

# HOUSE & HOME

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FT WEEKEND | Saturday February 26 / Sunday February 27 2011



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# The sound of the future

Sonic designers are revolutionising the way we create our interior spaces. *By Laura Battle*

Interior design is now a lucrative and far-reaching – some might argue, bloated – industry. The import and export of styles is big business, top designers such as Kelly Hoppen and India Hicks have achieved filmstar status (one or two others the dubious fame of fraudsters) and then there's the lucrative spin-off culture of books, magazines and reality television shows. Its emphasis, however, has so far rested almost exclusively on the visual.

Once clients have agonised over colour palettes, fabrics and fittings, it's rare that any thought is given to the sound of a space, aside, perhaps, from blocking unwanted noise or integrating the latest Bose speaker system. Partly this is because our understanding of sound has always been vague, and partly because sound designers – a blurry spectrum of DJs, artists and sound engineers – have pursued a range of careers. But there is a sense that this once mysterious subculture is finally gaining mainstream credence. A growing number of individuals are promoting the importance of sound design in public and domestic settings. Among them is Lawrence English, an Australian composer, curator and sound artist.

"We're so conditioned to experience the world through our eyes that the other senses really suffer," English says. "It's always interesting to go into a space you know very well and then close your eyes. It's not something people do very often but it can be very powerful."

As well as devising sound festivals and installation works around the world, English has designed his own house near Brisbane, Australia with sound as a primary concern. Trees and plants have been planted for the sound effects of their leaves, or to encourage birds – lorikeets and blue-faced honeyeaters – in specific locations so that their song can be enjoyed from inside the house. As with his other projects, English's approach to domestic sound design is about "reinforcing the positive rather than counteracting the negative". Like many of his contemporaries, his interest does not lie in noise reduction techniques, and nor is it simply about music playlists; it's about exploring a level of sound that leaves the softest imprint on the consciousness.

"Until the early 20th century we didn't fully understand how sound functioned," English says. "Recording technology has really influenced how we think about sound and I think now there is, at least, a passing awareness of how it works."

Of course, an interest in sonic atmospheres is nothing new. In the 18th century there was a trend for *Tafelmusik* (literally, "table music"), with Georg Philipp Tele-

mann a prominent advocate, which was designed to offer a background soundscape to feasting and merriment. And in 1917 Erik Satie put his own spin on the concept with *Musique d'Ameublement* ("furniture music"). So-called ambient music is, however, generally traced to Roxy Music alumnus Brian Eno, and specifically his 1978 album *Ambient 1: Music for Airports*. This collection of soft-focus sketches came with a slip asserting that ambient music "must be as ignorable as it is interesting".

As a mantra, it inspired a whole generation of so-called ambient bands, and the sudden explosion of ambient music in res-

In the 18th century, a trend for *Tafelmusik* was designed to offer a background soundscape to feasting and merriment

taurants and lifts and other public spaces. As English explains, this genre (known and loathed by many as "muzak") was developed as a sort of tranquilliser for modern, city life. "but at some point the effect was reduced by its sheer volume and now when you go shopping the sounds are overwhelming". A growing understanding of how sound can influence behaviour is now being actively exploited as cynical marketing tricks: hard techno is often played in clothes shops to encourage frenetic purchases, for example, and bars tend to play loud music to stifle conversation and encourage people to drink instead.

Others in the industry, including English DJ and sound artist Scanner (aka Robin Rimbaud), have put sound design to more creative ends. Scanner established his reputation in the English club culture of the 1980s, performing in chill-out rooms – spaces where those too smashed for the main sets could slump in front of calming, psychedelic light shows and DJs playing down-tempo music by the likes of Massive Attack and The KLF. Since then, he has broadened his work with a number of notable commissions, including telephone sound design and an installation for Tate Modern, as well as high-profile collaborations with Bryan Ferry, Radiohead and the Royal Ballet.

In 2003 Scanner was asked by the Hôpital Raymond-Poincaré in Garches, near Paris, to create a sonic backdrop for their *salle des départs*, or morgue. Already the Italian architect Ettore Spalletti had designed a striking cobalt blue interior – luminous, elegant and minimalist – but he felt the space needed another dimension and invited Scanner on board. "It was almost impossible at first," the sound artist explains. "This was a soundtrack for, perversely, a place where nobody wants to be, and a place where people are not expecting to be visiting. It's dealing with sudden death, basically, so what does one do?"

