Is Your Home Affecting Your Child's Brain? Transcript

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Introduction to Home Environment and Wellbeing

I've seen it for so many years and doing this for over 25 years now of just going into homes and seeing people live in their spaces. And one of the things that's sort of a baseline with all families and mine included, yours included, is that life gets in the way and there's too many things that become a priority and things that you just focus your energy on.

But you realize, and I've come to realize, that in all those years of doing design for real people and going into real homes, is that baseline is the same, is that this foundation that you come into every day and you come home to every day, start your day in and sort of spend a lot of time in, really starts to have an impact on you.

Welcome to Demystifying Pans and Pandas, the podcast where we uncover the mysteries, breakthroughs and hope behind these life-altering conditions. I'm Dr.

Nancy O'Hara, a board-certified pediatrician, educator, and advocate with over three decades of experience helping children and families navigate the challenges of neurodevelopmental and neuropsychiatric conditions, especially PANS and PANDAS.

These disorders can feel overwhelming, but here we'll break down the science, explore transformative treatments, and share stories of resilience and recovery.

If you've ever wondered what's possible for your child or how to find answers, this is the place to start. Let's dive in. Hi everybody, it's Dr. Nancy O'Hara and welcome back to Demystifying Pan's Pandas.

I can't tell you how thrilled I am today to welcome a dear friend and very well-known designer and author Stephen St.

Podcast Welcome and Guest Introduction

Ange. His work has reached millions across the globe because he's kept his work really relatable to the everyday family. You've seen his expertise featured on Oprah, The Today Show, CNN, BBC.

His design philosophy has been a mainstay in magazines like Better Homes and Gardens, Family Circle, House Beautiful, El Decor, and he's the author of a book, No Place Like Home, which I love, a title that perfectly captures his lifelong commitment to family and his belief in attainable and real life design.

And Stephen's turning his years of hands-on experience and industry expertise toward a powerful new mission, which is to empower, educate, and motivate all of us to look at our environments through a completely different lens.

Because Stephen believes that space we surround ourselves will impact us in ways we see and also in ways we don't see. So our surroundings can lift us up or pull us down.

And Stephen's here to show us how we can take that power to our advantage and make our environments a tool to help us live our very best lives. So Stephen, welcome.

Thank you. Wow, that's quite an intro. I appreciate it. And it's great to see you because I know this is something near and dear to your heart and to be a part of it and be in this episode.

Thank you for asking me and I'm glad to be here. Thank you. Well, you know how much you and your wife Mary have impacted my life in many, many makeovers of myself, but also our homes, my offices.

I haven't created, opened, used a space without you. And many accolades I get for the spaces I have. And that really is all thanks to you. Well, I appreciate you saying that.

And Mary and I feel the same way about just helping people Experience what change can do and you've seen it with two of us. You've had us over and you've said, you know, we don't know what to do with that room.

And all of a sudden we're like, just let us go deal with the room. You go have dessert or whatever. And that's the fun thing is that for us in our own home, we're always changing things around all the time.

So people are kind of used to that and you're used to that. You see that in our space, but for other people. to experience that and you've experienced it firsthand.

It goes so far. I mean, you don't realize like when you're living in a space and, you know, you and I, we work with families who are in spaces with their kids and their families every day.

And there are so many things that they're dealing with.

How Home Design Affects Daily Stress

And then all of a sudden they come home and it's like this environment is, like you said, either good to them or it's not good to them. And I see it all the time.

And it's just such a powerful tool that we can learn to change up to really benefit us on so many levels. Yeah, so much so. So, you know, obviously with pans, pandas, autism, all the things I deal with, all of our families are overwhelmed by appointments, by the daily care of their children, all of the things, just life.

So good home design, you've said, has the power to change lives. How does that apply to like the families that I take care of? Well, I've seen it for so many years and doing this for over 25 years now of just going into homes and seeing people live in their spaces.

And one of the things that's sort of a baseline with all families and mine included, yours included, is that life gets in the way. And there's too many things that become a priority and things that you just focus your energy on.

But you realize and I've come to realize that in all those years of doing design for real people and going into real homes, is that baseline is the same.

Is that this foundation that you come into every day and you come home to every day, start your day in and sort of spend a lot of time in, really starts to have an impact on you.

One of the things that I saw in all my projects is that people like things to be the same and there's a safety in that and so it's out of sight, out of mind.

We don't have to deal with it. But you don't realize that not dealing with it and being out of sight, out of mind because you don't want to deal, you're dealing in your denial about your house.

is that it's having an impact on you. And when you said, you know, in ways that we see and ways that we don't see, it's very true because I've seen it firsthand where people don't change a broken door or they don't change a sofa that's, you know, seen better days.

They just keep it there and the keeping it there starts to suck the energy out of the space and something that goes unfixed or something that goes unpainted or cleaned up clutter is a big thing that all that has an impact on you and all of a sudden starts to build up and the space that you come home to at the end of the day is not welcoming you home anymore.

It's really kind of bringing you down. And especially when families are dealing with, you know, their kids and all the

things that might be dealing with doctor's appointments and going to here and there, is that exhausts you.

So why not make your home space something that fuels you up again? Yeah. So is that one of the things you mean by the unseen factors in a home that can be adding to stress?

Yeah, it adds to the stress, it adds to your anxiety level, adds to your, your energy level being drained, tired, and you sort of overwhelmed because you're coming into a kitchen.

Like you'd be coming through your mudroom and you come into the kitchen and there are bills piled up on the countertop and there's, you know, dishes in the sink and there's clutter.

That starts to affect you. But the minute we start to change that and remove those items, and I'm not saying major renovations, major construction, lots of changes.

