



ENSPiRED
Robert Esterley
takes on the art of
healing through
interior design.

Sacred Space

Robert Esterley sees a home's interior as more than just a space for living—it's a place to heal. | *By Carrie Storke Williams* |

We all have a favorite room in the house. It may be the place where we go to rest and rejuvenate after a long day. Or maybe it's an inviting space that welcomes guests for gatherings, large and small. It can even be the room where we go for creative inspiration and reflection. We may not know what, exactly, makes these spaces sacred to us, but interior designer Robert Esterley does—and he specializes in creating these healing havens for clients around the country.

"Our environment shapes who we become," says Orange County-based Esterley. "Each part of our home shapes our minds, hearts and spirits. My mission is to educate, inspire and empower individuals and families to view all of life as sacred. I want to help clients slow down from the chaos of modern living, so that they can experience the home in such a way that they feel nurtured and protected."

This philosophy is more than a masterstroke of

branding and interior design innovation for Esterley—though it is that. It's also a deeply personal mantra—he knows firsthand about the power of healing.

"There's nothing extraordinary about the work I do," says Esterley. "What is extraordinary is that I survived and overcame a violent childhood against all odds by becoming consciously aware of the power an environment has on our emotional and psychological development. And what that has come to mean is the driving force that promoted me to pioneer healing space design and the concept of Sacred Living as a lifestyle brand."

Esterley's healing process—and interior design training—is the evolution of a journey that began in his hometown of Kansas City, Mo., and took him to the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, where he studied fine art. Soon after, he moved to New York and continued his education while working for renowned designer Diane Love, accessorizing Upper East Side residences with Asian antiques and custom silk floral arrangements. It was in one such storied Fifth Avenue home that his eye for refinement forever changed. He was asked to design floral arrangements to complement a Monet painting. He recalls the feeling of awe being in the presence of such a masterpiece and knowing instinctively the balance that a Zen arrangement of celadon blossoms on branches would provide.

New York offered another turning point in the designer's career. He had an opportunity to work for the largest French caterer, during which time he was exposed to what he recalls were the most magical of environments—including the Metropolitan Museum of Art's *Temple of Dendur* exhibit, which, he says, "resonated in my soul: the sacredness and energy of it. I was instantly transported. Like Dorothy in Oz, I knew I wasn't in Kansas anymore."

And, soon, he wasn't in Manhattan anymore. Esterley found himself back in Southern California, after surrendering to an addiction, and began the long journey of his own recovery while starting a new life in Laguna Beach. Along with this came new opportunities in design, including doing visual merchandising and window displays at South Coast Plaza and along Rodeo Drive for the likes of Baccarat, Fendi, Frette, Gucci and Lalique. It was here that he learned how to display important objects and collections, and how, he says, "to be gentle with something important—that's a critical part of the healing process."

It was also here that Esterley secured his first interior design project—for a client who was going

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through a divorce after a 30-year marriage. He spent a year working on her home, transforming it from a place of painful memories and reinventing it as a space for her to stay busy, remain focused and move forward.

"My goal was to heal her through the process of remaking her home," says the designer. "We started at a sacred level. Rooms that she associated with her husband and her suffering were recast as bright, happy rooms for her grandchildren and a fitness room for her to literally rebuild her health following the divorce."

Word of Esterley's compassionate, therapeutic approach to interior design soon spread, and each project added to Esterley's expertise in creating healing spaces, including home spas and therapy rooms, transitional recovery areas for patients after major medical events, and meditation and relaxation sanctuaries. And his work is now a brand: Sacred Living. But it's not just about healing and recovery. It's also about celebrating life and honoring the sacred in everyday events, and especially the joy of family and friends, says Esterley. For example, the designer recently worked with a couple in Ladera Ranch who, after downsizing from a larger home, wanted to create a spacious venue to keep their extended family connected. Esterley focused first on the guest casita, designing a hotel-inspired suite with a luggage storage spot and abundant closet space, a sitting area to invite relaxation and a desk to accommodate a workplace for long-term visitors. He even suggested personalized welcome notes and chocolates be laid on the guests' pillows. "Many of my clients are accustomed to staying in fine hotels," says Esterley. "Why not give your guests those special touches and comforts that demonstrate your love and caring for them?"

Esterley also viewed the Ladera couple's entertaining areas as opportunities to invoke Sacred Living, designing transitions from the interior to the exterior of the home and customizing furnishings and décor to match his clients' hosting style. "I conducted extensive interviews with them about holiday celebrations, parties, family occasions," he says. "The furniture, seating and floor plan had to flow with a welcome area in the front courtyard for cocktails and hors d'oeuvres, a formal dining room for sit-down dinners, and an alfresco dining room in the rear of the home for coffee and dessert."

This past spring, Esterley participated in the Philharmonic House of Design in Laguna Beach, an interior design-focused fundraiser for the Philharmonic Society of Orange County. There, he created a Sacred Living space that was, by many accounts, the most buzzed-about room in the home. Nestled at the end of a quiet wing of the residence, his healing sanctuary featured a spacious entry area with sheer curtains, reflective elements in the carpet and chandelier, and a pedestal table with fragrant lilies to immediately engage the senses and set the tone for serenity. The room also featured a massage area, a relaxing spa lounge seating space and a secluded patio with an ocean view.

Even if you don't have the space for a dedicated spa sanctuary, Esterley says, it's important to carve out a private area in your home where you can be still, find balance and reset your mood. "We all need a place to nurture our souls and center our families," he says. "I understand the challenges of modern living and, through that insight and interior design, can bring peace and harmony into my clients' lives. That's the gift and the journey of Sacred Living." ■



Clockwise from above: At this Ladera Ranch abode, Robert Esterley designed seamless transitions from the home's exterior and interior entertaining areas, making it a place of serenity. He also created a healing space at the Philharmonic House of Design in Laguna Beach.

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PHILHARMONIC HOUSE OF DESIGN AND LADERA RANCH HOME PHOTOS BY LISARENEERPHOTOGRAPHY.COM