

# Zen and the art of designing

## PLAYING WITH LIGHT AND SHADE DUALISM IN THE TROPICS

BY LESLIE MCKERNS

Life is sizzling in the tropics. Heat, sun, sand and water weave a textural backdrop to our lives. Perla Lichi, renowned Fort Lauderdale based interior designer, knows much about the experiential nature of living and designing in the tropics.

"It is the nature of designers to think of the inhabitants of the building. We view it from the perspective of human experience, of bringing the outside in and providing a respite from the tropical heat and humidity. Key is not only what we see, but how we feel in a space," observes Lichi. "It is hot here in the tropics, so we're striving for a sense of freshness when you walk into a room. In tropical spaces, earth tones balanced with cooler colors provide that feeling of freshness."

Lichi is also known for a strong sense of spirituality in her designs. "When elements are properly balanced, it creates a sense of serenity. I use the five senses throughout my designs and unconsciously use the art and science of Feng Shui to bring proper balance to a space."

In an elegant, richly textured oceanfront condominium project dubbed, "Zen", Lichi demonstrates how she uses the five senses in combination with Feng Shui.

"Balance is provided by texture, color and proportion," she added. "In this case, this condominium is on the ocean, so it was a natural fit to use colors such as "Spa Blue" and "Spa Green" to bring the water colors in and

provide balance to the earth tones. Feng Shui teaches us to combine and modify elements based upon their essential energies."

In this Zen environment, Lichi balanced earth energies with water, using cooling water elements at the front door. The senses are evoked through the sound of water, calm soothing music emanating from the entertainment center, through textural fabrics, smooth and carved woods; potpourri and candles for aromatherapy.

People come to Florida to experience the sun, the water, the tropical plants and evenness to the seasons.

"I do find my clients adopting a more regional way of living, dressing and dining

based on the tropical lifestyle. It is an emotional and physical reaction to the surroundings. When you look out a window, often the ocean provides the landscape, and those blues and greens bring the essential nature of Florida inside,” adds Lichi. “Tropical homes are, for my clients, often second or third homes, so when they enter their home here, they want to be put immediately in the mood of the tropics. Often that means opening up a room to the views. In Chicago, for example, the winters provide many gray days, so windows are often covered with heavy draperies. Here, the opposite - gauzy sheers are the rule. It is all about light and airy.”

Lichi tends to use a blend of natural materials as a palette, juxtaposing stone floors, woods, marbles and stones in furnishings and fixtures, and balancing the natural materials with a range of metals.

Lichi is of a Mexican heritage and is well traveled. She finds that her clients are also sophisticated world travelers open to the many cultural influences that she brings to her work. More and more this is lending a Zen-like influence derived from Japan, China and Thailand. Currently, she finds that many of her designs are based either on an Asian influence, Tropical Modernism, or classical Old World design. “People are seeking balance and a sense of peace in their homes,” she notes.

Speaking of modernism, she added, “The Modern influence in Florida is also very prevalent. “And modern is all about what looks good now. If you think of what was modern in the '80s, it was mostly synthetic materials. Now we accomplish a clean modern look using natural materials. Interestingly, the type of person that chooses this modern aesthetic is very open to change because it the nature of modernism to be in flux. Modern will date itself to an era, whereas classical design remains constant.”

She feels that the clean, Modern influence lends itself extremely well to the tropical look. One of her projects, L'Ambiance in Fort Lauderdale was designed with such a modern, sweeping look. “The ocean and sky provides the backdrop,” adds Lichi. “The interior is punctuated with combinations of wood and natural stone, including a beautiful, translucent onyx which looks magnificent when lit from behind.”

It is this changing nature of the modern aesthetic that brought her to a current project in the works, Museum Plaza, at 220 S. Andrews Avenue in Fort Lauderdale. In a unique facelift wrought by Lichi, this existing

downtown office building has been swept from the '80s into 2005 and beyond. The developer, recognizing the importance of using interior design as a tool to distinguish his project from competition, brought Lichi on board.

“The plan was to take this 1980's building in a spectacular location, and turn it into a retail and office condominium project. The magic happened when we designed an interior based upon rich browns punctuated with a bronzy aqua,” stated Lichi. “Museum Plaza is a very clean cosmopolitan contemporary palette - light and medium earth tones with metallic accents of stainless and silver leaf. This space is sophisticated and inviting, not at all a stark walk through space.”


Though the budget was sizeable, the transformation was anything but long and painful.

“Museum Plaza was done beautifully as a mini-facelift. When the “surgeon” was done, the makeup artist transformed a plain face into that of a supermodel,” observed Lichi.

Museum Plaza will contain office condominiums ranging in size from 3,000 square feet to a 32,000 square foot penthouse unit taking up the 10th and 11th floors. In addition to lawyers, accountants and retail, it is thought that the space might also draw tech companies. While office condos have long been on the landscape, it is unusual to have retail condos, and with a sizeable portion of the building already sold out, the market bears are watching.

She thoroughly enjoyed the project, and with a smile in her voice, added, “When the penthouse people call, I will pick up the phone.”

The next thing on the horizon is going exotic. Design projects are lined up in Dubai, Kuwait and throughout the Middle East. Only logical, considering the fact that designing in the tropics has an 'other world' feel to it. “For 22 years our firm has enjoyed designing in the tropics - now we will be adding the exotic to the tropical,” Lichi said.

Contrast is a virtue borrowed from nature. Light follows dark; heat follows cold- the rhythm is cyclical. Creativity lies in exploring the contrast to the maximum and adapting it to strike a balance. Can there be a bigger teacher than creation itself? 

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