It's simple little things that you can do that are step by step to really feel the difference. Like somebody sends you flowers and the flowers are sitting on your countertop and you walk in and you notice the flower arrangement and you appreciate it because it's something new, it's something beautiful and it draws your eye.

Same thing in your space, making change happen your desktop, your countertop, your coffee table, whatever it is, all of a sudden gives you this whole new attitude and you don't realize it, but you get a kick out of it and you get a boost.

And that is the way to change. And that's my big thing now is that change is good and it's not a scary thing. And I know for a lot of people, it's scary and it shouldn't be.

I know, I know. Every time I visit you, the house looks different. Everything is moved and I have to embrace that. But the movement of furniture is something that's very simple.

I mean, I remember when you were designing my latest office, which is very, very small, just the shift of a sofa to a corner rather than, just made such a difference.

It was such a relief. So like you said, these don't have to be expensive things. Exactly. And it's not something that's going to take a lot of time. And I think that's what people feel like, well, I don't have time.

My schedule is too crazy. But if you came home on a Friday night and spent one hour, just forget about everything you're committed to, everything you've got to do.

Take an hour and just put some music on and change the room around. And I just did a project down in Florida for a family. And they didn't really want to spend a lot of money with, you know, setting it up and doing a lot of, you know, decor purchases.

And so I said, let me shop your house. Let me walk around your house. Can I go into the basement? Can I look, you know, in your closets to get accessories and decor that you already have?

Because you're overwhelmed. You don't know what you have. And seeing is believing. And at the end of it, they were like, wow, we have that in our house?

Where did that bench come from? So you've got that potential. And I think that that's what's the fun part to me. Because if you're taking it on yourself as a, you know, a mom, a dad, a family together is a great thing as well with the kids and maybe changing up their play space, maybe changing up their home work area to really give them a say in how this changes up.

And I will say, you know, dealing with, you know, teenagers, for example, that like things to say the same and they don't want to change things up, that can be stressful.

So I'm not asking you to go into a space and bulldoze everything and make it you know, like all new. Because I've done that. I've gone into spaces and tried to make it nice when the kids were little and stuff like that.

But now I'm respecting that the kids have their own zone. And I think as parents, we need to think about that as well. So I'm really focusing in on the parents really giving themselves that space that's going to be good for them.

Yeah, it's sort of like what we say about as parents, we need to put our own oxygen masks on first. You have to have that space, that safe space also.

And when you were talking about getting things from around the house, it reminded me many, many years ago, when we couldn't sell a home.

Creating Calm Spaces for Sensory Needs

And there was a dead space under the stairway as you came into the house. And you took an old urn that had dead flowers in it, the bottom of a cheese plate, a chair from the dining room, and some other little thing and put that right there with a tiny lamp that had been in another area.

And it just lightened up the space, made it all inviting. And as you said, there was no expense to that whatsoever. It was just a shift. So talking about shifts, you know, a lot of our kids, the ones that I see, have a lot of sensory processing challenges, whether it be a child with autism or a child with severe anxiety or OCD, intrusive thoughts with pans and pandas.

What does it mean when you talk about design and making a sensory shift there to create a safe place or a regulated space for these kids? Well, I think the biggest thing that I've seen and I did in a speaking event where a parent came up to me and asked me, you know, what do I do, you know, with my kids?

They're on sensory overload and they had already taken away the technology part of it, which to me is a big thing, you know. I just had an interview with Carol Burnett and she was saying, you know, when I was a kid, we used to go out to play, you know, and life was, we all went out to play.

When it got dark, we came home and things have changed. So kids are dealing with things coming at them. And so to me, when I heard that this family in particular had taken away the technology and having that be something that was a drain, I said, what about clutter?

What's your space, the kids space like? Is it overwhelming? Is there too much stuff going on? And the biggest takeaway from that was that less is more.

And that's one of the biggest things that I can share with people is you don't need all that stuff. And sometimes. as a parent it's easier to maintain when there's less stuff to pick up and put away and toys and you know all that stuff but at the same time for the kids it kind of calms their mind and Mary and I my wife talk about this all the time that that's something with the cases that she works on where there's too much there's too much stuff going on visually and as a designer for me it's like I want it to look good but I also want it to feel good so it's about the lighting it's about the lack of things being cluttered and being organized so that there's a certain baseline that's creative of a foundation that is a comfort level that is safe and inviting.

And, you know, going back to the beginning of the conversation, people don't like change because they like things to be comfortable and same, same, same.

But sometimes that same, same, same is a negative. And that's why I want them to create the environment, especially for the kids that you're talking about, where the parents don't have to maintain so much, but it's also creating this cocoon for the kids that's good for them.

And I think really that's what we have to look at it as, as a cocoon for them to sort of feel comfortable and safe. Right. And the other thing that's very cocooning is color.

I mean, you've taught me a lot about the types of color. You know, so many people went, oh, this really bright wall. Well, that may be good, but it may be a shock to your senses and actually be more stressful for some of these kids.

Can you talk about color a little bit? Yeah, I see that a lot in a lot of the homes, especially when I was doing a lot of makeovers for magazines where I'd walk into a house and we were going to make over the room.

And a lot of the houses had a lot of dark colors because people do what's trendy. They do what magazines or what Pinterest is saying is, you know, hot right now.

And then they feel that they need to introduce that into the house. But they don't realize that some of those things are going to impact their environment in a way that's not going to be right for them.

So I've learned and I've expressed that to clients and people that I know in design is that you want to create this palette that's calming and something that's going to be inviting.

And it's about choosing colors that also play out differently at different times of day. So right now, I'm speaking in a white room, but the use of lamps with certain colors on the wall.

