

The psychology of ‘wellness’

Where is *human-centric design* more important, than in the spaces that people use the most? We uncover the ways in which kitchens and bathrooms help us to live well.

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When Eileen Gray designed the seminal E-1027 project in the late 1920s she displayed an inherent regard for the wellbeing of the occupants. Unlike its Modernist counterparts, this house was not merely a ‘machine’ in which to live, rather an extension of the human experience. As a living, breathing ‘organism’ it worked to fulfil the desires, whims and moods of the people who inhabited it and functioned to make their everyday lives all the more richer. Gray’s understanding of human behaviour and the resulting ‘wellbeing approach’ is what makes her such a pioneer. She set a benchmark for today’s designers and architects who are directly addressing pertinent issues of health and wellness – in light of the recent wellbeing movement – with innovative kitchen and bathroom designs.

As the ‘heart of the home’ the kitchen is generally regarded as the primary site for gathering. The open plan trend, incorporating cooking and dining zones, enables social activity by bringing friends, family and like-minded people together. It’s a brief that designers and architects, such as Rodney Eggleston, Principal of March Studio, are commonly used to receiving; whether for small-scale apartments or large new builds. Most of March Studio’s residential designs include open plan kitchens, with the recently completed Somers House proving a particularly compelling model.

“Our clients wanted a space that could contain their art collection,” says Eggleston.

“More importantly they wanted their new home to accommodate a large number of guests; it is a weekender, after all.” This psychological need for social interaction, family relations and friendship is cross-cultural, being as it is part of the human condition. But most significantly, these values are instrumental in generating or inducing happiness – a universal goal and aspiration that continues to remain relevant in our everyday lives. It is also a primary measure of subjective wellbeing, according to the United Nation’s World Happiness Report 2013.

As the link between sociability and positive emotions, happiness translates into greater functionality, productivity and efficiency, as well as increased longevity. The report found Denmark to be the happiest country in the world (although a new poll conducted by Gallup and Healthways names Panama at number one, with Denmark a close third). What both countries have in common, however, is a strong tradition of gathering, with high importance placed on social connectivity. Quite simply, the happiest countries in the world actively value socialising for its positive benefits and the Danes are especially renowned for this particular quality. They even have a word to describe it: *hygge*, which roughly translates as ‘cosiness’, but is more accurately understood as a sense of contentment that comes from keeping company with family and friends.

For Chema Bould, co-Director of Bower Architecture, this concept of *hygge* has informed the award-winning Hover House. “We understood the need to balance an open plan



with subtly broken-up areas, so it doesn't feel too expansive," she explains. "It was important there was plenty of opportunity for intimacy and that's why we lowered the kitchen ceiling to create a 'cave.'" Providing a space conducive to socialising allows the kitchen to be read as a metaphor for nourishment, while it literally feeds all those who partake in the cooking and dining experience, investing these simple everyday acts with a level of significance and meaning.

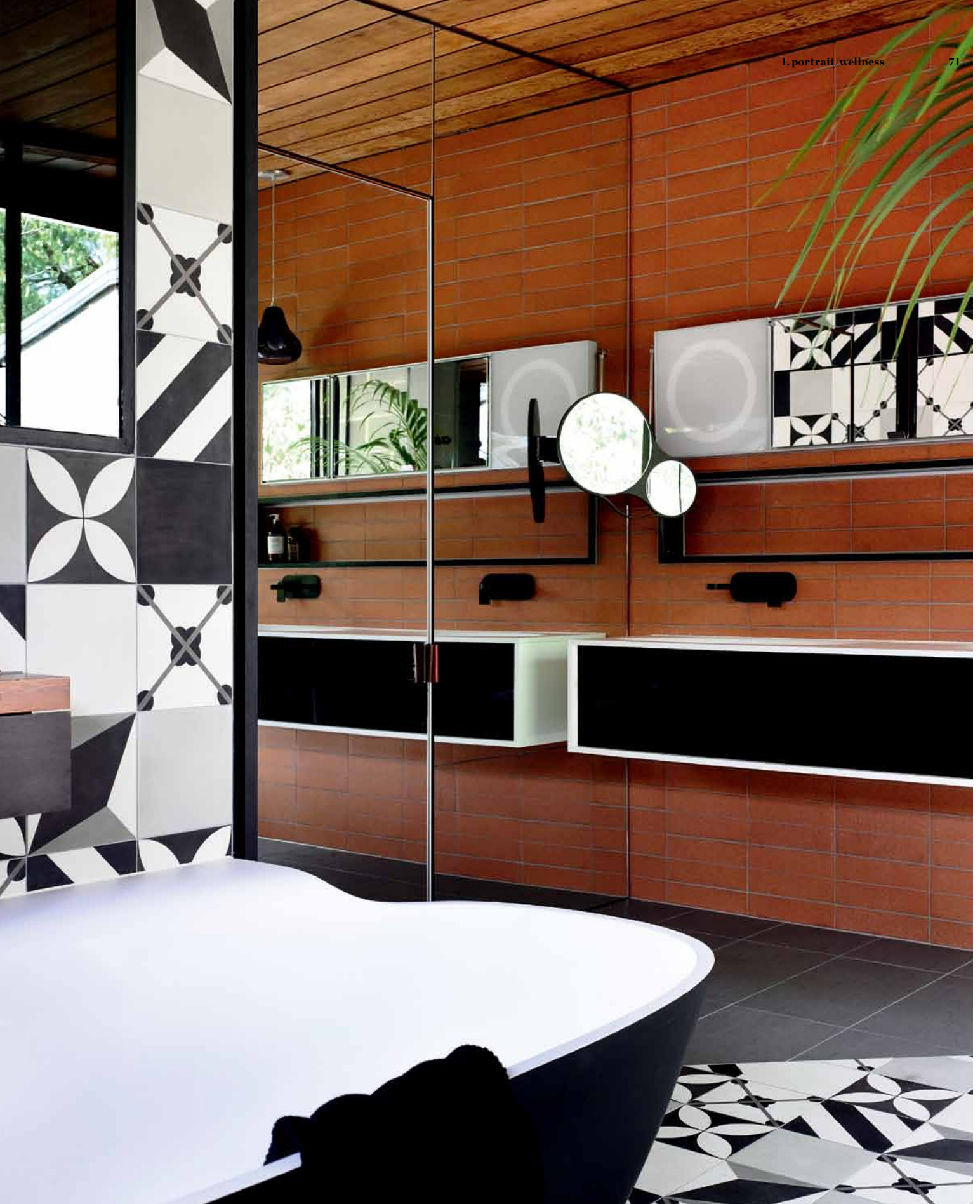
The kitchen may speak to the collective human experience through behaviours that are extrovert in nature, however, the bathroom is its polar opposite; a space that supports the individual human experience through behaviours introvert in nature. At its most fundamental level, the psychology behind bathroom design is informed by an understanding that good health and positive wellbeing should be supported and nurtured in the home. This is especially true, considering the fast paced, increasingly technology-focused, consumerist society in which we live, and our resulting desire to make the bathroom a sanctuary within a sanctuary.

