

BUSINESS OF HOME

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THE LEADERSHIP ISSUE

Inside the Work & Lives of
8 Visionary Women



THE PATHFINDERS

2018 has been called the Year of the Woman, and the design industry is ripe for its own revolution. Meet our shortlist of the leading female changemakers and boundary breakers as they share their stories.

AS TOLD TO KATY B. OLSON

ILLUSTRATIONS BY MONICA AHANONU

Keia McSwain

Holly Hunt

Wendy Goodman

Deborah Berke

Aneeqa Khan

Susan Lyne

Kelly Wearstler

Clodagh



GURU

Clodagh

Irish-born fashion designer-turned-interior designer Clodagh is a minimalist master of the principles of feng shui, chromatherapy, biophilia and biogeometry. Yet, for the mononymous designer, the tenets that ground her work boil down to two essential elements: simplicity and kindness.

I was born in Oscar Wilde's country home. We moved five times before I was 16. I was packed off to boarding school for four years of it.

I've always been a minimalist. My house as a child was stuffed with antiques, which kept

getting sold. We were downwardly mobile. One entire huge sideboard of silver went out one time, and that was a blessing, because we children had to polish it. What has made my work so simple and, in a sense, muscular, is that in my family you had to take care of the furniture. I think the furniture should take care of us.

I started my own fashion company in Dublin when I was 17. I had fallen off a horse and broken my back, so I was on my back for a long time. While recovering, I opened *The Irish Times* and saw a little ad for the Academy of Dress Design. "Why not be a fashion designer?" it

read. I decided there and then. My father wanted me to do classics and mathematics and become a professor, but I went against him. My mother gave me 400 pounds—and my father locked me out of the house. He [only] welcomed me back about 10 months later, after the Irish Cancer Society gave me a fundraising fashion show at this smart hotel and it got written up in the *Times*. It got lots of photographs.

I never had a game plan. I just wanted to be the best that I could be in whatever I did—ever. So I tried to be the best in fashion. When I left fashion, left Ireland, and changed husbands, I tried to start what I'm doing now—and again, I just wanted to be the best at it. Not the best in terms of fame and fortune, but in having people be really happy in the buildings and gardens I design.

They say that a rolling stone gathers no moss, but I've gathered lots of wisdom over my many, many trips to over 100 countries in the world. I'm always looking and testing what makes people happy, how people behave and what the cadence of their voice is to see what I can bring back, and to enrich what I'm doing. The lovely thing about being a designer—whether it's for one man in an apartment or a 400-room hotel—is that you actually affect an awful lot of people. If you affect them in a beneficial way, you're doing your job.

Leadership is doing what you think is right, quietly, not going on about it. It's being an example that people can follow. I want people who work with me to say, "I feel safe with you. I can come in and talk to you about anything." I think that's leadership—that people feel safe with you. Showing up is also important in leadership. Being aware of the faces of people who are working with you, and if you see the shadows there, trying to find what you can do to help. I don't feel like a den mother, but I do feel we're a team, and each part of the team is very precious to me—whether it's the newest intern or the highest architect, it doesn't matter.

There's a certain element of tough love too. I challenge my team: "Have you walked through this place? Where are you going to sit? Are you sure?" I'm challenging myself at the same time. When our project director is doing presentations, I'll treat myself like the client and poke holes in the presentation. So I'm not coming at it from a design point of view but from a hotel guest's point of view, or from the budget point of view. I've always felt you have to hire people that are better than yourself.

I try to follow Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh's teachings and make everything I do bring myself back into mindfulness. I follow Buddhism because it's about kindness, compassion and mindfulness. Those three things encapsulate the kind of person I want to be. ■