One of my favorite colors, and you know this because it's one of my go-tos, is Stonington Grey from Benjamin Moore. And the reason why I like it, and I know you know it well, because you've seen it used recently.

is that it changes with the color at the time of day. So if it's sunlight, if it's lamplight, so things like that subtly that change. And the same can be said for textures on furniture and accessories, you know, keeping things simple and clean can go a long way in those kind of environments specifically.

Yeah. And then you've also taught me about the pop of color. You know, if I want that color, I can put a pillow or the flowers you mentioned before, or something else to bring that pop in that I could change more easily than the colors on my wall, for example.

Right, and I think that's one of the things that people… Go ahead. Go ahead. No, I was going to say one of the things that people need to think about is that you're adding that pop of color in the accessories that you can change.

And that, like you said, you're not committing to making a new paint color on the wall or renovating a space. You're rearranging what's happening. I urge people to have like a closet where they have props and they have little accessories that they can pull out and rotate over time.

Cause people that know us and know my family, we're always changing those things. Because to me, that keeps it interesting for me as a homeowner coming in.

But it's a creative tool for other people to take advantage of because you want to change it up because it gets stagnant. It gets boring. And I say same, same, same all the time.

But it's true is that you walk in and you see the same thing all the time. It's not giving you that boost of energy that you need and getting you excited about being in your space again.

And you need that, especially in our crazy world. We need to come in and have control over this environment that is good to us. Yeah. And you talk about design or our environment that can lift us up or pull us down.

And I wanted to give one example, and then I'd like you to too, of we often have boxes and stuff we have to keep. And my practice manager likes to keep them close to her desk.

And I remember when we were designing, again, this very small space, your recommendation was to have a sort of panel to panel that off, a very decorative, pretty one.

And I thought, oh, we don't need that. We'll just put the boxes under the desk or whatever. I cannot tell you how much I love that I don't even know what it's called.

It's some kind of paneling that we put up to just sort of put that stuff behind it. So what I walk into is calmness and beauty and not seeing a bunch of boxes hanging out from behind the desk.

Well, and that's why, for example, they tell you never have your home office in your bedroom because you're going to wake up in the morning and see stuff that reminds you of work.

Color, Lighting, and Simple Design Shifts

And it's the same thing in your work environment. It's the same thing in your home is that you want your eye to be drawn to things that you love. So if it's in your home environment, your work environment, something beautiful to look at whether it's a piece of art on the walls or it's flowers or plants or the accessories that you have on the coffee table but also personalizing it like you know you could have framed photos of places that you've gone to or people that you love you can have collections of things that mean something to you introduced into the space you don't need to see the pile of bills you don't need to see the files that remind you of the of work or whatever and it's something so simple but people overlook that because they think like oh you know my house is not a magazine i'm never going to have it look picture perfect and it's not about and that's the whole thing it's not the stuff i'm talking about is not keeping up with the joneses it's not you know magazine photo shoots because nobody lives there it's not you know instagram lifestyle shots that people you know envy it's about really just making your environment beautiful in the way that's right and beautiful for you.

But also what I'm saying is that you're changing the things that are always the same and you need to make the change happen. And that's why, to me, I'm taking everything that I've learned in all my years of doing design for so many people and taking that common denominator, which is that I've seen it, that the before and after of somebody's change and seeing the end result just re-energizes them in such a powerful way.

And I think we need that more than ever now. And especially the clients that you have, their families are overwhelmed with all that they're dealing with.

And I can't be there to make the change happen with them. So I'm urging them to hear this and say, you know what, take an hour, just an hour. And then maybe it's on the weekend and maybe it's after the kids go to bed, but to wake up the next morning and to see the decluttered kitchen or to see your rearranged family room or the homework station, get a whole new boost, a whole new look, that's exciting because you wake up and you're like, wow, I made that happen.

And that's also the thing is building up the confidence to be able to take it on yourself and to make the change happen because then you say, okay, if I can do that, I can keep going forward and do something else.

Yeah. And I think it's so important for our kids with pans and pandas because they often have such cluttered and intrusive thoughts, such anxiety and stress in their insides, that if we can make their room or their workspace less cluttered and more calm, that that can do a lot for their psyche.

Right. But I also understand from the research that I've looked into as well as the neuroscience and all that is that there are some spaces where it's better for their stuff to stay the same and not change too much because that gives them control over something, especially when you're dealing with pans.

And I understand that, that there are certain things that need to stay the same so that they feel like, okay, this is my zone and I get that. So at the same time, the parents leading by example to in the kitchen, for example, they're making dinner, dim the lights, light a candle, put some music on that's calming.

You're leading by example, it's making you calm and de-stressed you while you're going through this process, sit down and have dinner together as a family, that music can be playing, that candle can be lit, And even if it's just little moments, you're shifting things by doing that in a different way.

Instead of like saying dinner's ready and everybody rushes in or doesn't rush in, everybody kind of stays in their own corner. So there are ways as a parent that you can work with this, this way of life that's the way it is right now to make it better for you and to get you through to the other side.

Yeah. And you know, when your wife Mary and I have lectured together on setting up practices, et cetera, you know, one of the things you're mentioning now that she always mentions is the five senses.

Yes. You know, and, you know, we've talked about color and that sight and decluttering and that sight, and you just talked about music and sound, you know, which is also part of your environment.

But all of those pieces are really important, right? They really are. And it's something that you don't think about, but I know from a design standpoint, like when I set up a makeover or we've done a house renovation and I go in and I set it up for the client and they walk in and it's done.

You know, I love those reveal moments, but part of it is music. And part of it is that. emotional connection that they'll get from that memory of that space being transformed.

And it's like a soundtrack for them. And that's important to me. And I feel like in everyday life when I'm creating and I'm designing, I've got music playing in the background when I'm sketching or whatever it is, that's a big part of my process.

