



Can Your House Heal You?

Decorator Lucie McCallough thinks so. She turned her Massachusetts home into a lab experiment, testing the effects of natural, nontoxic materials on her health problems—while refusing to compromise on style.

BY SOPHIE DONNELSON
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MONICA SPIEZA

I was a few hours after the arrival of the container—40 feet long, straight from Hong Kong and dense with the McCallough family's earthly possessions—that the opening fire returned, but instead of revealing its contents and arranging in the way only a decorator could, a team of global laborers could. Lucie McCallough embarked down a rabbit hole to find some answers about why her body seemed at odds with her environment. Here in the States, months after not feeling well in Hong Kong, McCallough gave convinced it was her furniture that was making her sick.

After a decade in Asia, this peripatetic British former fashion designer and her husband, Roman, a financier, had planned to settle their family into their home in the leafy Boston suburb of Concord. "I was convinced we'd move into a traditional New England clapnet or saltbox," says McCallough. But no, they still for a 1940s stucco that looks as if it had been plucked straight from Kent. It was "the most English house in the area."

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as McCallough calls it, and seemed especially so during the morning, when the two open fireplaces were roaring—crisp for a Brit, she claims. "Plus, there was a vintage Barneys bag in the driveway. . . . They really put it on for me!" But for the time being, the family hauled all their crated furniture out to the property's stables. Mold tests came back positive. The family's own perspective moment would have to wait.

About 18 months later, while tending to their third baby (of now four) and prepping to renovate, McCallough and her husband met someone at a local restaurant who mentioned a natural

home store in a nearby town. "I showed up at the shop the next morning, and the owner told me all about natural building practices," she recalls. "It was on a plane to Costa Rica that next Monday." McCallough jetted to New Mexico to learn about Building Biology, a practice of nontoxic construction and home-making that originated in Germany as BauBiologie. This set of standards and practices prioritizes both the environment and the health of a building's occupants, and just maybe promised to be a balm for McCallough, who was born with a vascular condition and developed extreme allergies in Hong Kong.

While Building Biology was designed to be life-enhancing for all, the practice is thought to be especially powerful for environmentally sensitive people who suffer symptoms from triggers such as chemicals, mold and synthetic fragrances at far lower levels than the average person. McCallough counts herself among this population.

The last few years have brought increased scrutiny of indoor air quality and an onslaught of Biorec priming the culprit: Volatile organic compounds (VOCs) from carpet, paint, engineered wood and cleaning agents are a few. According to

the Environmental Protection Agency, some pollutants are found in concentrations two to five times higher inside than out. And since Americans spend about 90 percent of their time indoors—a statistic that predates the Covid-19 stay-at-home directives—the importance of nontoxic residential environments becomes even more obvious.

Renovation and demolition can exacerbate problems, releasing old toxins (from deteriorating drywall, insulation and web) into the air. It's no wonder, then, that the Building Biology practice McCallough studied is gaining traction in the mainstream.

"If you talk to someone about green home building, they drift off," McCallough acknowledges. "But when you talk to them about how they feel, their health or their kids' health, then they're listening."

Back in New England and primed to launch a healthy renovation, McCallough found herself straddled in a curious aesthetic chasm, pining her Biolog passion for global style against her new commitment to a design vernacular that implied, at well-appointed organic canvas yurt. But could someone whose resume includes a pop year in Mexico followed by stints in Rome (working for Valentino in color), Milan (Ralph Lauren) and London (British Vogue), as well as forays in design in Italy (women's shoes and a luxury hotel) and a Hong Kong decorating business, ever concede to a less than fabulous home?

Turn out the didn't have to. The decorator's decade in Asia is evident in the swankiest room, where the influence of the lounge China Club reigns. And McCallough's unshakable home-English decorating is ever-present, softening the drama. It's a family home, after all.

Many of the pieces have such intriguing provenances or attributes that you wouldn't notice their eco or health benefits. McCallough designed the geometric-pattern gold-tooled silk carpet with a print nicked from a detail on the Taj Mahal. The carpet is free of toxic backing, glues, dyes and chemical finishes, plus its silk fibers have been spared the formaldehyde typically found in commercially available rugs. And plenty of that once-erred upholstered furniture, stripped to the frame and reupholstered in back home as well.

