



Simply Put

Clean lines and natural materials are just two characteristics of Asian-inspired rooms

While recent years have acquainted this country with Asia's rich cultural and culinary diversity, in design, a certain sensibility continues to be associated with this vast and varied continent. Spaces that are described as "Asian-influenced" are often sparsely decorated, simple, elegant and serene. Their materials are earthy, substantial and rough in finish. For some designers and in some spaces, such as the bath, lack of color speaks to the meditative quality of Asian religions, while others equate the Far East with a palette of coal black, fiery reds and warm coppers. Add to this a growing interest in feng shui and the look becomes a confused but quiet hodgepodge of styles, hues and textures.

The reality is that there is no true Asian aesthetic, no defining look that can ably embrace all of the countries that reside in that particular corner of the world. "'Asian' is an expansive aesthetic that extends from the most ornate Persian miniatures and tiles to Chinese gargoyles, dragons and Fu dogs and all the way to Japan, where the association is with a clean, understated look," said designer Fu-Tung Cheng, principal of Cheng Design, San Francisco. "What most people pigeonhole as Asian is that understated look."

Rooted in Japanese Zen Buddhism, which in itself was an adaptation of 8th-century Chinese T'ang Dynasty culture, said Cheng, this reverence for clean lines and the authenticity of natural materials has long impacted Western architecture and residential design. In the kitchen, Cheng suggests creating a space with a strong horizontal emphasis, which relates to the horizon and, consequently, earth. This can be done by locating a series of windows at eye level or choosing woods with linear grains.

Cheng also recommends a judicious use of wall cabinets, as they can detract from the horizontal emphasis. His preference is for an open, uncluttered space that uses open shelving whose intervals and compartments form a composition, much like the units traditionally used to display Chinese antiques. Bring an earthiness to the space with thick concrete, stone or honed granite countertops. Select natural finishes.

Following these guidelines can help impart an "Asian feel" to a kitchen, but, Cheng stresses, there is no set formula. "An Asian aesthetic is not just about having the right stylistic clues," he said. "Its essence lies in the level of craftsmanship and of the emotional embodiment of the feeling of serenity. How that is achieved is through good design."

In the bath, the Asian sensibility has become closely tied with the successful re-creation of a calming spa experience. In fact, designer Diane Lowenthal, ASID, principal of Lowenthal Partners, Norwalk, CT, has noticed more demand for this aesthetic in bathrooms than in kitchens. She credits this trend, in part, to the location of her practice, suburban Connecticut, where the residences are more traditional and the kitchens, also similarly



Asian-inspired designs often use strong horizontal elements and emphasize the interplay of textures. Here, rich wood slats are juxtaposed with cool concrete in a linear fashion, creating a serene space. Photo: © Matthew Millman

styled, often open onto other rooms. For these suburbanites, the peacefulness associated with Eastern-influenced design is ideal in the bathroom.

To convey a sense of serenity, Lowenthal keeps the designs clean, earthy and open. Color is scarce, as the focus is on the textures and finishes of materials. She favors simple, dark wood cabinets that are wall-hung to enhance the feeling of openness and honed stone finishes, such as travertine or concrete. On large projects, however, Lowenthal recommends restraint, as the overuse of stone can make a space appear cold and clinical. For accents, wall coverings resembling linen or grass or glass tiles that mimic rippling water evoke the natural world, a key component of the Asian aesthetic.

While the Japanese influence remains basic to people's perception of Asian design, that the discussion continues today suggests that the desire for this aesthetic has moved beyond being a mere passing trend. Said Cheng, "I'm hoping, at least for myself, that it becomes more of an idea of timeless design, something that hits you emotionally and that you can keep coming back to." With globalization a growing force in everyday life, his hope may soon be reality. ■

—Alice Liao