But I also know that's a big part of just creating an atmosphere. And that's really what you're trying to do. It's not, you know, earth shattering, you know, something new that's being revealed.

It's like, let's think about the simple senses that are affected by walking into a space, you know, your sense of what you're seeing, what you're hearing, what you're smelling, you know, like the smell of chicken noodle soup, you know, cooking on the stove or chocolate chip cookies in the oven.

There are certain things that connect you to an emotional memory of something. And there's a comfort level there. And I think that that's a very big part of your home environment.

Yeah. And we talk about smells all the time. I mean, I'm talking to my families about essential oils and diffusers and, you know, then your realtor tells you to bake and not burn.

Right. Some cookies before the showing and, but those smells in our everyday lives and transforming them. I mean, at night bringing in more of the chamomile and those relaxing scents, you know, so important.

And people don't think about it because you're overwhelmed. And I get that. And that's why it's like a chance to pause and say, this is an added tool that you can add to your tool belt to really kind of empower you as a parent to help you in a positive way.

Yeah. And speaking of being overwhelmed, you know, what many of our families are overwhelmed by is their expenses. You know, remediating a home that's full of mold, all the doctor's visits and the supplements and the school and the tutors and all of that.

And I know again and again and again, you have shown me how to harness the power of our current environment without breaking the bank or doing a major renovation or any of that.

So how would you bring that to these families too? Well, what I've been doing is one of personally what I've been trying to do because this is my mission is really empowering people about environments and how change can impact their lives.

Affordable Changes Using What You Already Have

So I've been offering Zoom coaching sessions where a family, I just did one last week where the family reached out

the husband and wife that couldn't agree on how things should happen.

So I became the shrink in many ways, you know, to have a conversation with them for 45 minutes to an hour. And basically, me seeing something that they're showing me about their home environment is easier because they're too close to it.

So the end result of that one hour session that was a one time thing for them. Sometimes I do a couple sessions for people, but I love it that I'm seeing something that they can't see because they're too close to it.

And when you come home every day and you see the same thing and you say, I just can't deal. I just can't deal with it. Or if you're a couple trying to figure it out and you've got differences of opinion because you're both coming at it from different directions, it's easier for me as a designer who sees this all the time to say, this is what I'm honestly seeing.

This is my gut reaction. And all of a sudden, all of that other stuff falls away. And they're being heard, they're being seen, and then I'm hearing both sides.

And then I'm saying, this is really what I would do if I came in there and did this makeover of your house and made these changes happen. This is what I would do.

So this is what I suggest for you. And that simple. It's just connection. It's a connection with these people and hearing them because I know that they're overwhelmed and I know that they're feeling it's emotional.

You know, they're feeling they're not good enough. They're not doing enough. And then they've got their house on top of it. They have to deal with and they've got to add more expenses to that.

So what can I do? And Mary and I talk about this all the time. It's like simpler is better, but to work with these families and say, Hey, this is what we're seeing.

We get it, but let's do this. And here's your game plan and to make it attainable. And it's not bulldozing. It's not, you know, going out and spending thousands of dollars.

It's usually just reworking what you already have. And that saves the day. Right. I mean, I've seen you take, you know, when a room needed very much deeper colors, deeper tones, rather than just buying the new furniture, stain what you already have, a deeper color.

That's a transition that's much less expensive than buying new furniture, and it's a new look. It's a new look and it's a chance to, again, like I said, shop your house or trade with your friends.

I mean, I've got groups of women that, you know, that I, you know, will hear from, from magazine stuff that I've done, you know, like Better Homes and Gardens where they will say, hey, we had a tag sale and we traded our stuff.

They didn't even sell the stuff to each other. They were selling and trading props, you know, the decor props that one house didn't want anymore. So I'm sure you've got friends, you've got family that have, you know, have stuff.

that you can trade out with them. And to me, that kind of makes it a fun process. And there are mom groups, there are parenting groups I know online that people get together and they give each other advice.

This is one of the things that I think is such a great thing for people to do because you've all got stuff. And sometimes we have too much stuff. So take that stuff and shift it around and use it to your advantage creatively in your home and they can use your stuff in their home.

And so there's a chance to have some fun with it. And I think that's one thing that is a, you know, sort of a message to remember is you got to have fun with it because there's too much serious stuff going on and you need to use this

creative outlet as a de-stressor.

And it's fun. I mean, it's fun for me, but I've seen it be fun for other people as well. Look, I have no design sense whatsoever. And it's fun for me when you direct me and show me how to do it.

I mean, it really is. And I think so much of the time we get for me in medicine and the people that come to see me, we get so bogged down with which medicine is right, which supplement is right, which diet is right.

But if we can look more at the lifestyle, the getting outside, the changing up the spaces in our home, how we're living, how we're going about that, we can bring some joy back in without any money.

Yeah. And I think a lot of families in, you know, this economy, they're feeling, you know, stressed out to begin with and people might not have the dream house.

They might be living in the starter house. They might be living in a condo, an apartment, whatever it is, but it's your home environment and it's your space.

And, you know, people starting out, you know, in life, you know, in their twenties or whatever, going out and getting their first place. It's your first place and you're creating this environment because you're figuring out who you are as, you know, the style that's yours in your space.

And then couples who, you know, started out and they're buying their first home and then you introduce kids into the situation. And that style that you originally had together evolves because the kids take center stage.

So I've seen it all. I've understand, you know, all the different stages of life. I've heard from so many people that are just really honest and open about what they're trying to figure out.

And I love it because I can cut to the chase and I can go right to, you know, sort of like ask the right questions and say, what about this? And why haven't you done this?

And, you know, what do you, essentially it comes down to what are you afraid of? And they're just like, we don't want to make the wrong choice. And like you said, you don't necessarily have the design sense, but you don't have to But I also feel that people judge themselves based on what other people have done.