What Scanner did was collage together a number of environmental recordings – insects, birdsong and the sound of rain outside a window – and then overlay this with the lightest piano touch. The result is *Channel of Flight*, a composition that carries a vague suggestion of rhythm and a

sense of human presence, and yet is without a spiritual or religious agenda. "I wanted to make the piece as anonymous as possible and the volume at which it is set is key," Scanner explains. "I wanted to play the soundtrack at such a volume that you'd realise its absence should it not be there but at a level that you are not fully conscious of." It's an approach that relates directly to the original principles of ambient music.

Since then, Scanner has moved his work into the domestic environment. Edith Garcia, an American sculptor and installation artist, had heard about Scanner's previous projects and recently invited him to create a sound environment for her loft apartment and studio space in Minneapolis. "She wanted something that would inspire her, but that wouldn't interfere too much," he explains. "So I made a series of very tonal pieces, a mixture of strings and voices, all kinds of things. They're very long and there is no sense of beginning or end, they just happen and they become part of the space, in a way. I was trying to create an ambience that would offer a creative environment but also help to mask other noises that were going on outside."

Once complete, the compositions were loaded on to several iPod shuffles and posted to Garcia, who simply connected them up to her own speaker system. As Scanner explains, the entire project was dependent on MP3 technology: "An old cassette tape or CD gives you a finite amount of time, around 70 minutes, but the great thing with digital media is that you can now play pieces of extraordinary lengths: days or even months," he says.

"And what's clever about the iPod is that you can write a number of pieces then hit shuffle and they will constantly reconfigure themselves within the space, which means that the same patterns don't follow each day."

The cost of these commissions can range from about £5,000 to £20,000, depending on the location and the demands and expectations of clients, and excludes any additional hardware expenses.

Like other sound designers around the world Scanner has seen his repertoire expand in recent years from one-off, niche and broadly experimental projects to large-scale installation schemes and the more practical design of domestic appliances. "It still seems to be a new concept for lots of people. Even architects very rarely talk about the acoustics or sound of a place," he says. That may be so, but it seems likely that sound design, and sound designers, will wield greater influence over the buildings of the future.

Laura Battle is deputy editor of House & Home

## LISTEN TO THIS

### The music of sound

Sound has always been integral to the design of household appliances, but it wasn't until the start-up jingle for the Microsoft 95 computer operating system that people realised its significance. Microsoft approached Brian Eno (pictured) with a brief that reportedly stretched to 150 adjectives (futuristic, universal, sentimental etc) for a piece that was to last just three-and-a-quarter seconds. In response, Eno composed a little swirl of arpeggios that has now become synonymous with the brand.

Since then, the aesthetics surrounding product design – how they are packaged, how they look, feel and sound – have become increasingly important with the advance of technology. As smart phones and tablets are integrated into our lives, more and more thought is given to the sounds of ringtones, message alerts and alarms. There is even a White Noise iPhone app that offers a choice of sound effects, including a heartbeat, the rumble of thunder and the sound of a Tibetan singing bowl that

are supposed to aid sleep or relaxation. English DJ and sound artist Scanner (see above) was commissioned to design a series of alarm sounds for the Philips Wake-



Ambient Brian Eno Getty

Up Light. "I came up with a simple philosophy, which was that no one wants to be woken up where they are, they want to wake up near the beach or somewhere beautiful," he says. "So I made these different environments, one a collage of European bird song, one a little African village with insects and warm sounds and another a very elegant, soft beep."

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## High notes

## Where to put forbidden gifts



**David Tang**  
Agony Uncle

*Sir David Tang, globetrotter, entrepreneur, and the man about too many towns to mention, divides his time between homes in Hong Kong, mainland China and London. Here he invites readers' queries for his advice on property, interiors, etiquette at home (wherever you live), parties and anything else that may be bothering you.*

I work for an organisation that forbids its employees to accept gifts. An eminent Asian gentleman offered me a gift (silver box things, books etc). I explained that I could not accept gifts and fear this may have caused offence. What is a girl, or more precisely a corporate employee, supposed to do?

Accept the gift from your Asian admirer but, with a wry smile, remark that unfortunately, any present given to a member of staff is treated as a present to the organisation, and will be openly displayed in a cabinet on the premises. This idea comes from my visit to Pyongyang at which all the gifts to President Kim Il-Sung were proudly displayed in an underground museum, immune from nuclear attack. But the

organisation might have to make do by installing in your reception a display case in which all such gifts will be exhibited, with the name of each donor clearly identified. This expose will make people think twice about their intended donation, especially those harbouring any ulterior motive. The cabinet should also offer some amusement and relief to those who are bored waiting at your reception.

