yellow. Though now the kitchen is arranged so nicely I'm on my way to not noticing it at all.

Lucy Kellaway is an FT columnist

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