So they might have, you know, a mother-in-law who's really good at design and you go, they come to your house and they have everything wrong is happening in your house.

But at the end of the day, it's like, what do you respond to? You know, what do you like? What is it that, you know, you're drawn to that will help make it more your space while you're dealing with everything else that life has thrown your way?

So That's what I like. I like being able to pare it down and simplify it and say, just do this. Just even three things, you know, make those three things change and try it out.

So you're obviously focusing on empowering and educating families, you know, the everyday guy like me and my family. But you've worked with celebrities, you worked with big magazines, TV networks.

What was it that really sparked this new direction for you? Well, I love talking to people. I mean, I love when I get to go to a speaking event and just speak from the heart.

You know, I never go with a script. I always, you know, I kind of read the crowd and I get a sense of who the people are that I'm speaking to. And, and I love when I get to do a media interview because I get to like zone in on something that I'm really excited about, you know, like a topic that means a lot to me.

And when I look back on my career and I think about the things that I've done on TV and in magazines and all the

stuff that I've done, what resonates with me is that connection with the that I get to meet when I go do something or when I speak at something or when I go to an event about design that's empowering people about design.

And what resonates with me is the real families. It's the real people that, you know, that they're the ones that I connect with because I get it. I'm a dad, I'm a husband, I'm a homeowner.

I get that, you know, life throws stuff your way and you're like, oh, I've got a to-do list. you know, the to-do list on my refrigerator, you know, I've got that.

So I understand them, and I'm not trying to approach it as, oh, he's a designer, so he's untouchable, not approachable. And I think what resonates with the people that have seen my work is that I remain approachable and I remain somebody that's open to hearing your story and hearing what your dilemmas are and what your stress is and taking my experience and saying, here I am to help you out.

And that's really what the focus has been.

Designing for Families and Personal Control

I realized like, yeah, I enjoy working. with the magazine makeovers and taking the pictures and having the before and after, but the real people that are going through the stuff they're going through.

That means a lot to me because I feel like that's something that I can have a say in and that's something that I can do something about with the talent and the creativity that I have and shift it to make their lives better and to change it up.

So what's one like first attainable change, like somebody that's listening or watching this and feeling like their life is chaos, they're unsupported, you know, here's another podcast that's just, you know, I got to pay somebody else to come into my house.

What would be a first attainable change that they can make to start to shift that? Pick one room. Pick one room that really is the space you spend a lot of time in.

Maybe it's the room that you come in through when you come out of the garage or you've parked your car, you come in, you got all your stuff. What's that room?

Because that's the room that's having its first impression on you. There's nothing worse than walking in like, I haven't done the dishes. I haven't, you know, put the stuff away.

You know, the breakfast stuff is still there. Whatever it is, take that room. Don't worry about, you know, the rooms that everybody is going to see when they come for Thanksgiving or when they come for Christmas or whatever it is.

Think about the room that on a daily basis you deal with. So in most cases, it might be a mudroom. It might be the kitchen. It might be the family room.

Pick that room and just really step back. And one of the things that I urge people to do, use your phone. We've all got our phones. stand in a doorway of the first impression of the room when you walk in and take a picture of it, the way it is now.

And then look at that picture, because something about the magic of like magazines and makeovers where everybody looks like, here's the before space, the view is, you know, and here's the after.

But the idea of seeing it through the lens, I think is a creative way for people to empower themselves, because I really feel that you will start to see like, oh, that looks messy over there, or that's, why is that like that?

Or boy, that chair is really bad. Because you want to start to take the stuff away that's not there. So seeing in your

family room or whatever room you choose, the clutter.

There are coats there from the summer, but it's the middle of winter. So why are the coats still on the hook? There are shoes there that are from last season's soccer practice and now it's winter, there's no soccer.

Finding those things, another home will make sense. But you really want to declutter those spaces so that you can see the baseline of what's there because the fun part is rearranging it.

So if it's a mudroom, you might not be able to rearrange, but you can get rid of the stuff that doesn't need to be there. You could add some stuff. You could, maybe there's an art piece that you like from your guest room or something that you have in the basement.

Put it in the mudroom so that all of a sudden there's something new. Same thing with the kitchen. Your countertop has got so much potential to be a great looking space.

And the decluttering part is easier in many ways in a kitchen because a lot of stuff just needs to be put away. And once you do that, then you can say, oh, well, here's a thing, a bowl that I bought on vacation years ago that I never used, but I can put it on my island with some lemons, which is my big trop is on everybody knows with my foot, which I do lemons and Pellegrino bottles.

But the idea is that you can introduce new things once you see through the lens what's wrong with the space. And I go back to the thing about, it's not about like what Thanksgiving is like when you prepare your house for people to come over.

It's really about you and your everyday and thinking about how you're walking into that space. Because you want it to welcome you, you don't want it to remind you of all the things that are on your checklist that you haven't accomplished.

And that's one thing I do a lot of. You know, I listen to podcasts as well. And, you know, we're bringing my podcast back, which I put on the back burner to kind of figure out what I really want this focus of empowering people about design in their environments to be.

And one of the things that resonates with me is that, you know, people just feel so overwhelmed by these things that are. bombarding them when they walk through the door, not to mention you've got your pets, you've got your kids, you've got your family members, but the environment just comes at you.

And I think people don't realize that as much as they do. And I say, just get it out of the way, put it away, declutter it, rearrange it, have some fun with it.

But you deserve it. And I think that's the thing in the clients that you work with and the families you work with. I think they just have so much going on that if they could give themselves that little treat of an environment that's going to impact them in ways that they obviously see, because they made the change happen, or I helped them make the change happen, but they can see something at the end that is tangible.