"The metrics consider our house as our third skin," McCallough says, "and just like with our skin and clothes, we feel better when we're surrounded by natural materials. Once you realize how good you feel, you don't go back."

The swank Plaster dining chairs—so comfy they encourage dinner parties to drag on well past a commensurate hour—are a vintage score from nearby Lincoln, Mass., known for its secondary architecture. But the added benefit is that their composition—leather and metal—let McCallough and family breathe easy. Upstairs in the renovated master suite, a pair of 18th-century Shaker province screens separate the bathroom from the bedroom. The carved-wood screens underwent an extreme spa treatment before their arrival: They were stripped of their varnish in Hong Kong, defaced in a natural formula containing thyme oil



The kitchen, by Kenetic Custom Kitchen Matters in East, Mass., was built to Building Biology's nontoxic specifications. The Lucie and Roman leather bar chairs are of Lucie McCallough's own design. McCallough had the custom dining table finished with high-gloss clear lacquer, surrounded it with Eames chairs and found the Marrone Green left here in an antique shop in Tem, Italy.

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DISCOVERED FROM THE LEFT: Lark and Roman McCullough with their oldest two children, Mini, Ois, and Cian; the Negro Room, with a wicker chair from South Africa, a Chinese-style sofa from London, a lantern lamp from Hong Kong and a Hans Wegner Flag stool; a Buddha from Vermont; a Buddha from Vermont; the mudroom cabinet; was designed by McCullough and



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(which repels mold), created, shipped and finally refinished here with a rustic lacquer. Several months in a container, as it turns out, is just an invitation for mold spores. (Daria, flea-market shopper, take note.) And for that reason, the human-size reclining carved-wood Indonesian Buddha lounges in the post-lap, a most stylish exile.

It was essential for McCullough, an introverted color lover, to find alternatives to potentially toxic commercial paint. Though many homes renovated with attentiveness to health and sustainability embrace concrete, plaster and wood in their natural states—and are in turn awash in neutral shades—the designer wouldn't have it. The kitchen, basement level and hallways are painted with clay- and lime-based formulas from BioShield, producing the best-case scenario for air quality because they "let the walls breathe," she says. Even for the more jubilantly colored spaces she was able to select from Kona Paints' wide range of environmentally friendly hues, as well as APM Safecoat and Benjamin Moore Natura, which have zero emissions.

"Rooms have different needs, so I like to give each space its

own character, to let it have its own meaning," she says. The home's palette draws directly from her trips to mountainous northern Asia regions, including Mongolia and Bhutan as well as Shangri-La on the Tibetan plateau, where she sought embossed motifs and rope.

Some of the renovation obstacles had nothing to do with wellness. "I was really struggling with the American idea of a mudroom—a mess of boots and coats and open shelving," McCullough says. Her fix was to conceal the storage with a wall of dramatically overcast yellow doors with metal studs and huge handles, inspired by Chinese palaces. The hue is dubbed Middle Kingdom Yellow. "Red would have been the expected idea for Chinese-inspired doors, but when Roman said yellow, I immediately seized on the reference to the Forbidden City."

And as if by fate, two rooms were already dressed in jewel tones when the McCulloughs arrived and remain the same today: the dining room, with peely, original midnight-blue flocked-velvet wallpaper—so old it's new again—and the red-painted sitting room with a fireplace, dubbed the Negro Room.

"People gravitate toward spaces that are cozy and warm and fun," she says. "I'll light a fire in there and my kids will say, 'Mum, can we please go into the Negro Room?' Even from a young age, you create that."

But the most rewarding part of the house cannot be seen at all, of course. "Oh, I felt better right away," McCullough says. "Reduced inflammation—that means less body pain, I stopped the incessant sneezing. Now I can sit with my family and look around the home we've made together. It's like flipping through a photo album of my life. ■"

