

# Comfort & Simplicity Continue to Trend

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Global influences such as hygge from Denmark, lagom from Sweden and wabi sabi from Japan focus on the kind of natural, simplistic, relaxed design that is in high demand right now.

We used to say that a man's home is his castle, but men and women alike seem to be moving away from a castle mentality and more toward a refuge mindset tied to comfort and simplicity. That is partly due to economic and demographic trends, with environmentally conscious millennial homeowners priced out of larger homes in major markets and strapped with college debt, empty-nester boomers and seniors downsizing, and the residual effects of the Great Recession, when millions of Americans saw their home values plummet. McMansions seem so last decade!

It's also due to the cacophony of daily living, where a bombardment of technology, advertising and negative 24-hour news cycles disrupt our sense of quiet, calm and well-being. It's natural – and probably inevitable – that people would seek sanctuary in their private homes. Given the centrality of kitchens and baths to our daily lives, it's not surprising to see comfort and simplicity show up in those spaces; homeowners, designers and manufacturers are all embracing the trend.

## GLOBAL INFLUENCES

Americans wanting to simplify their lives and embrace a more relaxed and sustainable way of living have numerous opportunities to learn and be inspired: Hygge (pronounced hoo-gah), from Denmark, is the best known of these movements (with 865 books listed on Amazon and 32.9 million Google results at press time), but lagom from Sweden and wabi sabi from Japan also relate.

All three emphasize natural, simplistic, easy design at home that eschews excess and perfectionism in favor of functionality and relaxed

living. How does this relate to the kitchens and baths you create for clients, and the products manufacturers and retailers offer to complete them? Two designers, an author and a manufacturer, share their insights.

## HYGGE AT HOME

"Hygge is being in touch with your innate need and desire for emotional and physical comfort," shares Long Island, NY-based designer Susan Serra. This, she says, "includes a regular supply of fresh flowers, candles, iconic Scandinavian furnishings and accessories [and] an appreciation of exposed old construction such as crooked beams, imperfect plaster or 100-year-old wood flooring. It is a home as a collection of treasured items that may not be perfectly coordinated, nor in perfect symmetry. The result of the spaces they live in reflects a perfect balance between too much stuff and an absence of life within the space."

While the trend has been sweeping the country for the last few years, Serra has been embracing it in her Scandinavian-inspired projects for close to three decades. She is not surprised in the least about its growing appeal: "After 2010, kitchen design began to evolve toward cleaner lines. From my lifelong visits, I believed that Scandinavian interiors' mainstream cultural aesthetic included design elements that Americans would find attractive. These include: the use of white in new ways, the use of vintage items, natural materials and a modern design aesthetic with warmth. I felt it was precisely the combination of modern warmth paired with the [stylish] look of a casual lifestyle that would resonate.



Photo: Hansgrohe

Warm finishes, glass and wood combine in this stylish Scandinavian shower.

"In terms of the layouts," she notes, "I'll do plans filled completely with cabinetry, which is what [clients] think they want, and then I'll show them a few alternative plans with less cabinetry, which translates to more of a 'room' experience than a solely utilitarian place." Other design elements to incorporate, she says, are large windows, low-hung lighting, plants, vintage furniture pieces repurposed as storage, natural materials, treasured decorative objects, natural materials, practical rugs and a couch.

"I strongly advise designing in what I call the kitchen sofa." It's a magnet, she declares! To get the proportions right, Serra selects a real couch with legs replaced for ones with a better dining height and practical, durable upholstery. "It provides incredible comfort, significant visual softness and warmth in an otherwise hard-surfaced room, as well as enhanced functional purposes – including napping on occasion!"

Hygge-inspired bathroom elements, she says, can include a steam shower and large separate tub, bidet-style toilet, ample natural lighting, heated floors, music, plants and natural materials wherever possible.

