

Vegan Interior Design Week marks a step forward for animal-friendly design

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By Caroline Bourque



The vegan lifestyle is most commonly associated with food, cosmetics and fashion—less so interior design. While consumer decisions about what to eat and what to wear are made on a daily basis, decorating happens more infrequently, and is easy to overlook as a vegan opportunity—but that doesn't mean a rising community of interior designers and their clients aren't striving to bring vegan principles to the home industry.

The first annual Vegan Interior Design Week took place virtually last week from November 1 to 5, as nearly 400 interior designers, specifiers, manufacturers, suppliers, retailers and property developers united to discuss the future of conscious design and ethical homewares. The programming featured 30 experts on panels covering topics including vegan materials and finishes, biophilia, conscious home design, building biology, and practical advice on marketing, public relations and communicating vegan values to potential clients.

Sydney, Australia–based interior designer **Aline Dürr** began formulating the idea for an event to bring together the vegan design community while conducting research for her book, *Vegan Interior Design*, which was published in September 2020. In March 2021, she started planning the conference in order to bring together the field's far-flung specialists—and ultimately rounded up speakers from the U.S., Australia, South Africa, Greece and Canada.

“I wanted vegan interior design professionals worldwide to know that they are not alone,” says Dürr. “We all have the same end goal—the end of animal exploitation and more sustainable and healthy surroundings for everyone—and therefore we love seeing each other's businesses thrive and grow.”

For speaker **Risha Walden**, principal designer and owner of the New Jersey–based firm Walden Interiors, it was a revelation to finally be among like-minded design professionals after practicing for several years as the only vegan designer in her area. The initial

decision to center her work around vegan principles, she says, began as a natural growth of her personal choices to follow a vegan diet.

“I quickly realized that even though I was choosing not to eat animals for moral reasons, I was selling them and making money from them, because interior design is prolific with animal products,” says Walden. “I wanted to align my personal choices with my business principles.”

The ways in which animal products are incorporated into design go beyond the well-known leather sofa example, Walden explains: Clients and designers alike don’t often think too hard about the fact that down (found in upholstery, pillows and furniture) is sourced from the soft feathers of a duck or goose. Even less obvious: the fact that hide glue (used to construct furniture) comes from an animal’s skin. Walden doesn’t blame anyone for not knowing, especially in the case of mass-marketed products and big-box stores—and she readily acknowledges that the long chain between purchaser and maker often makes it difficult to determine whether animal products were used along the way in a given product. Instead, she has found that it’s a safer bet to source from local or small businesses that are transparent about their operations. Creating a forum to share those products and resources, says Dürr, was another key objective in planning the conference.

Los Angeles designer and event speaker **Sarah Barnard**’s vegan design process often takes on a much broader scope than just shopping ethically for a project. With a background in sustainability and historic preservation, Barnard sees the two tenets as going hand-in-hand. If during a remodel, for example, contractors want to cut down a tree to bring a crane in to lift a bathtub through a window, she’s there to advocate for how to preserve the surrounding landscape and local wildlife to achieve the same result.

“A foundational step is thinking about how these improvements we desire to make to our lives might impact the environment locally and globally,” says Barnard. “When people think about our impacts to the environment, a lot of times our minds go to energy and fossil fuels—[but] in a much more local way, we can think about really simple ideas. If we’re going to remodel a home, are we going to disturb plant life and things that are surrounding the building that are likely supporting insects, birds, mammals of all sorts? Doing no harm is the first step.”

Practicing in the L.A. area, Barnard wasn’t lacking a community of vegan clients and designers, and instead joined the event to continue her journey in educating others about conscious design. In doing so, her guiding principle is to meet others where they are in terms of vegan design knowledge—which sometimes means accepting clients who aren’t vegan, and introducing sustainable concepts in small ways. (Since posting a transcript of her Vegan Design Week talk on her blog, she’s already had several of her own clients reach out to learn more, including one who isn’t vegan.)

Operating along the same idea, Walden has begun to notice a shift in clients’ reactions to her vegan-centered design practices in recent years, and to public opinion on the term in general. While before, the word “vegan” seemed to conjure “crunchy, granola”

connotations, she says, she thinks it has become less taboo—so much so that she adjusted her branding this year to put the term front and center in her firm’s name and messaging.

With rising public interest in vegan practices and an already-growing speaker waitlist for a future event, Dürr says Vegan Interior Design Week will likely make a return next year. As for this year, the designer says the first annual edition has already fulfilled its purpose and more.

“The event was designed to make new and nurture existing relationships across the wider international ethical and sustainable interior design industry, and encourage education and change within the non-vegan design community,” says Dürr. “My hopes were for professionals in our niche to collaborate and communicate with each other in the future—and my hopes have definitely been exceeded.”

Homepage image: Courtesy of Vegan Interior Design Week

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