

Life-Enhancing Minimalism

Interview
TOMIO NAGAOKA
Photography
ERIC LAIGNEL

In the complex world of eyewear, the most beautiful designs are often the most simple, seamlessly integrated with our own sense of identity to enhance our wellbeing while enhancing our sense of style. The fundamentals of good quality design are universal attributes and what better place to learn about them than from one of the top design firms in the world: Clodagh Designs. Acclaimed designer Clodagh has been redefining the world we live in, from private sanctuaries to aspirational spaces like luxury hotels and spas, through her studied application of interior design strategies that blend her own brand of "Life-Enhancing Minimalism™" with a wide range of influences from Feng Shui to chomotherapy.

Her innovative approach to interior design includes an award-winning portfolio that spans projects in more than 30 countries. Since the beginning, Clodagh has been inspired by the environment, championing eco-conscious projects around the world. Today, Clodagh's designs can be found across a broad range of projects from million-square-foot hotels, residential buildings, international spas, private residences, restaurants, retail stores and showrooms to women's apparel and cosmetic packaging, branding, furniture, and even on private jets and luxury yachts.

What she has learned from her many years of designing spaces is that design is not just about design but about "creating experiences that people can enjoy". Clodagh takes a holistic approach to design with the ultimate goal of supporting and enhancing wellbeing through her interpretation of the spaces around us. Her third book called *Life-Enhancing Design* on the subject of designing for wellbeing will be published later this year. She tells 4SEE about her storied career as a designer, her design philosophy, and the transformative power of designing environments for living well.

What is your "core" design philosophy? Are there one or two very simple words to describe it that are unique to you and to no one else?

Life-enhancing minimalism. Everything that you need, but nothing more than what you need. But everything that you need to feel well and happy. Because I believe in design for wellness. I design for wellness and make sure that homes support peoples' lives. I like universal designs—you're designing for babies and hundred-year-olds. It's a whole-life process.

As an interior designer, one of your hallmarks is that you are very particular about materials, and textures... Can you tell me why that is?

That's what I'm all about. Because nature is full of textures. Although I like shiny and hard things too, you need the counterpoint, I think. I think design is like composing music. There's a theme that runs through, there are high notes and low notes. If it's all one note, it's boring. So the textures are incredibly important to me. Also, I've been working since 1986 with Feng Shui and biogeometry, biophilia, chromotherapy... I'm very careful how I weave these modalities into my work, and use experts to help me to do that. So that people really feel comfortable and safe when they're in one of my spaces

So it's not only about the beauty in design?

Design is not about design. Design is about creating experiences that people can enjoy.

How do you get that inspiration when you're discussing a project with a client who may not know anything about interior design?

Well, the client may not know anything about interior design, but everybody is a brand. Every person is a brand. For example, I have a saying that you can put the same ingredients down in front of 50 different chefs and you'll get 50 different dishes. So we very often use words to write a narrative before we put lines to paper. We actually interview the client, and ask them very firm questions. That interview is extremely important because that's what I consider the branding process. Design involves a huge amount of observation, psychology, and watching how people move through space.

Your sort of approach applies to any kind of interior design...

It does, and now we also do consulting on gardens and art, as well. I very often sit in a café and just watch people. We're doing a big hotel and restaurant in the Cayman Islands, and yesterday the team went out, and we had a drink, and just watched how the chef and restaurant that



we thought was the closest to what we might be doing prepared the food — how they styled it before they presented it. Because you really have to think of the "back-of-house" and everything. It's not just "front-of-house". So we design, in a sense, from the inside out, as well as from the outside in. I think a lot of design is from the outside in, we're from the inside out.

I've witnessed that many interior designers' work looks obsolete or stale after a number of years. Your work, on the other hand, becomes enriched as time passes. Why is that?

You see, I don't believe in trends, I believe in movements. My movement has always been toward simplicity, comfort, joy, wonderful art, wonderful food... and I've also been very influenced by Japan. Before I was ever there, people thought I was influenced by Japan. Perhaps I was Japanese in a past life... but you see the beautiful buildings in Japan, they don't change, they're just beautiful, that's it! Even from architects like Tadao Ando, they don't change, they're just beautiful. There's no need to constantly change, just go in the right direction. If design is honest and you're really taking care of people, and taking care of what they need, it's going to last forever.

You started out as a fashion designer when you were a teen in Ireland, but at some point you changed your career from fashion design to interior design. How did that come about, and why?

Well, I changed husbands, countries and careers, basically. I was a fashion designer—I had a very well-known company—but I didn't have a good marriage! [Laughs] So I met a man, married him, and I wasn't quite sure what I was going to do. I closed my business in Dublin, and he decided he wanted to live in Spain for a while. I didn't speak Spanish, so I asked him if I could take care of the old house that we had bought on a really beautiful old square. I could deal with the architect and I was going to learn Spanish along the way, while he did his business. And I realized, when I was talking to the architect, that the architect was not really very clever about how people live—where a dining room should go in relation to a kitchen, and stuff like that. So I kept drawing over his drawings. The old house had been abandoned for a long time, and it was just very dusty and old—it was a beautiful old house. And the day the demolition happened... there were 4-meter shutters looking out over the old square. They were open, and the dust was everywhere. The sun came in the window and hit the dust, and made a beam of light. I looked at the beam of light, and it just occurred to me that "this is what I want to do, I want to design spaces. I want to create experiences." So when my husband came home that evening, I said "Daniel, I have decided what I want to do." That's how it started.

Now you're one of the most celebrated interior designers, and possibly the busiest female designer in the world. So I imagine you're involved in many projects, but what's holding your focus right now? Can you tell me about them?

Well, there are many of them [laughs]. We're just finishing the interiors of 1,800 apartments in Jackson Park in Queens, in New York City. We're working on a very large building in San Francisco, rentals and condos—it's our sixth project for the same developer. They do very well with our projects, people line up for them. I'm working in Washington, and we're doing a very big resort in Kaplankaya, Turkey. It's about 60 acres. We're working with the landscape, I think it's 150 hotel rooms, and a massive spa. Also, we're developing new licenses. We've got a wall covering collection coming out in late fall. We've got a faucet collection, which has just come out and we're developing. We just signed up recently, spring last year, with Restoration Hardware, and we're continuing with them. I think what makes our design a little different is the amount of research we do. We've been researching the healthy brain. There's an institute for the study of the healthy brain in Wisconsin. I've been out there, and listened to the speakers, and actually presented to the Dalai Lama, which was really extraordinary... And we think, "what makes people happy?" That research is what really fuels us. It's a question I ask people when they're presenting to me in the studio, "Is that going to make you feel good?" When I went to Tibet in 2007 I bought myself a great new camera, and started to take photographs myself. I started to sell them about five years ago, so now I'm going to have an exhibition. I'm always exploring something new.

That's how I've always seen you for the past 30 years. Always exploring, always moving forward with things people haven't seen, something new. But not "trendy new".

Not trendy, no. With my clients, I don't let up until I feel that something's right for the wellness and health and joy of the people who are going to be there. It's funny, one of my clients emailed me the other day and he wrote "Relentless, Clodagh!" [Laughs.]