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Om at Home

Soulful solutions to breathe new life into the way you live

BY JEANNE STORCK



Forget *Extreme Home Makeover*. Forget the cost and headache (not to mention waste) of a renovation.

Stop comparing your life to the pristine museum interiors showcased in the home design glossies. Keep it simple — and sustainable — by making easy, affordable changes to create a beautiful space right where you are.

Dawn Ritchie and Kathryn Robyn, authors of *The Emotional House* (New Harbinger), lament the glut of home improvement shows that “focus on just the exterior not the interior life of a home.” It’s not about the spotless granite kitchen counter top, but rather the sunny breakfast table where newspapers have been read and conversation shared over coffee,” says Ritchie. It’s about bringing a little soul into the rooms we spend time in.

And of course, no soulful addition is complete without a healthy dose of sustainable design. But greening your home isn’t simply about investing in eco products. Architect Carol Venolia believes “we’ve gotten to a place where we don’t think of ourselves as dwelling in nature. We need to blur the boundaries between indoors and out and realize we’re part of rather than separated from the larger environment beyond our own four walls.”

As you nest, remember: resist the throwaway item. Buy the oak cabinet, not the particleboard shelving; pick the cast iron skillet over the chemically laden Teflon. Patty Grossman of O Ecotextiles, a Seattle-based fabric company, marvels at how a truly organic piece of cloth can last a century or two and with wear and tear only gain in luster. The greatest home improvements are the durable

domestic objects that travel with us over the years and weave themselves into our lives.

With these tenets in mind, we bring you six easy, earth-wise solutions for breathing new life into the way you live.

Problem: Too many chaotic piles of stuff are harshing your mellow

Solution: Time to put your house in order

Seana Hansen, author of the blog *eco-organizer.com*, believes “the whole concept of organizing — purging what you don’t need, being spatially aware in your personal environment — is fundamentally eco-friendly. It encourages efficiency, conservation and simplicity.”

If you’re letting go of stuff, repeat after us: recycle, Freecycle or donate. Try repurposing jars and boxes you already have, and if you do need to buy storage or shelving, Hansen advises choosing products that use the highest percentage of post-consumer recycled content. As with anything you buy, make sure it can be recycled again.

For the design aesthetes out there, good-looking, eco-friendly storage does exist. **Engage Green’s** traymats do double duty — they’re sturdy recycled paper bins that unsnap to become placemats in chic floral and striped patterns (*engagegreen.com*). **Viva Terra’s** flashy recycled Flip Flop Bins look like they’re woven from candy-colored bicycle chains. Or if you’re seeking something a little more streamlined, check out their shelving and organizers made from recycled wood remnants (*viva terra.com*). Scott Bennett of **Housefish Key** builds sleek

What’s a VOC?

Often used in paint, carpet, plastics and cosmetics, VOCs are volatile organic chemical compounds that have high enough vapor pressures under normal conditions to significantly vaporize and enter the atmosphere. Suspected carcinogens, VOCs can cause acute symptoms like headaches and dizziness. Even zero VOC paint has some VOCs, as any paint with VOCs in the range of five grams/liter or less can be labeled “Zero VOC,” according to the EPA.

OPPOSITE PAGE

Clockwise, from upper left: American Clay wall plaster; Flor Poodle hallway border rug; Inhabit Braille wallpaper; Palace Papers Cockney wallpaper; Madison & Grow Estella wallpaper; Marmoleum Click flooring; Madison & Grow Eleanor wallpaper; VivaTerra Eco Wood Grid Shelf.

Center: Marmoleum Click flooring.

THIS PAGE

Left: Flor’s Toy Poodle rug enlivens a child’s playroom.

Right: Cozy up on Knoend’s Bean Rocker.



Get Nesty

» READ

The Emotional House: How Redesigning Your Home Can Change Your Life

Dawn Ritchie & Kathryn L. Robyn (New Harbinger)

Healing Environments: Your Guide to Indoor Well-Being

Carol Venolia (Celestial Arts)

The Bountiful Container

Rose Marie Nichols McGee & Maggie Stuckey (Workman)

» HOME-IMPROVE

Green Home Center, 1812

Polk Street, San Francisco, 415.567.3700
thegreenhomecenter.net

Spring, 2162 Polk Street,

San Francisco, 415.673.2065
springhome.com

Eco Home Improvement,

2619 San Pablo Avenue, Berkeley, 510.644.3500
ecohomeimprovement.com

Green Fusion Design Center,

14 Greenfield Avenue, San Anselmo, 415.454.0174
greenfusiondesigncenter.com

modular storage units from sustainably harvested maple plywood that's finished with zero VOC (volatile organic compound) finish. The units fit together without screws or glue, just sturdy aluminum pegs, and you can add optional sliding metal doors in a suite of bright, minimal colors (housefish.com).

