

zen shui

the buddhist principle of wu wei
frees up a san francisco home

by andrew wagner

BY NOW, EVERY ARCHITECT, engineer, and decorator—and anyone else even remotely interested in design—knows about feng shui. Unfortunately, the ancient Taoist principle of wu wei has not been so lucky. The two share Asian roots, but that is where the similarities end. While feng shui is based on the proper ordering of all things in life, wu wei is concerned with following the sometimes chaotic patterns inherent in the universe. As the Taoist sage Chuang Tzu wrote, wu wei (literally, “non-doing”) is “purposeless wandering.” Writer, educator, and Taoist priest Ted Kardash goes a step further, explaining that wu wei is “the experience of going with the grain, swimming with the current.” So, while feng shui has been embraced by interior designers, wu wei and its more free-form philosophy, unsurprisingly, has not. With no coffee-table books or home-improvement TV shows to its name, wu wei has generally kept quiet, biding its time peacefully in Buddhist temples across the globe.

But San Francisco-based designer Robert Holgate believes it's time for that to change. “I learned about wu wei from my client and friend

Wendy Earl, a book publisher, when she asked me to design her loft,” Holgate explains. “To start the project, we spent several hours arranging things, getting a feel for what Wendy liked. The time flew by.” He continues, “After we finished, she said, ‘What an amazing wu wei session.’ I asked what the term meant, and she explained that wu wei is the process of finding the perfect place for things—letting objects go where they want to be in the world. I realized that’s the approach I’ve used intuitively all my life.”

Since that moment, Holgate has more consciously incorporated wu wei into everything he does. “When I approach a project, I try to spend some time with the clients—to get a feeling for what brings them joy,” he says. “Loving everything in your living environment is vital. Once I get a feeling for what flows best for my clients and what helps surround them with loving energy, I set out to create a home that encourages that flow.”

In Earl's loft, for instance, Holgate created spaces that would allow art to be easily moved when the mood seemed right. Since Earl's art collection is deeply personal—much of it is by

friends—it was important to allow the artworks to settle into the rooms where it felt right and not have the space dictate where each piece needed to be. Books are an integral part of Earl's life, so rather than containing them in restrictive cases, Holgate allowed them to form a serene and ever-changing hill of knowledge. Literature currently in favor sits on the surface, then gently falls to the bottom of the pile as Earl's state of mind shifts. There are no final resting places for things in a home guided by wu wei.

This may sound complex and even a bit intimidating to the uninitiated, but Holgate says that manifesting wu wei in your home is really just about knowing yourself and trusting what comes instinctively to you. “Things drift toward the place with the least resistance, it's just natural,” says Holgate. “That's wu wei.”

But what about feng shui—the indisputable heavyweight champ of interior-design philosophies? “It's great for some designers,” Holgate says. “But I function better with fewer rules. Since so much in life is not perfect, it's best to work with what you have.” ○○○○



In Wendy Earl's loft, art and favorite objects have free reign, often changing locations or peeking out from

unexpected places (opposite). Books are allowed to flow easily along a credenza in the living room (below).