I have a very demanding employer - who will regularly admonish me for my fat posterior (it is not) - elephantine gut (which it is) and general slothfulness (which I admit to). As a woman of certain age I fear becoming too thin and losing my (entirely natural) youthful, dewy plumped skin. Perhaps you can enlighten me on how one cuts one's calorie intake without keeling over.

Start watching those American TV programmes in which people weighing over 350 pounds go through a gruelling regime of extreme diet and exercise and, six weeks later, in their stratal leotards, prove that they manage to reduce themselves to 250 pounds. If this does not

inspire you, then stand in front of a mirror every morning for at least 30 seconds examining your contours. It will then dawn on you that your slothfulness should properly be applied to your jaws. Otherwise, mark my words that your "youthful, dewy plumped skin" will come off saggy, dry and wrinkled, as fast as a bride's nightie.

I have recently left my champagne socialist comfort zone in Hampstead, north London, to live in deepest Tory, fox-hunting, church-going, Dutchy Original-supporting Sussex. Should I put up a notice saying 'republican, atheist, Labour voter, anti-hunter' or wait for the truth to trickle out?

Little Englanders from Sussex have a great social sense of smell, and they will smell you out like a rat in a flash, especially if you can't even spell "Duchy" correctly. It will, however, be interesting to see if you might be approached to join any local swingers club, as that could be a barometer of your inclusion or otherwise. I hope you don't miss Hampstead, because one of the most

nauseating things about champagne socialists is that, perched on the fringes of West Hampstead, they pontificate about Marxism while sipping Chablis and scouring for "U" invitations.

For reasons beyond my control, I will most likely go to live in Canada for a few years starting this summer. All I really know about Canada is that it is where one of my heroes, the concert pianist Glenn Gould, hailed from. But do you have any advice on where to live in Canada, and how to live?

As a director of the Glenn Gould Foundation, I am glad you associate Glenn Gould with Canada. Mind you, Céline Dion gives me the creeps. I have also been puzzled about that vast country, because despite its spectacular sceneries everywhere, I have always found it a bit soulless and extremely cold, particularly its immigration officers. I was once asked, "Where are you coming from?" When I replied, "With a great deal of warmth", her long face turned into a stalagmite.

E-mail questions to david.tang@ft.com

## Piles of style

Weaving together modern designs and traditional techniques, the latest rugs promise to stop you in your tracks. By Victoria Maw

The contemporary rug is on the rise. Once dismissed as cheap, cheerful and mass-produced, it has long been seen as a poor relation of the antique Persian carpet. But although such rugs exist (and have their own advantages), a handful of companies are creating a rather different type of contemporary rug: one that is handmade and upmarket, produced slowly by skilled craftsmen; one that marries traditional techniques with new designs.

Christopher Sharp, co-founder of the Rug Company, is a connoisseur of the handmade rug. His company's rugs are designed by top designers such as Vivienne West-

