

# THE HANDBOOK



Greg Dutton's off-the-grid cabin

## The Great Indoors

*BOH's* guide to getting green—from taking your first steps toward sustainability to making your clients care.

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PHOTOGRAPHY: ALEXANDRA RIBAR

**A**T ITS BEST, great design achieves far more than just beauty—it actually improves the way people live. It is strange, then, that green and sustainable design has remained a fringe topic in the realm of interiors—a conundrum many compare to the organic food movement 20 years ago. It took a long time, but the question eventually shifted from ‘Why would you buy organic?’ to ‘Why *wouldn't* you?’ The crux of green

design is remarkably similar: If you have the opportunity to make choices that lead to healthier, more sustainable homes, why wouldn't you?

Though the Environmental Protection Agency estimates that as much as 90 percent of our lives are spent inside, there's still a major lack of transparency when it comes to what goes into our home furnishings. While the wellness craze has infiltrated popular culture in the form of turmeric lattes,

infrared saunas and ever-expanding crystal collections, we still go home and sit, sleep and eat on furniture that may be toxic—to the planet and to us.

At its core, green design utilizes skills that designers already possess. It means tapping into that same attention to detail that decorators already put into the aesthetics of a space and taking it a little further, to account for the materials and chemicals that go into those chic furnishings. For *(continued)*

instance, to get that glossy, lacquered finish on the dining room walls, are you using paint that releases toxic fumes? Does that custom settee have filling coated in flame-retardant chemicals? Is there formaldehyde in that hardwood floor? That's what green interior design comes down to—helping clients create homes that are not just visually appealing, but also safer places to live.

It can be helpful to think of green design as a spectrum, with, say, using natural textiles on the more accessible end. Greg Dutton, a designer at the Columbus, Ohio- and Pittsburgh-based firm Midland Architecture, found himself on the more extreme side of things when he built an off-the-grid cabin on his family's farm in 2018. The 600-square-foot dwelling depends on recycled rainwater and solar energy, and was designed to get maximal sun exposure to conserve energy usage. One of the most crucial parts of the process, says Dutton, was tapping a team of experts to collaborate with—especially for features like solar panels. “Having that wealth of knowledge around you and finding people who know these processes is the best thing you can do, especially if you're new to sustainable practices,” he says.

While going off the grid is a great way to radically reduce one's carbon footprint, eco-friendly design can also happen on a much smaller, simpler scale. “To me, green design is about improving indoor air quality and making choices that reduce the impact that our industry has on the environment,” says Jennifer Jones, a LEED-accredited designer at Niche Interiors. “Supporting local vendors is an easy [option] and that purchase will have no carbon footprint. You might not think of that as a green choice, but it is.”

Designers are in a unique position to make choices that can positively impact the environment, while also educating their clients and changing their lifestyles. But much like monogrammed linens, green design is more popular in some parts of the country than in others. Nashville designer Stephanie Sabbe says that most of her clients express little to no interest in sustainability, while the San Francisco-based Jones says that the bulk of her clients are interested in at least some aspects of their interiors being green. (Sometimes, a client's priorities can be a study in contradictions: Sabbe recalls a recent one who wanted organic mattresses and low-VOC paint, but didn't bat an eye about the formaldehyde in new hardwood floors.)

Sabbe finds ways to incorporate green features into her work, even for less-enthusiastic clients, by framing the design decisions as a matter of durability. “People want stuff that's going to last,” she says. She cites natural hardwood floors as a prime example, as they can be stripped and restained multiple times. “You can help clients make good decisions that will extend the lifespan of their home and prove to be sustainable financially and environmentally long term. That's a conversation worth having.” For energy conservation, low-flush toilets and energy-efficient double-pane windows help diminish a home's carbon footprint, sure, but they can also reduce utility bills. “People care when it makes financial sense to care,” says Sabbe. “If they can save money through energy efficiency, they're all for it.”



A San Francisco home by Niche Interiors

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—JENNIFER JONES

A simple way to gauge a client's interest in green design is to bring it up as part of a new-client questionnaire that asks them to rate how important the issue is to them. “Most of our clients sit somewhere in the middle,” says Amy Cuker, principal designer at the Philadelphia-based Down2Earth Design. “They think it would be nice to incorporate sustainable elements into the project, but not at the expense of other priorities—which is fine with me, because there are so many sustainable design decisions that you can make that don't involve trade-offs.”

Jones, who has clients rate their interest on a scale from 1 to 10, says that even if someone claims to be unconcerned with issues like the indoor air quality of their home, there are green choices designers can make along the way. “We obviously never want to push what we want onto the client,

but we have green elements baked into our process that they don't necessarily even need to know we're doing for them,” she says. “Even if they rate themselves as a zero on that form, I can still select zero-VOC paints, source upholstery that doesn't have flame retardants, use sustainably harvested wood, work with quality vendors we trust, and put a priority on American-made furniture. In that way, we're looking out for our clients even if they think they don't care.”

While you don't need to be an expert on sustainability in order to make greener choices, educating yourself on the intricacies of the issue is an important step. The more you know about toxic materials, for example, the more aware you can be of the types of products you purchase and the companies you source from. Knowing what to look for—and to avoid—is a major component

of green design. For example, Jones refuses to use furniture containing flame retardants; if she's working with a new vendor, she calls to ask if the company uses the chemicals. “There are a few big-box furniture stores that I call once a year to see if they've stopped using flame retardants,” she says. “There are a ton of retailers, like Crate & Barrel, that are progressive and don't use them, but there are also some notable holdouts. I just keep checking.”

Dutton incorporates conversations about green design into his entire process, and includes sustainable elements along the way so that they're inherent to a project's design rather than stuck in after the fact. “That's the best way to integrate it into your practice and promote this kind of thinking to clients,” he says. “Just make it part of the whole conversation.” ■



## Museum Caliber

Two not-to-be-missed exhibitions are tackling the relationship between design and nature.

***Broken Nature: Design Takes on Human Survival***  
XXII Triennale di Milano  
MILAN, ITALY

→ This thematic exhibition, curated by Paola Antonelli, highlights the concept of restorative design and comprises four major commissions, multiple loans, and 22 international participants. (In the U.S. pavilion, “RECKONstruct” explores how new materials can help bolster a sustainable, circular economy.) “Broken Nature” is held in conjunction with a slate of conferences, panels, workshops, screenings and performances in Milan. *Through September 1, 2019.*

***Nature***  
Cooper Hewitt Design Triennial  
NEW YORK, NY

→ Encompassing more than 60 works (including garments in glowing transgenic silk, *above*) across various design disciplines, including architecture, urbanism, product design, landscape design, fashion and communication design, “Nature” highlights the ways designers across the world are collaborating with scientists, engineers, farmers, environmentalists—and nature itself—to create a more harmonious and regenerative future. The exhibition, which is running simultaneously at the Cube design museum in the Netherlands, will address sustainable production methods, identify new ways to protect future generations, and deepen our understanding of, and relationship with, nature. *Through January 20, 2020.*