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BYLINE: For newborns to newlyweds, fung shui can create harmonious homes. Kavita Daswani meets two sisters who help put things in their place

BODY:

THERE'S MORE TO setting up a baby's nursery than simply choosing between motifs of Babar the Elephant or the Care Bears - much more, according to sisters Alison Carlin and Laura Forbes Carlin.

The Los Angeles-based business partners and interior designers use a combination of fung shui, design savvy and common sense to create spaces for new babies that are conducive to sleep and play, and are generally the most peaceful spots in a house.

They've compiled their insights into a **book** that's due out next month called *The Peaceful Nursery: Preparing a Home for Your Baby with Feng Shui* (Bantam **Dell/Delta Books**). "For babies, who are so sensitive physically and emotionally, it's important to have a holistic approach that combines fung shui, healthy living tips and life-coaching tips," says Carlin. "Environment plays a huge role."

The sisters, whose company is called The Art of Everyday Living, have carved a niche in New York, Boston, Los Angeles and elsewhere with their holistic approach to home decor. Both are trained in fung shui, and between them they hold degrees in communication, education, art and spiritual psychology, as well as having 10 years' design experience.

Their clients include model Sophie Dahl and they base their recommendations on a belief that the home is one of life's most significant anchors. "A home can be a support and can really help you when facing a huge transition such as having a new baby," says Forbes Carlin, mother of a three-year-old boy. "The beauty of fung shui is that it looks at the heart of a space so that it's more than just a space. It actually begins to shape your life. The home becomes an extension of your body."

The designers recommend pastels for a nursery, although they acknowledge a trend towards red trimmings. "Red as an accent is great, as opposed to painting a wall red, which can be overwhelming and not conducive to a peaceful space," says Forbes Carlin. "Also, many people like to paint large murals. We always remind them that murals can't be changed easily. It's important not to have too active or busy a mural."

They recommend using lots of containers and bins for toys, which ensures the room changes easily from a playroom to a sleep room. Ideal items with which to decorate include solid wood furniture, natural fibre rugs and organic, untreated wool crib mattress and linens. "Newborns are particularly sensitive to the chemicals and toxins found in many common household furnishings," says Forbes Carlin.

They also suggest creating a view from the crib. "Once your baby gets a little older, what she sees when she wakes up in the morning and what she sees before going to sleep will influence her view on life," says Forbes Carlin. She recommends beautiful artwork.

The sisters suggest soothing, soft colours such as light blue, lavender or pale yellow. Brights should be reserved for accents such as pillows and throws. "To create peace and calm, don't fill every inch of the room with objects," says Carlin. "It's OK to have some open space, whether it be wall space, floor space or shelf space."

Otherwise, the sisters use the tenets of feng shui. If the baby's room is at the front of a house or in a flat over a busy street, the energy needs to be toned down. Soft colours and peaceful artwork will help, as will double-pane windows and heavy curtains to block out street noise. "You can also purchase a white noise machine to mask unwanted sounds," says Carlin.

The sisters have already started work on a second **book**, tentatively called *At Home With Love*, which uses the same approach for singles and couples planning to share a living space.

"It will focus on creating romance in the home, and in life, using the home as a vehicle," says Forbes Carlin. "When couples move in together, there's a real opportunity for them not just to make a home together, but really to define their life together. We advise them to take the time to think about what they're going to bring into a space.

"It's an excellent vehicle to discuss their expectations for their relationship."

In the homes of single women the sisters often find artwork depicting a solitary female figure. In single men's homes, it's not unusual to see a bed with just one pillow. "We come to it with the approach that, if you're single, you want to create a space for two people, to act as if you're already in that relationship, and that you're inviting that person into your life," says Carlin.

"Set up a bedroom with two nightstands of equal size - representing equality in the relationship - and at least two comfortable places to sit to eat, watch TV and read. Also, balance the masculine and feminine energy. If you're a single woman looking for a relationship and you live in an overly feminine home - lots of pink or lace or floral patterns - consider inviting more masculine energy into your life by adding some solid, more masculine colours."

Couples deciding to move in together may also need help. "Everything you bring to your new home with you should support your relationship and your goals," says Forbes Carlin. "For example, it might be time to get rid of your ex's record collection or sofa."

They also advise couples to agree on what goes in common areas. Partners might

have different tastes, so it's important to find a space for each person that is theirs to decorate as they please.

"Ideally, this would be an entire room such as a home office," says Carlin. "But if you live in a smaller home you can still create your own space, even if it's the top of your dresser or the corner of one room. If you cook more, decorate the kitchen. If your partner pays the bills, he or she could organise the desk area."

And never put a television in the bedroom, they say. "It tends to take the place of romance," says Carlin.

Couples moving in together have other issues to address, among them past relationships. "We start by getting rid of clutter - getting those old letters and photographs from former relationships and ex-spouses and suggesting those be moved out of the home," says Carlin.

But the small things are important, too. Tension often builds between people living together because of such inanities as a coat left on the floor or because the setup allows for items such as car keys to be misplaced regularly.

"There's a counselling aspect to [designing]," says Forbes Carlin. "When we begin a consultation, we don't begin by asking what someone wants their home to look like. We begin with a question about goals, and creating a living space to support those goals."

The effects can be dramatic. Forbes Carlin remembers a couple with whom she once worked. Although the pair had been together for several years before the woman moved into her boyfriend's home, almost no changes had been made to his original space. The only evidence of the woman was in a tiny corner of the home where she'd set up a desk.

"It was almost as if her presence wasn't in the home," says Forbes Carlin. An area was cleared where she could set up a home office. He also removed some of his posters so she could hang the artwork she had collected.

"She finally felt at home, in her home and in his life. By making space for her physically he also made space for her emotionally. About a month later, they got engaged."

GRAPHIC: Alison Carlin and Laura Forbes Carlin (top) say a baby's environment will play a vital role in the child's development

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