

Top-tier designers reject overrated Danish lifestyle fad

February 8, 2017



Miami's Monad Terrace from architect Jean Nouvel marries water, light and spare geometry to create a home bathed in tranquility. Courtesy JDS Development Group

Hygge doesn't equal happiness.

The Danish lifestyle trend promoting well-being through simple pleasures, hygge was short-listed as the Oxford Dictionaries' 2016 word of the year — no surprise given it was the subject of half-a-dozen books and countless magazine features in the US alone last year. Its focus: soothing indulgences like cashmere socks and flannel blankets, and environments big on handcrafted goods, crafts and dripping candles, all shared with good friends and family via cozy gatherings.

For many design experts, however, the Danes' hibernation-like approach — created in large part as a reaction to the country's long, dark winters — is not a blueprint that they want to follow. Instead, they prefer to create warmth, or a sense of tranquility, with more minimally designed products and environments.



A platform creates both intimacy and an infinite sense of space in a San Francisco home designed by Chris Weir and Susan Collins Weir (inset). John Sutton; Stephen Buskin

“I’ll go on record as saying I’m pro-anything Scandinavian, but [hygge doesn’t seem like] a strategy for long-term comfort,” says designer Chris Weir. His most recent project with his wife, Susan Collins Weir, is the renovation of a multistory Edwardian condo in San Francisco. In addition to having clean lines, austere furniture and lots of white space, and includes an intimate seating area (on an open platform) tknock-out bursts of color and the owners’ collection of sentimental art and photographs.

“The goal is to make a space decluttered without taking the life out of it,” says Weir. “You clean the space and then those warm elements really stand out.”

Whitespace, the new Flatiron showroom that is online home goods retailer Snowe’s first brick-and-mortar outpost, has an anti-twee philosophy that also does not exclude comfort.

“Hygge has a softness and a coziness that feels safe, but what about design accentuating, elevating and highlighting your experiences and getting beyond uni-dimensional coziness?” asks Andres Modak, Snowe’s co-founder. “Sometimes you want to think beyond safety to complexity, crispness, coolness. ... Simplicity leaves room for the interesting stuff.”



Monochrome palettes at home goods retailer Snowe pair well with comfortable pieces, like the Sail Pouf beanbag chair by GAN (left); Snowe co-founder Andres Modak (right). Snowe; Evan Robinson/evanrobinson.com

In the showroom, he says, the “pieces ground the soothing, neutral monochrome tones with a pop of soft pattern and texture.” Examples include throw blankets made in Italy from Mongolian cashmere and Australian merino wool, as well as the Sail Pouf by GAN, a triangular beanbag chair.

“They’re wonderfully comfortable and feel fun and accessible,” Modak adds. “It’s a favorite among the team for taking break-out meetings.”

Star architect Jean Nouvel’s sharply drawn elegance can create a sense of warmth as well. The goal for Monad Terrace, his first project in Miami — which will feature a honeycomb exterior of glass encased metal and hard interior materials like black Zeus and Calacatta gold marble — is to direct residents’ attention to the views over Biscayne Bay. Rather than cocooning, Nouvel’s concept, with 59 units starting at \$2 million, embraces the outside world.

“I wanted to create a building that is like the reflection of the sun on the water. ... This symbiosis of geometry and light is the key point for me,” says Nouvel, who expects the first residents to move in next year. “It’s like the light in the eye: When you see it, you know there’s life.”

And the reflections that the light, water and building create together, he adds, “set the atmosphere for maybe a dinner with friends or time out on the terrace. ... You are completely in relationship with the beauty of the site.”

Coziness, these design experts say, can even do your home a disservice.

“This hygge trend is good for Instagram, but once you actually live in the space, it’s different,” says Virginia Valentini, who runs Spazio Primario, a firm inspired by the legendary Milan-based Memphis design group, with her husband Francesco Breganze. “The dripping candles on the coffee table might look great in a photo shoot, but when you actually need the table, it’s a mess.”

Instead, Valentini says, clean rooms provide tranquility by freeing their inhabitants from the heaviness that comes from too many tchotchkes.

One way Spazio Primario creates warmth is through the layering of materials: leather, textiles, oil-rubbed wood and dark paint colors all add depth.

Still other aesthetes agree smart design needn’t sacrifice style for serenity.

“Comfortable spaces don’t have to feel homespun. We’re really trying to inject optimism in our design, making uplifting interiors that are modern and full of light,” says Johanna Uurasjarvi, West Elm’s creative director.

Raised in Finland, Uurasjarvi knows her way around hygge and has just introduced a new line that includes boldly colored plates and textiles. West Elm’s new palette is cheerier all around, but rendered in materials and silhouettes that skew more sleek than soothing. A subdued quality especially inspires architect Thomas Hickey, whose Manhattan firm GRADE is popular with financiers and entertainers like Oprah Winfrey.

“Our work is restrained and understated so it makes the cacophony of everyday life disappear,” says Hickey, who works a lot in highly saturated grays. Hickey and his firm design their own furniture and finishes, and GRADE’s homes feature lots of rift cut wide-plank oak and walnut, and metal finishes like polished nickel and blackened alloys.

“We’re creating opportunities for comfort, but it doesn’t have to look like a big teddy bear,” says Hickey. “Our clients tend to be 35- to 50-year-olds who don’t want to go from bachelor pad to Martha Stewart. They want to raise a young family without feeling like they’ve thrown in the towel and lost all sense of style.”



Architect Thomas Hickey, of New York-based GRADE, carefully designed this subdued interior for this apartment at 87 Leonard St. in Tribeca to stave off the stresses of the city. CORE

For New Yorkers seeking the antithesis of hygge, Chelsea's Chamber gallery offers lots of choices, some bordering on the apocalyptic (515 W. 23rd St., 212-206-0236).

To wit: Carl Emil Jacobsen's fiber concrete, steel and acrylic Powder Table, pigmented with crushed bricks and stones, and Ferreol Babin's Coal Soul lamp, he calls "a matte, dark and rough piece that seems to have been burnt or aged by time."

"Our objects have something to say," says Chamber founder Juan Garcia Mosqueda, "and the last thing they consider is whether something's comfortable."

Its designs include Mathieu Lehanneur's stark Spring Lamp, where naked LED tubes sit atop luxe materials like onyx and hand-blown stretched glass.

"It's a question of confrontation," says Cedric Morisset, global director of the Carpenters Workshop Gallery, which also has galleries in London and Paris.

"Some artists ... want to create a violent or interactive impact. It's not about giving comfort."