Problem: Those stark white walls are making you blue

Solution: Embrace color and brighten up your world
Wisdom has it that "if walls could talk," they'd tell us a lot about ourselves. And in fact they do — they're the canvas on which we're free to express who we are: bright and cheery, cool and serene, traditional or modern.

If you want to liven up a room with a fresh coat of color, opt for paints made from all-natural substances like milk, botanicals, clay and earth pigments. Or choose a zero-VOC paint like **AFM Safecoat**, **American Pride**, **Green Planet** or the gorgeous hues from **Yolo Colorhouse**. (There are zero-VOC tints as well.)

To create a warm mood, **American Clay's** wall plaster gives a room an earthy, Mediterranean feel and can be applied directly over paint. The plaster has a laundry list of benefits — it's non-fading and easy to patch, it inhibits mold and supposedly emits "negative ions" that purify the air (americanclay.com). Or try lime plaster-based **EcoStucco**, which can be used inside or out and repels water and air pollution, absorbs structural movements and retains its color over decades (ecostucco.com).

Looking for something livelier than paint? Wake up your room with wallpaper. As the design savvy among us will have already noted, we're in the midst of a bit of a wallpaper revival, and that means more fabulous patterns are hitting the market every day. But before you grab a roll and get gluing, consider that most conventional wallpaper is made of (or at the very least, coated in) toxic PVC vinyl.

Fortunately, the newest crop of wallpaper designers includes quite a few eco-minded artisans who are substituting hand silk-screened papers and water-based glazes in lieu of the chemi-laden plastic stuff. **Mod Green Pod** (modgreenpod.com), **Madison & Grow** (madisonandgrow.squarespace.com), **Palacepapers** (palacepapers.com) and **Pottok Prints** (pottokprints.com) all feature gorgeously green works of art.

If the landlord won't let you paint or paper, try removable wall treatments. **Sherwin Williams'** non-vinyl **EasyChange** sheets go up and come down without a trace — and without solvents. You can also look for exotic flora and fauna patterns by UK designers **Graham and Brown** (grahambrown.com). For something sculptural, **Inhabit's** (inhabitliving.com) embossed white wall tiles add eye-popping texture to a room with motifs such as Braille or Industry. Made from bamboo pulp, they feel like heavy cardboard and can be left pristine or painted.

Problem: You try to tread lightly on the earth, but your floors still need an update

Solution: Turn to natural and recycled fibers for an instant room refresher

Floors are the most intensely used element in a house

and we often take for granted the mysterious creaks of wooden floorboards or the warmth of a plush rug beneath our feet. Creating a foundation for ourselves that's natural and durable subtly grounds our daily routines.

Fiber area rugs add texture underfoot. Sisal, sea grass and bamboo can be cut to measure then trimmed with cloth edging. Organic wool rugs add warmth and purify the air as well as being stain-resistant and non-flammable. Make sure the backing is hemp or cotton and uses natural rubber adhesive. To warm up a tile bathroom, cut a lush mat from ½" wool pile. It looks and feels like lamb-skin and offers an instant foot cozy when you step from the shower.

FLOR modular carpet tiles make for a quick room refresh. These sleek, boldly colored 20" squares are held down by adhesive dots and can be endlessly rearranged (or individually replaced, should you spill an errant glass of wine). Although the carpet is not 100 percent organic (it's a mix of natural fiber and recycled nylon and polyester), it is low VOC and uses a cradle-to-cradle model in which every tile can be recycled into new carpet (flor.com).

If you're looking to redo an entire floor, cork and Marmoleum offer a sturdy, sustainable alternative. Available as interlocking tiles, both can be laid over existing flooring. Cork insulates for sound and warmth while supporting backs and knees and Marmoleum's anti-static and anti-microbial material improves air quality (forbolinoleumna.com).

Problem: Your retro armchair needs a little TLC

Solution: Give your flea market finds an organic makeover

It used to be that buying organic upholstery fabric made you feel virtuous, not fashion forward, but a growing number of online stores offer stylish options that are also kind on the earth.

Patty and Lynn Grossman of **O Ecotextiles** produce high-end artisanal fabric that is truly 100 percent natural. "Wool or cotton can be organically grown," they explain, "but for softening or dyeing, toxins might be used, so definitely ask questions" (oecotextiles.com).

