



LAWS OF ATTRACTION

Lehman & Qian founder Karolina Lehman on how to make interior spaces come to life

WORDS BY KIT GILLET. PHOTOS BY AN YUAN

In an unusual twist for a law firm, it is the warmth and vibrancy of the decor that lingers most in your mind as you leave the offices of Lehman, Lee & Xu, located in one of Beijing's international compounds off Liangmaqiao Lu. Rather than the stiff and formal interior design one might expect from a law office, the walls and furnishings here exude a welcoming and relaxed feel; soothing colors, antique furniture, and beautiful wallpaper and paintings combine to form a space far removed from its Beijing surroundings.

"Inspiration ultimately comes from my concept of a comfort zone – the idea of an old house with a well-established garden outside the window," says Karolina Lehman, the office's principal interior designer. "I like the effect of a place that gives you the feeling of a nicely maintained century-old interior, updated over the years."

What she has been able to create is an interior that not only possesses this century-old style, but also intriguingly manages to blend

elements of both traditional Western and traditional Chinese designs. "For decorating purposes, Chinese design is an excellent source of inspiration," Lehman suggests, "but as much as I admire the uniqueness of the traditional Chinese interior design, I don't find it warm and practical enough for Western design settings."

So, instead of relying solely on one or the other, Lehman has pioneered a hybrid style – one that takes the best qualities from each. Within this niche market, her company, Karolina Lehman Ltd, is rapidly developing a strong reputation amongst China's increasingly stylish corporations and individuals. Recent projects include interior redesigns of offices in both Hong Kong and Shenzhen, with a similar project starting soon in Shanghai, building on the success of the Lehman & Qian (Leimen Jiuge 雷门九歌) boutique stores in Shanghai's trendy Xintiandi area, and Beijing's Laitai Flower Market, which sell hand-painted silk wallpapers, fabrics and furniture. »



Opposite page: Antiques and traditional furniture are used to give a timeless feel to the office

This Page: Scenes inspired by 19th century British landscape painters have been hand painted on the silk wallpaper



This page: Beautifully crafted furniture helps create more informal meeting spaces



"In the beginning it was about surviving the long Beijing winters," says Lehman, "The grey concrete and sandstorms were so overwhelming that something had to change, and interiors were definitely the easiest places to start." Vibrant colors were soon employed throughout her and her husband's offices, and later in commissioned projects, adding much-needed warmth and a level of comfort in those dreary cold months.

While many aspects of Lehman's designs follow tried and true approaches to interior decorating, it is her use of what some consider old-fashioned materials and decorations that make her creations different from those of her peers. Using objects often dismissed in office design by others – elaborate silk wallpapers, porcelain, traditional furnishings and antiques – Lehman seems to have redefined the market and revealed a host of forgotten possibilities.

Especially eye-catching is the use of stunningly designed wallpaper. "I believe [wallpaper] has an important role in interior design," Lehman explains, "as well as in covering up the imperfections of construction" – a practical concern in a hastily built city such as Beijing. Hand-painted, the silk wallpapers Lehman designs whisper of a past age of grandeur – scenes taken from Chinese mythology and history are depicted grandly across entire lengths of the interior walls of Lehman, Lee & Xu's office. The scroll tapestries are reminiscent of those found in museums and palaces across China, while many rooms are highlighted by intricate floral and/or animal motifs.

Apart from the desire to use bold and striking colors, Lehman is seemingly content to let her clients come up with possible themes for the wallpaper details. "The range currently available makes it possible to »

This page: Vibrant colors and floral decorations are used by Lehman to give the rooms a sense of comfort and warmth

Opposite page: Motifs and themes run throughout Lehman's rooms – with furnishings, wall space and ornaments combined in elaborate yet unified designs



create any effect you can think of," she says. "I utilize mostly old designs in my work – from geometric Scandinavian designs through to classic floral designs of Art Nouveau and hand-painted Chinoiserie silk wall-coverings."

In front of these distinct Chinese touches, the day-to-day furniture clearly belongs to the Western-influenced aspects of the design. Plush suede sofas and armchairs, also in strong colors, create comfortable seating areas for clients and office employees. In addition, the use of landscape paintings from Europe and America, still life drawings and renderings of flowers, fruits and insects act as "an alternative to a garden view in the wintertime," notes Lehman.

"Over the years I have created interiors for both professional firms and private clients, but they are always a reflection of my personal style," Lehman says. This style gives the clients a uniquely designed interior, but one that sticks to a few key principles that Lehman holds dear – notably the blending of East and West and the prevalence of nature. "The vibrant colors I use are just a reflection of nature; I believe

they make for a happy living and working space," she explains. "The one thing that should be included in every interior are fresh-cut flowers, and the occasional fern – but no plastic pots please!"

Whether those who come to the office seeking legal advice are able to fully appreciate these natural touches and the details of the elegant overall design, is not, in retrospect, the designer's concern. But a more harmonious living and working environment of the sort that Lehman creates is sure to yield dividends, making those billable hours fly by in comfort. **U**

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