And that's what I love about cooking, because there's a beginning, a middle, and an end when you're preparing a meal. But in design, it can kind of be the same way if you break it out in the way that's attainable.

So you have a beginning, a middle, and an end. And if you're taking that picture of what's wrong with that mudroom or that kitchen, and then you can have the after shot, it may not be picture perfect, but the idea of you doing it yourself and making it happen and making the motion to change up the energy, That's huge.

That's like a pat on the back right there. And that's going to motivate you to want to do it again. Maybe it's next weekend for another hour, or maybe it's tomorrow because now you say, you know, what was like, why am I wasting my time watching TV when I can be making these changes happen?

And people see the change. You see the change. Your kids will feel the change and they'll also see it as well. And that's good for everybody. Yeah. I mean, and it's such that taking a picture, that mental picture, that picture with your phone makes such a difference.

I mean, we haven't been in a place we're living for very long. And I did that the other day. And I realized that this one little loose floorboard was causing me such angst every time I walked in.

And all we did was put a little, like very sweet little area rug right on top of it. So now I don't see it. Didn't cost anything and we'll fix it. But it was that little thing that can make a difference.

You're buying some bins to put those things in. Maybe you can't get everything out of the way, but you can get some inexpensive little baskets or bins from Ikea or whatever.

One of the places I've shopped with you many times. Yeah. But there are so many little ways to do that. One of the other steps you gave me once that I wanted to tell people about was the chalkboard paint, which I had never heard of till I met you.

And it was something we did in several of my offices where we just took a section of wall and painted it with chalkboard paint, took some pieces of wood and framed it out.

It made it look special with no money, and yet it was something the kids could write on and play with all the time. Just another very simple first attainable change.

And I love that because for me, and I joke about my refrigerator because my refrigerator has chalkboard paint on it and it's my to-do list. So when I have a reminder of something, I put it up there.

So for parents to be able to have a place where it's out of your mind, and I think that not literally you're out of your mind, but it's out of your head so that you're putting it up on a board and it's something that's, okay, it's there, it's not.

Finding Your Style and Making It Attainable

Overwhelming. And in my podcast, The Driven By Design Studio, I talked with a lot of people that were successful in business and I really wanted to understand the creative mind.

And one of the things that I would ask people is, how do you organize your mind? And one of the things was, there was one thing is like having to-do lists, which I thought was interesting for me as someone who loves lists.

is that sometimes to-do lists can get overwhelming because people put everything on their to-do list and then by the end of the day, they haven't accomplished anything.

And then they feel like they've completely wasted the day because they never got maybe two things done out of a list of 40 things. So there's a certain amount of too much is too much.

So that's why I feel like a chalkboard is like attainable things that are like, oh, here are the things that are going to be done today. And I think that's what's manageable because why I love chalkboards is that then when it's done, you erase it.

And there's nothing better than that feeling of like, oh, the chalkboard's clean, because we've done what we needed to do. And I think, again, it's micro focus on what you're looking to do with change in a space, change on a to do list, so that you make it attainable so that it's something you actually want to do.

And that's one of the things I think people can We all know this, we can all do this, talk themselves out of it. And they'll say, I'll do it tomorrow.

And then tomorrow comes and you don't do it because there's something new on your plate and there's something new coming at you. And I think that, you know, everybody can procrastinate and I get that.

And there's, you know, procrastination in a lot of us and putting something off. is almost as much of a drain as actually taffling something. And maybe it's not perfect, but you've done it.

And my wife and I talk about the phrase that, you know, done is, I can't remember, I'm going to try to remember what it is. Done is better than perfect.

Or perfect is better. Yeah. Done is better than perfect. and I love that because it's so true because you can be in your mind so much like I'm not going to change this or this kitchen is going to get renovated someday or someday I'm going to paint this room and you just you don't do it because you're afraid you're not going to do it right but the fact of changing it and actually committing to making the change happen all of a sudden it just it frees you on so many levels and I can't explain it I mean I'm going to have to do a whole deep dive on the scientific sort of neuroscience behind it.

But I do know that the cortisol levels of your brain, especially in women, some of the research that I've seen that changes in their environment do something to their brain that all of a sudden it just clicks in a very positive way.

And so I think there's something about that for using that to your advantage, especially in the environments where people are feeling overwhelmed, where things are just stagnant.

And that ability to just make the change happen and go with it is going to release something that's going to be so positive. Yeah, I was just talking to a friend this morning who every Saturday when we get together talks about how she's going to tackle the picture box.

She's going to pull out the pictures or the artwork or whatever. She's going to do it today. And I remember another one you did for me, which was it was basically just a clothesline.

or a piece of string where you put a bunch of clothes pins in, and you could hang things up. And I actually told her that this morning. And she goes, oh my gosh, then I don't need to get them into the frames, and I don't need to do this.

Then I can just put them up and see them. And it was such a little thing that was such a great little tip that I passed on that you, yeah, every day. you could exactly you could well then you become really obsessive about it like i have to change the picture but you can change it and that's the whole thing is that you're not committing it's like you said i'm not painting a room i'm changing the decor and i think people feel because there's so much social media there's so much you know there are magazines that are great inspiration but i think at the end of the day keeping up with the joneses is a big you know, stressor for a lot of people.

And I think that that's something everybody's got an opinion. Everybody's going to have something to say about you chose a color that you loved in your dining room.

You loved it. And that's the whole thing is that's really part of what my sort of message is now is that you know what you respond to. You know what, you know, you're excited about and what you get this feeling of maybe there's a color in your house that you've put up that has a nostalgic connection for you to your grandmother's house or to your mom or whoever it is or you know whatever it is if it's something there's a piece of artwork that you love because it just brings some visual thing to you that is a memory that you love and there's something about that to me is so powerful because it's not somebody else's idea of what a house should be it's your home and it's your idea of what you respond to And I think in the midst of everyday life and everyday bombarding of everything that's coming at you, people forget the essence of what their house is and what it could be and what it should be.