At **Near Sea Naturals**, a small family-owned business, the emphasis is on working with the innate textures of cotton and hemp and the natural flame-retardancy of wool to create sturdy, eco-friendly fabric. Woven cottons in delicious colors like Frosted Moss, Pearl Barley or Brown Sugar offer more muted hues. Near Sea Naturals also carries aforementioned wallpaper designer's Mod Green Pod cotton fabrics, which are hand-printed rather than dyed. Whimsically named samples like Licorice Jubilee and Chocolate Clara offer a hip, updated take on the swirling Victorian vines of William Morris (narseanaturals.com).

For seat cushions, **Eco-terric's** Rowena Finegan, a certified Bau-Biologist, uses natural latex foam. If you'd like to touch up the wood frame, use BioShield plant-based resin and oil stain finish. And finally, top off your new piece with an Eco-terric throw pillow covered in elegant



From top to bottom: Let Knoend's Lite2go hanging lamp light up your life; Furnishing is a breeze with a Housefish modular storage unit; Say goodbye to blah beige walls with marvelous Madison & Grow wallpaper.

Kalamkari fabric — a hand-woven organic cotton that's block-printed with 100 percent natural dyes by fair-trade artisans in India (eco-terric.com).

Problem: You dream of being a city farmer but don't have a backyard

Solution: Exercise your green thumb with a container garden

Even the most space-challenged urbanite can grow food indoors on a windowsill or outside on a stairway, deck or even a roof. Cultivating a garden, however small, brings outside awareness indoors — you'll begin to notice the weather and pay attention to where the sun falls in your apartment.

Any area that gets at least four hours of full (ideally southern) sunlight can become a mini-garden. Pick up a copy of McGee and Stuckey's *The Bountiful Container* (Workman) — the go-to reference for apartment dwellers looking to produce food in small spaces.

Fill your windowsill with herbs. Chives, basil, lavender, parsley, mint and thyme are all good starters. Outdoors on a stairway, lettuce grows easily and abundantly if given full sun. McGee advises to "think vertical" and use hanging baskets to increase your growing area. Suspend a container of cherry tomatoes up high and make room for a bucket of squash or cucumbers below.

For the more ambitious, try a mini orchard. Meyer lemon and Kaffir lime trees do well indoors, and blueberry bushes, figs and even some varieties of apple, peach and nectarine can be grown outdoors in large pots.

Invest in a self-watering container, which saves on space, time and most importantly, water. The commercially made **Earthbox** comes with detailed instructions on how many seedlings to plant and when to water (earthbox.com). Better yet, make your own using a hand-me-down five-gallon food-grade PVC bucket and follow Erik Knutzen's video instructions on howto-homestead.org.

Problem: You want to let your light shine without being an energy vampire

Solution: LEDs - This bulb's for you

As city dwellers, we've lost our connection to the natural rhythm and energy of daylight. We no longer rely on the sun to keep time and we've forgotten the pleasures of wrapping ourselves in line-dried sheets.

Architect Carol Venolia urges her clients to build in a way that "draws every last drop from natural light to increase energy efficiency. If you can't renovate because you rent or if you live in an older, not-so-green home, you should still work with existing light. Watch where the sun falls and use it to illuminate your indoor work whenever you can."

When you *do* need to turn on the juice, here are a few lamps made from sustainable materials that we've given the green light. Double points if you use Light Emitting Diode (LED) bulbs. Before you balk at their price, consider that LEDs are more than twice as energy efficient and can last three times longer than CFLs (imagine not having to change a light bulb for 15 years!) and don't contain mercury.

Green Light Concepts rescues the glass lenses from old traffic signals that would otherwise go to landfill and turns them into "retro-modern" lampshades (greenlightconcepts.com). For muted light, the **MIO Shroom** perches on the tabletop or floor looking like an ethereal mushroom. The soft felt shade made of 100 percent wool gives off a diffused glow (mioculture.com). The **Lite2go Lamp** by **Knoend** cleverly eliminates packaging. The recyclable polypropylene shade snaps together to wrap up a seven-watt CFL with an electric cord and socket (it's also LED compatible). Simply un-snap and plug in (knoend.com). And if you've got a big enough deck, dine outdoors under the stars (with a meal grown in your city garden) and hang some Soji silk solar lanterns to light the festivities (gaiam.com). 🌿

Jeanne Storck lives in San Francisco where she writes, gardens and has several home improvement projects in the works.