

Lifestyle

No more sick building syndrome with homes designed to make you healthier



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Paul Scialla's New York apartment.

For years there's been a niggling worry that our indoor environment is making us sick. Toxic paints, dodgy air conditioners, all kinds of nasties contained in furnishings – even our cleaning products have been blamed for a heap of ills.

New Yorker Paul Scialla was someone who wondered if it was possible to reverse the process. Could buildings not only stop making us sick, but actually make us better?

So the former Goldman Sachs banker set up Delos, a research, consulting and real estate development company placing health and wellness at the centre of design. Delos pioneered the WELL building standard that, after a two-year pilot, was ratified in October 2014.

WELL is a performance-based system for measuring, certifying and monitoring features of the built environment that have an impact on human health and well-being, including air, water, nourishment, light, fitness, comfort and the mind.

According to Scialla, the standard "is grounded in evidence-based medical research that demonstrates the connection between the buildings where we spend more than 90 per cent of our time, and the health and wellness effects on us as occupants".

Scialla hopes that WELL certification will do for the indoor environment what LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) has done for construction: be a benchmark for developers and attract a premium from end users.

Scialla says his intent was always that WELL would work in alignment with LEED, the Living Building Challenge, "and other leading global sustainable building programmes".

Property firm CBRE's new global corporate headquarters in downtown Los Angeles, which opened in November 2013, was the world's first commercial office space to be both Gold LEED and WELL certified.

Scialla unveiled his ideas in 2011 at his own family home - a wellness loft in Manhattan's Meatpacking District. The loft is ergonomically designed, and contains more than 50 health-promoting features and amenities.

Many of these are low key or even invisible - such as anti-germ coating on surfaces, neatly concealed six-stage air filters, and shower fixtures that add vitamin C to the water. Others are prominent, such as hydrating stations prompting people to drink more water, and staircases in places that encourage their use instead of taking a lift.

Delos' designs "deliver preventative medicine in a passive way", Scialla says. At the same time, it has created features that "do not conflict with design preferences".

In Hong Kong, designer Rowena Gonzales, founder of Liquid Interiors, has risen to the challenge of health-promoting concepts.

When Gonzales started her interior design company, she looked at sustainability but soon realised that wellness is a major trend "and very relevant to interior design".

LEED is lacking in some ways, Gonzales says. "A LEED space may save a lot of energy, but it doesn't necessarily mean that you can feel a difference," she says.

The search for more "human aspects" in green building design led her to the WELL building standard - then still in its pilot phase - which she first incorporated into a Sheung Wan show flat completed in June 2014 for Vivid Living, a developer of healthy living spaces.

To encourage exercise within the home, Gonzales ensured there was enough open space to roll out a yoga mat, do weight training, or fit a portable TRX. That's in addition to a stand-up work desk in the study area, with a roll-out treadmill underneath, and a chin-up bar in the hallway.

To promote healthier eating, the kitchen has pull-out panels where the integrated blender and juicer stand ready for action. The rationale is that such appliances are more likely to be used if they're easy to get at.

A steamer oven replaces the microwave ("It's healthier and the food tastes better", Gonzales says), and an indoor herb garden is nestled by the windowsill.



My sleep patterns are much better because of the circadian lighting systems; I rarely get sick and I feel healthier, happier and more productive
Paul Scialla, founder of Delos, New York-based research, consulting and real estate development company

Aside from exercise and healthy food preparation, the flat also optimises the occupants' air and water quality. An Oxyvital air purifier was chosen for its claim to remove 99.9 per cent of key volatile organic compounds and particulates, and a plumbed-in water purifier, visible only via its attractive spout, replaces the clunky bottled variety.

To promote better sleep, Gonzales incorporated circadian lighting, which aligns with our circadian rhythm, the body's internal clock. Its aim is to emulate the natural cycles of day and night, which is believed important for maintaining optimal well-being.

"In the home automation system, we integrated a morning setting - a brighter light with a bluish tinge, to help you wake up and feel energised," she says.

"In the evening, it's more yellowish and dim, so that will help you sleep better." Night lights are also provided for minimal sleep disturbance during those midnight bathroom visits, while 100 per cent blackout blinds block any artificial light from the outside.

Street noise is addressed through judicious orientation of the bedroom (for example, placing the bed away from the road, and utilising wardrobes as a sound buffer), insulating the windows, and sound-proofing the walls. "We also chose an air conditioner that is really quiet," Gonzales says.

The entrance incorporates a niche for Buddha because "for us, healthier living is about your spiritual well-being as well", she says. A lot of thought also went into providing ample storage and concealing objects such as the television to create a clutter-free environment, in the belief that less mess equals less stress.

Gonzales incorporates many similar features into her residential, office and institutional projects. Her offices routinely have some bar-height tables so people have the option for stand-up meetings, and put printers and rubbish bins in places where workers have to get up and walk to them.

"In my office space, we have a TRX trainer in the ceiling to encourage people to get up and stretch during breaks," she says.

The intent is to create spaces in which people can be healthier and feel better. How do they shape up? Scialla has a vested interest, but says he has felt healthier since moving into his home in 2011.

"My sleep patterns are much better because of the circadian lighting systems; I rarely get sick and I feel healthier, happier and more productive," he says.

As for the costs involved, Michelle Moore, senior vice-president of the International WELL Building Institute (also founded by Scialla), says that, based on early experiences during the pilot, the additional investment to achieve WELL was less than 3 per cent for projects that are also pursuing green building certification.

The industry response to date has been strong, Moore adds. "Nearly eight million square feet of commercial and multi-family building projects have registered to become WELL-certified. Market leaders, including CBRE, whose global headquarters was the first, are embracing the business benefits of health and wellness real estate."

To date, 30 per cent of WELL-registered projects are outside the US, including projects in China, Moore says. "Given the potential economic returns for corporate owners and real estate developers, we are confident that WELL certification is a good investment," she says.