And I think that that is really what we need to remind people about. I think in your work environment, it's the same thing. In your home environment, it's the same thing.

You're not able to control the outside world or the things that are being thrown at you in many cases with life, but you can have a say on this place that is the foundation of your life.

And that's to me, what resonates with me is sort of this next chapter of my work creatively is I feel that I'm reminding people that this is your foundation.

These are the places that No matter if it's an apartment, if it's a, it's a house, if you're an empty nester and it's a new house that, you know, is not your normal environment, but you have the ability to make it something that is going to make you feel like you.

And it's going to remind you of you. And then you can be you to everybody else. You know, you can, you can be the good you because you've created this nest for yourself.

And in many ways it is kind of nesting. It is in a way, but it's a new kind of nesting because you're not, you're not a bird, you're a person and you're creating this environment that's for you.

Well, how do you do it with somebody? I hear that voice in my head from many, many years ago. Well, I don't know what I want. It's sort of like Julia Roberts in Runaway Bride.

What kind of eggs do I like? I don't know. I got to eat all the eggs. How do you help draw that out of people who say, I have no idea what's going to make my environment better?

Well, I think it's a certain amount of dreaming a little bit of like, you know, you know what you respond to. I mean, you and I have talked about this before.

And, you know, in my book, No Place Like Home, I talk about movies or TV shows. You know, we all watch movies, we all watch TV shows, and they've all got houses in them that you might respond to.

I love that there's a way to use that to your advantage. Okay, so you're sitting there watching something and you're entertained, but are there houses you're seeing?

Are you with your spouse and you say, hey, I like that house or I like that apartment, you know, and what is it about it that you respond to? All of a sudden, you're having a dialogue either with yourself about why you respond to it or with somebody that's with you to say, I like that.

Oh, I like that style. I didn't know I was a modern, you know, farmhouse person. I didn't know that I liked, you know, country, you know, sort of setting like that house.

I mean, we talk about something's got to give, you know, that Diane Keaton movie, Diane Keaton, we all loved her. That house and the Nancy Meyers movies, you know, they create this style of this lifestyle that we aspire to.

And that's what you respond to. And all of a sudden you're drawn to it. Well, you don't have to have the exact replica of what's in there, but you can look at it and say, you know, watch the movie, you know, streaming it and you can freeze frame it and you can say, I like that room because I like this color or I like that style of furniture.

And all of a sudden you start to empower yourself to communicate what you like to yourself or to the people that you're talking to say, yeah, I'm that style.

And that I think is daunting for a lot of people because they just don't know where to start. But if you're watching something, It's entertaining you.

It's a great creative tool. You're educating yourself in ways that you didn't expect to educate yourself. But I think use it as a creative tool to figure out what your style is.

Practical First Steps for a Better Home

And I love it when it's couples trying to do that because a lot of times I'll say to couples in our Zoom sessions or with clients in real life, I'll say, you know, what's a movie that you've seen or a TV show?

And then all of a sudden, and it's not like you both have to agree, but it's something that speaks to both of you and what is it about it? And then all of a sudden you can start to marry those things together and have, you know, a dialogue that makes sense in the world of design, but in the world of even just creating an aesthetic.

I mean, you might not have this furniture that you dream about having or the artwork or even the house, but how can you create that essence that kind of taps into that a little bit?

Yeah, that then is gonna make that environment more right for you. That will really help not just your life, but your health and that of your kids. And that's the big thing too is I think that again, I said the beginning is parents leading by example, because I think there's so many things that you have no control over with the kids and the situations that your clients are dealing with.

And there are some things they have to let go of. So what can they do to feel that there's this empowerment? And that's the word that keeps coming to mind of not you know, always having to go with stuff that's coming at you, but here's a little compartment, here's a little department in my life that I can have a say in, because I deserve to have this nourishing, energizing, comforting space that is not only good for me and my immediate family, but, you know, for my extended family when I leave this house, that I have this baseline that's been good to me and to them.

Even though they may not understand it, and I know with the parents and the kids, they're dealing with things that they're not necessarily the kids are not going to come in and say, wow, this is really pretty.

This makes me feel nice. But they might, they might get a little bit out of that in some other way that they might be drawn into the space more. They may want to hang out in the kitchen more because you've created this atmosphere by leading by example.

And that's really what I want to remind people is that you have the power within you to really kind of make the changes happen simply, but they're going to have an effect on you and they're going to have effect on the people around you as well.

And it's so powerful. So what's next for you, Steven? I know you have a podcast, and it's coming back, the Driven by Design Studio. So what else? So one of the things that I, you know, because I love doing TV and I love, you know, doing the showing by example, you know, leading by example and showing people the process.

And one of the things I really want to spend more time doing is showing them the process that I go out and do if it's a project for a client or a makeover for, you know, a magazine to show that sort of behind the scenes, if you will.

so that they can hear it from me so that they can learn as they're seeing. So it's not necessarily me saying and looking at the camera and saying, this is how you make your kitchen look better.

It's showing it. And let's talk about it. And so visually, I've learned that seeing is believing. So a podcast, obviously, we can talk about stuff. And the thing I love about the podcast, and you understand this, but the idea that People can listen to you and learn and subliminally learn by absorbing it, by hearing you.

And that's why I love the power of the podcast and the idea that somebody can be working out, they can be in their car, they can be making dinner, they can listen to parts of it and then pause it and then come back to it or whatever.

But it's a friend. in your ear and there's a comfort level there. And I realized that, and that's part of why I stopped the podcast and took it off and then realized where I want it to go and how I want to use it moving forward.