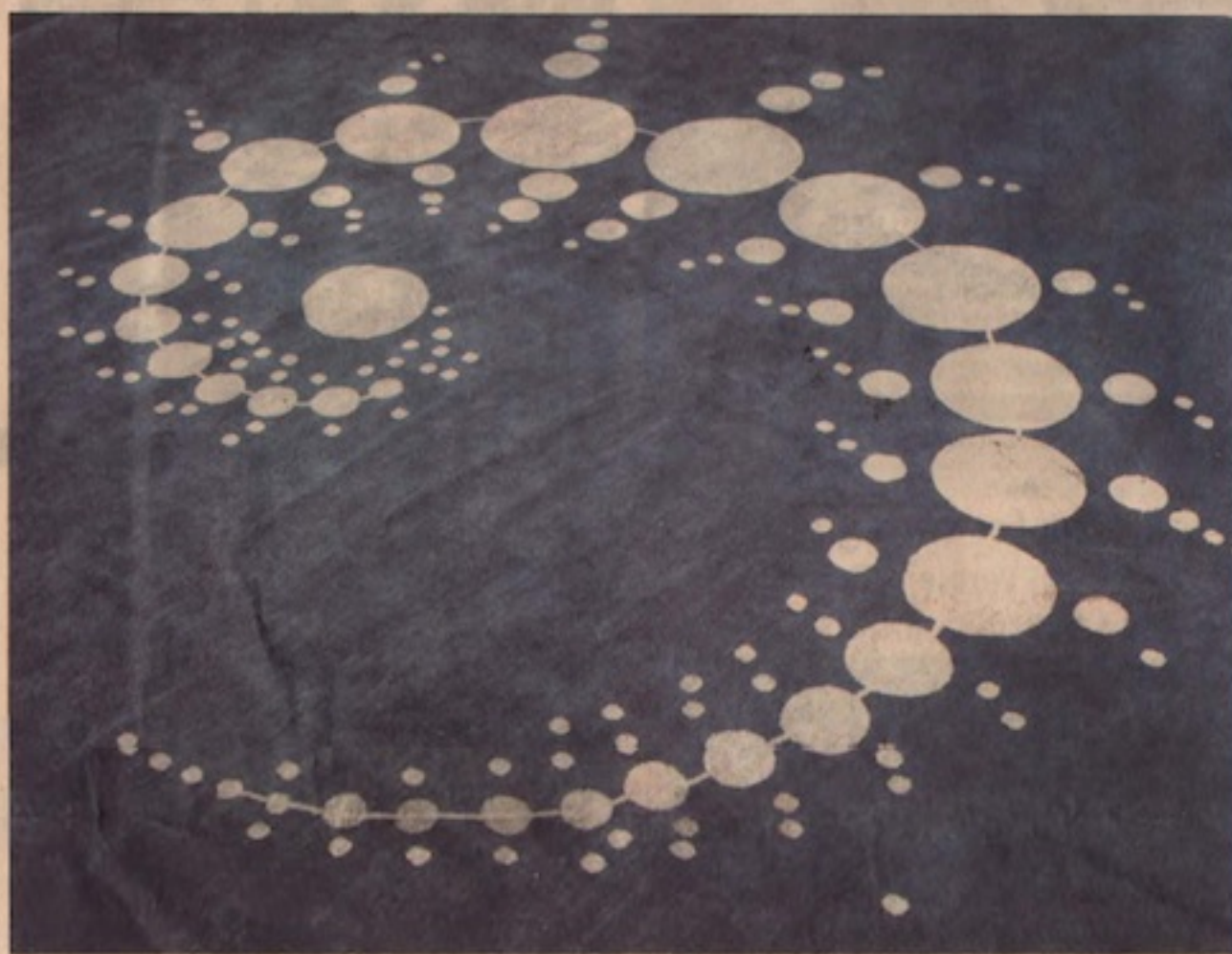
'Rugs are not like paintings that you see vertically in front of you. You always see them from an oblique angle'

wood and Paul Smith, and handmade by craftsmen in Nepal. They use Tibetan wool, prized for its high lanolin content, which protects the rug and prolongs its lifespan.

The wool is dyed in batches by a "master dyer" - a role that combines "chemist and artist and is given a huge amount of status," according to Sharp. "Our whole principle is we're going to make these rugs exactly in the way that they've always been made," he says. "We're not going to cut any corners and we're going to apply contemporary design to a traditional craft."

Luke Irwin is another champion of the contemporary rug and has been designing and making hand-knotted and custom-made rugs since 2003. His rugs are made in Nepal and Rajasthan in the traditional manner; hand-tied on upright looms, by several people working side-by-side.