"Hansgrohe has been actively promoting the hygge concept in Denmark, Scandinavia and Germany, and we would like to begin promoting it in our other subsidiaries, as well," shares Thomas Leth, managing director at Hansgrohe Denmark. "After a long, action-packed workday, it is important to de-stress one's mind, body and soul. The bathroom has always been an intimate, private sanctuary. This creates an oasis where one can relax and calm down," he adds.

For the German manufacturer, this has meant nature-inspired product design, warm, soft PVD finishes and lighting elements built



Photo: Susan Serra

Fewer cabinets and favorite artwork give the eye a delightful resting spot.



Photo: Hansgrohe

☞ Sunlight and candles are essential elements in Scandinavian design.

into fixtures, like its AXOR Nendo LampShower, for spaces where natural light isn't available.

“Organic and natural materials like wood or various tactile fabrics can soften the look in the bathroom,” Leth says. “Combined with shiny materials like glass, they create a nice harmonic balance within the room. Furthermore, glass is very hygienic and easy to clean.” More Hansgrohe and AXOR products are incorporating glass, he observes.

“Different spray modes and technologies in the showers can aid in offering a hygge feeling,” he suggests. “To deeply relax, one can try a hand shower equipped with massage sprays. Hand showers with multiple spray modes offer different ways to relax.” These can range from intense drenching to a softer spray.

### LAGOM'S 'JUST ENOUGH' APPROACH

Similar to hygge from Denmark, Sweden's “Lagom is often described as ‘not too little, not too much, just right,’” notes *Live Laugh Lagom* author and Swedish transplant from Nigeria and the U.S., Lola Akinmade Åkerström, “but lagom lies closer to the word ‘optimal.’ Having too much or too little causes stress.” In this way, lagom encourages smart purchasing and sustainability.

“Lagom invites harmony into our homes by avoiding clutter and balancing practicality with memorabilia near and dear to our hearts. [It's] even better if a single item can fulfill both roles of functionality and sentimental value.” This can mean using an heirloom hutch for dish and glass storage, rather than cabinetry, or the rug shipped home from vacation in the bathroom or kitchen.

“We can continue to stress over cleaning a piece of furniture every week that may be useless to us,” she notes. Even useful home elements



Photo: Jackson Design and Remodeling

☞ This Wabi Sabi-inspired kitchen emphasizes relaxed, natural elements.



Photo: Jackson Design and Remodeling

☞ A minimalist bath is softened with a touch of greenery.

can create stress when excessive ornamentation or fragility require rigorous maintenance. “Lagom wants us to question why we own the things we do.” It's not the same as minimalism, she explains, but rather, a precursor. “Lagom wants us to find our own levels of personal contentment by paring down excess in our lives so we can clearly see what we need to be focusing on or what we truly need to keep in our lives.”

Light is one of those needs, she comments. “From cozy candlelight on tables to warm lamplight at doorsteps to guide our paths in the dark, luminance in all its modes is essential. In Sweden, you'll find airy home layouts with space cleared to allow light to flow. Even the tiniest of apartments will often look breezier than normal because they have been consciously designed to maximize the space within them. Simple, neutral colors and designs let us see our own tastes and preferences more clearly against a clutter-free backdrop.” This includes simple, functional appliances that are durable and get the job done, she adds. The same applies to bathroom spaces and fixtures.

### WABI SABI AND MINIMALIST LUXURY

Scandinavians aren't alone in their focus on relaxed living. It's a Japanese value, as well, perhaps popularized to offset their famously intense work lives. With definitions that have evolved over the centuries, wabi sabi today may best be translated into English as ‘wisdom in natural simplicity,’ but it also points to embracing the rustic and imperfect elements in one's environment.

This was one of the trends cited by Tatiana Machado-Rosas, design department manager of San Diego-based Jackson Design and Remodeling. “Casual imperfection is a concept we see expressed in kitchen and bath designs that forgo formality and fuss in favor of minimalist space planning and muted color palettes based on white and earth tones. Clutter is eliminated and the essential objects that remain are selected for their authentic utility and beauty, including ‘imperfections’ such as those found in the natural textures of wood countertops or flooring, or a backsplash created from hand-made tiles.”