And I realized that simple fact is that you are like a designer, well, for me, designer friend in the person's ear. In your case, you're their doctor friend in their ear and It's the voice in your head in a way that is absorbing what

you're saying and sharing with them.

And I realized there's a certain amount of responsibility in that. And I wanted it to be a message that I'm excited about, that I'm passionate about, that I can then share that enthusiasm and that excitement with people that either they want to listen or they don't want to listen or they want to see it and they don't want to see it.

So I love that. And that to me is creatively fulfilling for me. But it always goes back to helping real life people with the real life homes. And that's not changing and that's become even more of a focus.

Yeah. And why is that so important to you? Why do you feel so strongly about that being needed right now in our world today? Well, I think there's so many things that have gone by the wayside, you know, traditions that we have, you know, like I joked with somebody the other day, like in the fifties, when people used to dress up to go out just to go get something at the market, you know, the people would dress in nice clothes.

And now we wear sweatpants and pajamas, you know, things like that, you know, it's like there are traditions that have gone away, but the home environment.

is a constant, you know, it's evolved over time and it's changed. And I, you know, in my book, I talk about what I grew up with when I was a kid and how those homes had an influence on me and as a father and as a parent with my wife, Mary and our kids and creating this environment for our kids.

And now, you know, people are going off and living their own lives and about to start their own lives. And it's just, to me, that's, it's, I like it because you have an opportunity to continue reminding people of the home is where the heart is.

I know it's corny. I know it sounds, you know, familiar, but it is really true. And that's why my book, No Place Like Home was named because it's no place like home, like the movie, The Wizard of Oz.

And at the end, no matter where you go, you go off into the world and see all this crazy stuff. You come back and at the end, you know, Annie M, there is no place like home.

And you're remembering, yeah, I saw all this stuff, but I come back here at the end of the day. And that I don't know, it's something so simple, but I think people have forgotten that in this day and age.

And I think, you know, in the world of social media showing you, this is the perfect life you're supposed to have, and look at me, I'm so great. But then people are realizing, you know, I'm not that, I'm never going to be that.

And my home is pretty simple, and my family is pretty simple, and I love having the simplicity. And I love that. That's what I'm about. So let's help each other with that.

Well, you've made so many of my offices, my homes, feel like home, feel like a place I want to be. And the patients I take care of, the friends I bring in, that they want to be here.

And it has to do with all the things you've talked about, the light and the color and the decluttering and the seeing the space. And I could go on and on about how much I adore your process and what you bring to what you do.

Closing Thoughts and Resources

So check out the book, No Place Like Home. Check out the podcast when it's back, Driven by Design. And how else could they reach out to you, Stephen, if they wanted to?

Yep. It's the website stange.com. So st-onge.com. And that's the best place they can find out about the Zoom consults. And that's where I deal with all my client stuff.

And it's just really trying to show people, you know, I'm reachable. I'm there for you. I'm not going to be judging you.

And that's the one thing I think people feel that they don't work with designers because they feel like, oh, that person's going to have like an opinion about what my house looks like.

And I've seen it all. I mean, I have been across America and Canada, and I have seen so many houses and so many styles and so many, you know, and I don't even judge it anymore.

You know, I think that people feel, I mean, maybe at the beginning of my career, I would have gone in like, Oh, what were they thinking? But now I realized like, okay, this is what they've done.

This is what they've created. And I've seen, you know, doing TV makeovers, there were crews and we were coming into, you know, a space that we've never been to in Tucson, Arizona or wherever it was.

And we're making the magic happen. But then there are other times where they're real life clients who have called me in and have said, okay, we just can't see it anymore.

And it's just fun for me now to be able to see, okay, I'm not judging you. I'm here to help you figuring out a better way. Because you're not seeing it yet.

And for me, you know, when I was on Oprah, she said, you know, you can see the potential in any space. And I said, yes, I can see it. I see beyond the clutter.

I see beyond the stuff that you're seeing every day. And that's why she said, well, that's why they call you Santosh. Well, it's not why they call me St.

Ange, it's because I get it. I get where you're coming from. And I get that life just throws a lot at you and we've all seen that. And at the end of the day.

If I can help you make a space better for your life to be better, that's what we're talking about. Yeah. And that's what we all want in every aspect of our lives to be gotten, to be listened to.

And I know you do that and thank you for doing it and thanks for being on this podcast. Yeah. No, it was great to be here. And I thank you very much for asking me.

And I think that if we can, in all that we do, I mean, I respect you and all that you do for the families you work with. And if we can just all get together to figure out a way to just to like, you know, balance things out.

Cause we know. It's crazy and there's a lot happening and, you know, these families deserve a break. They really do. You know, right? I mean, they really do.

And it doesn't all have to be dark and depressing. It can be something that, you know, uplifts you at the same time and gives you things that you don't expect.

And that's what I've learned through design. And that's why we're talking about this and we're going to keep talking about it. Cause I could, like you, I can keep talking about design all the time.

Forever. Yeah. Well, I can't talk about design, but I could listen to you talk about it. I'll talk about Pan's Pandas. So anyway, thank you, Stephen, for being here.

And thank you everybody for listening and watching. And we'll see you next time on Demystifying Pan's Pandas. That's it for today's episode of Demystifying Pan's Pandas.

I hope you're walking away with insights, tools, and hope to help you and your child on this journey. If you found today's conversation valuable, be sure to subscribe so you never miss an episode.

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moment, leaving a review helps us reach even more families who deserve answers.

Also, for more information, training, and community, check out our website, drohara.com, and join our annual membership. And remember, every step forward, no matter how small, brings us closer to healing and understanding.

Until next time, be present, be hopeful, and we look forward to seeing you next time on Demystifying Pan's Pandas.