

Eco-Mindset

A design approach with a human touch



Debra Duneier

thinks differently about sustainability. As a feng shui master practitioner, accredited LEED Green Associate, certified Eco-Designer, and a New York State-licensed real estate broker, Duneier is the creator of the EcoChi system of design and the author of *EcoChi: Designing the Human Experience*.

In the recent NEWH Green Voice conversation at BDNy featuring EcoChi—a design approach that blends green practices with

environmental psychology feng shui—Lorraine Francis, NEWH's director of sustainable hospitality and Gensler's regional director of hospitality interiors, sat down with Duneier to talk about the company's 180-Degree certification.

NEWH: You talk about EcoChi and designing the 'human experience.' What does that mean?

Debra Duneier: EcoChi is an interior design philosophy unlike any other. We are on the forefront of environmental sustainability and wellness design. With EcoChi, modern interior design has entered a new period—where art and science meet to create the human experience. A core concept of EcoChi is that people feel best when they are connected to nature. Restorative environments have been shown to increase attention span, lower pulse rate and blood pressure, and increase white blood cell counts. EcoChi design brings the outdoors in and restores our bond with the natural world.

NEWH: How did your path lead you to holistic hospitality design?

DD: I found myself in luxury real estate by accident. I wanted to invest, so I learned everything I could about the market and got my real estate broker's license. I was selling a piece of real estate—an incredible deal per square foot—and there were perspective buyers who would walk in and run out. There were other properties where people would walk in, feel comfortable, and hang out. I realized that people have physical and subconscious reactions to spaces and that spaces have an energy of their own.

I was slated to speak at a luxury real estate conference, and I gave the organizers 20 topic ideas, number 20 being feng shui. When they chose that topic, I studied feng shui for three months. I received such a powerful response to my talk that I then studied for many years with three feng shui masters and a Taoist priest, and became a certified professional consultant. I think clients were expecting to find a feng shui practitioner with a feathered earring and tie-dyed T-shirt. That motivated me to learn everything possible about sustainability and LEED. It was very challenging since I had no previous experience in HVAC or water systems. I also completed a one-year program at New York's Holis Institute for Ecological Living.

NEWH: How did you merge your studies and experience into the formation of EcoChi?

DD: I was doing a residential project for a very famous client—a TV journalist who was convinced her environment had caused her to become ill. I realized that if I practiced feng shui in her space, I was only doing half of what was required. With the goals of heal, rest, and restore, I did feng shui energy mapping, and met with her architect, recommending Low-VOC finishes, adhesives, paints, materials, and furnishings. Green Seal-certified and LEED-compliant products were used for this project, and we flushed out the space to eliminate any remaining toxins.

NEWH: You also created a multidisciplinary project certification process, the EcoChi 180-Degree Seal certification. What are the main criteria?

DD: EcoChi 180 certifies properties and projects involving conscientious choices about sustainable materials and systems, feng shui, and environmental psychology. The certification includes a feng shui audit, documentation of sustainable products and specification, and ecologically driven choices for people and the planet, all representing a 180-degree turn for the better. We also work with tenants who may not be in LEED-certified buildings to earn EcoChi certification by making sustainable choices.

NEWH: What are the metrics indicating the success of a project designed around the human experience?

DD: This is such a new way of working that the reporting so far is firsthand testimonials from clients. I have spoken with Columbia University about tracking metrics and case studies, and my contacts there believe we are about two years out from having metrics to report. I am also working on collecting hospitality data with an expert from Greenview, which aims to advance sustainability through increasing the prevalence of metrics, measurement, and reporting. I've been asked to create the human

Sustainability



EcoChi redesigned Westport, Connecticut's Positano restaurant based on its human experience equation. Guests say they feel better in the space.

experience questions for the hospitality industry that aim to deliver the data we are seeking.

NEWH: Can you share a major hospitality success story?

DD: We were called in to redesign Positano, the Westport, Connecticut restaurant space once run by Paul Newman and connected to the Westport Country Playhouse. We designed it based on our human experience equation and the owners keep telling us that guests love the décor. But it doesn't stop there. The owners said diners are coming here when they don't feel well—be it stress or migraines—and they feel better in the space. I honestly never expected that people would come to a restaurant to heal, and it blows me away.

NEWH: What tips can you offer designers, hospitality owners, and vendors to be more in tune with your holistic view of eco-centricity?

DD: One of the most important things for hospitality designers and owners to keep in mind is that what they do with a space matters, and it is most important to be authentic. Guests walking into a space know when there is intent. I just experienced this on a recent trip, in a lobby that had a really nice fireplace and furnishings, but they're faking it. There was no real thought about the guest experience. There should be guests and staff brought in to experience the space and report on that experience with fresh eyes. Millennials and baby boomers know when something is authentic. This speaks to their core values and makes them feel great, so you can be sure they will be returning guests. ■■



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