The designs in Irwin's new Pimlico showroom include traditional-looking Persian



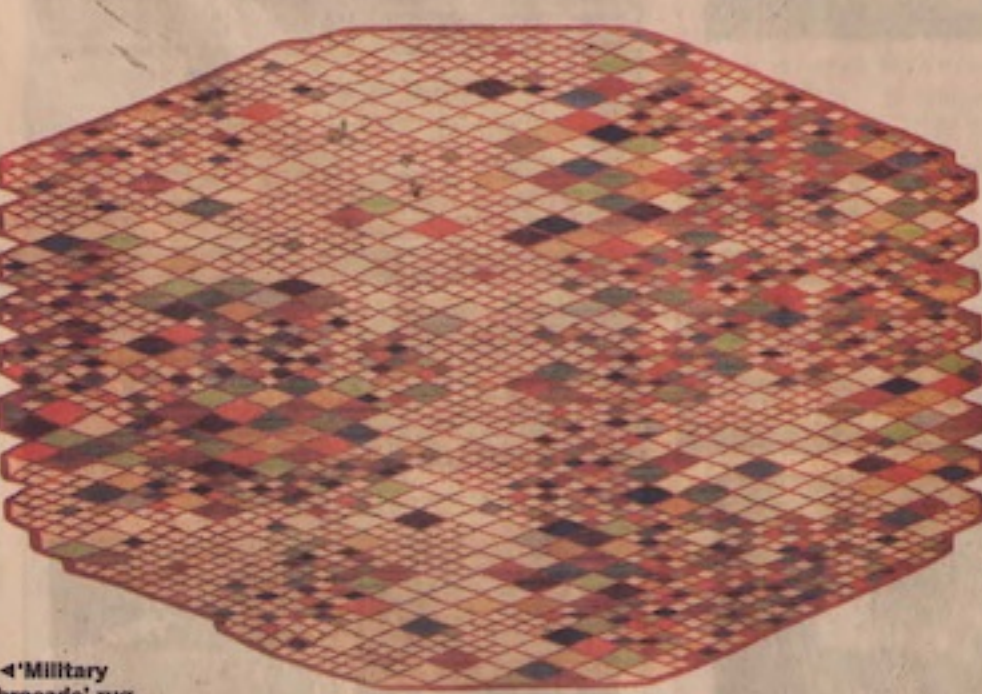
rugs in both bold and more muted colours, as well as contemporary designs such as his American flag rug presented by the Irish foreign minister to President Obama, in which a flock of doves, rather than stars, spill over into the stripes.

"Rugs are weird," says Irwin, "because they are not like paintings that you see vertically in front of you. You always see them from an oblique angle." Irwin plays with the properties of the silk and wool threads and the idea of a rug being seen from above. His rugs often seem to move or rise as one walks past, and his earliest designs were based on crop circles, with the different fibres and lengths of wool mimicking the relief of a cornfield.

'We have western customers... but the process is eastern. The one luxury I ask for is patience'

Each of the Rug Company's rugs involves up to 20 different people and takes around five months to make, during which time, Sharp says, "there is someone working on the rug for the whole time". Irwin's rugs can take 12 to 14 weeks depending on the season (many of them are dried naturally in the sun) although he says that not everybody is prepared to wait that long. "We have western customers with western expectations but the manufacture and the process is eastern with eastern attitudes. The one luxury I ask for from every client is patience."

What patience - and money - will hopefully buy, is longevity. "You've got handmade rugs that were woven in the 16th century, and there are quite a few of those still around," says Sharp. "The way we make our rugs is exactly the same way as those rugs were made, so there is no reason to think that they shouldn't be around in 400 to 500 years' time."



▲ 'Stonehenge', from £300 per sq metre  
This Tibetan hand-knotted rug is from Luke Irwin's 'Crop Circle' collection, named after the various crop circles their designs represent  
[www.lukeirwin.com](http://www.lukeirwin.com)

▲ 'Losanges' rug, 170 x 240cm, £2,714 or 230 x 300cm, £4,594  
This rug combines 13 different colours in a rhombus shape, and is handmade by craftsmen in northern Pakistan  
[www.nanimarquina.com](http://www.nanimarquina.com)

▲ 'Military brocade' rug, £1,400 per sq metre  
Designed by the late Alexander McQueen, this rug is handmade and can take up to eight months to make due to its fine quality, 200 knot wool and silk  
[www.therug-company.info](http://www.therug-company.info)



▲ 'ikat' rug, from £300 per sq metre  
A more traditional Persian hand-knotted rug from Luke Irwin's 'ikat' collection. All designs can be customised  
[www.lukeirwin.com](http://www.lukeirwin.com)



▲ 'Fire' rug, £760 per sq metre  
This Rug Company rug is designed by Vivienne Westwood and is handmade from wool with a cashmere backing  
[www.therugcompany.info](http://www.therugcompany.info)



▼ 'Fernhurst', £365 per sq metre  
Rug dealer Robert Stephenson and designer Melissa Wyndham have produced a range of hand-knotted carpets inspired by ancient Greek vases. This rug is handmade in India  
[www.robertstephenson.co.uk](http://www.robertstephenson.co.uk)



► 'Bejewelled' rug, £800 per sq metre  
Deirdre Dyson's carpets are either hand-knotted in Nepal or hand-tufted in the UK. Her latest 'Mosaic' collection is inspired by Pompeii and the decorative pavements of Portugal. All designs are made to order  
[www.deirdredyson.com](http://www.deirdredyson.com)



► 'Dreamweaver' from £300 per sq metre  
This Tibetan hand-knotted rug is from Irwin's 'Geometric' collection. The pattern appears to bulge when you walk over it  
[www.lukeirwin.com](http://www.lukeirwin.com)