Bathing is currently enjoying a resurgence in popularity as Western culture looks to Japan for inspiration. There is now the realisation that the simple act of cleansing is a worthwhile ritual benefitting both comfort and relaxation. Germany-based manufacturer Kaldewei has commissioned the Rheingold Institute to conduct surveys on the psychology of bathing,

with the most recent undertaken in 2011. What it found is that the simple act of bathing denotes a significantly transitional moment in a person's day, where everything that went before is 'washed away' and everything that comes after is new and fresh. It encourages a psychological change in attitude because it dispels tiredness or assists in the winding-down process, which ultimately aids in mental health and wellbeing.

Placing the bath at the centre of the bathroom prioritises the needs of the individual, making the experience of being in the bathroom a highly personalised one. As Head of Product Management at Kaldewei, Martin Dunisch understands the need for a solid, customised bath as a priority. "The qualities inherent in our steel enamel baths means they are made for all eternity," he says. "And so our designs are in perfect harmony with the needs of a body in search of relaxation." This supports the human desire to cocoon and withdraw within a private retreat, however, a need for connectivity still exists. While this is expressed through social interaction in the kitchen, within the bathroom this connectivity is with self, and with nature.

It echoes the Japanese tradition of *shinrin-yoku*, or forest bathing, in which all the senses are activated and is commonly recreated through the use of natural materials or opening up the bathroom's views with large windows. Letting the outside in has calming effects that detach the individual from everyday hustle and bustle.



PREVIOUS LEFT | THE HOVER HOUSE BY BOWER ARCHITECTURE IN MT. MARTHA. THE LOWERED KITCHEN CEILING HELPS TO CREATE AN INTIMATE, TRANQUIL SPACE. PHOTOGRAPHY BY SHANNON MCGRATH. PREVIOUS RIGHT | E1027 HOUSE AND FURNITURE DESIGNED BY EILEEN GRAY. IMAGE SUPPLIED BY ARAM DESIGNS LTD, HOLDER OF THE WORLDWIDE LICENCE FOR EILEEN GRAY DESIGNS. OPPOSITE | SOMERS HOUSE BY MARCH STUDIO. THE OPEN PLAN IS DESIGNED TO ENCOURAGE GREATER INTERACTION BETWEEN THE OCCUPANTS. PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN GOLLINGS. ABOVE | SWINGING SEVENTIES BY ATTICUS & MILO. GRAPHIC MONOCHROMATIC PATTERNS LAYERED WITH BLOCK COLOUR. PHOTOGRAPHY BY DEREK SWALWELL.

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It's a principle Caecilia Potter, Design Director of Atticus & Milo, applies in her renovation of a 1970s home, *Swinging Seventies*. "The bathroom design is strengthened by the views to the private garden, which lends the sense of being in a forest," she explains. "We've also found with the current renewed interest in 1970s architecture that clients are embracing many of that era's values, like casting away inhibitions and communing with nature."

While it's not always possible to bring nature inside in this way, many designers have used alternative methods for achieving this connectivity. Arent & Pyke has incorporated nature-motif wallpaper in *The Avenue's* bathroom and Eggleston's use of green within the *Somers House* bathroom is a deliberate nod to its natural surrounds. In much the same way as the kitchen nourishes, the bathroom nurtures the emotional responses of those who partake in the ritual of bathing and this is why creating a safe, cocoon-like environment is so important. Understanding human behaviour is necessary to comprehend why certain trends are adopted in the kitchen and bathroom, after all, design is simply not all about aesthetics and taste.

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Arent & Pyke
arentpyke.com

Atticus & Milo
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Bower Architecture
bowerarchitecture.com.au

Kaldewei
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March Studio
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