

Behaviour matters

Nicky Trevorrow looks into cat friendly interior design

Many of us are interested in interior design given the number of television programmes there are dedicated to the topic, but what do you think your cat would do, given the chance? There's a growing trend towards open plan houses, certainly in new builds. Despite this, we still maintain our need for privacy and of course, hygiene, which is why you will never see an open plan bathroom/diner. Cats are very similar to us in this respect which explains why they prefer to have their litter trays placed not only away from food and water bowls, but also somewhere private yet accessible. Many people place their cat's litter tray next to a cat flap, glass back door or in a conservatory; however, these are high-traffic areas which can be easily overlooked by other cats in the neighbourhood, leading to anxiety and potential behavioural problems. If your cat is not using the litter tray, the first port of call is to take your cat to the vets for a health check to rule out medical problems, before looking at their toileting preferences.

PHOTOS: TOP- SUE SHERMILT / BOTTOM: ISTOCK.COM/SDOMINICK



Scent marking



NICKY TREVORROW
BSc (Hons), PG Dip
(CABC), RVN

Nicky works in Cats Protection's Veterinary Department at the National Cat Centre as a Behaviour Manager. Nicky holds a BSc (Hons) degree in Animal Behaviour from Anglia Ruskin University in Cambridge. She completed a postgraduate diploma in Companion Animal Behaviour Counselling from the University of Southampton. Nicky is a registered veterinary nurse. She is a member of the International Cat Care's Behavioural Advisory Panel and represents Cats Protection on the Animal Behaviour and Training Council. Nicky is a full member of the Association of Pet Behaviour Counsellors.



Happy cats are those which have all their 'key resources', which is all the 'cat stuff' they need on a daily basis, such as:

- food bowls and feeding enrichment
- water bowls
- litter trays
- scratch posts
- places to hide
- elevated perches
- toys
- beds

So what are the golden rules for kitty interior design and resource placement?

Firstly, it is important to start with how many! The most important rule is 'one resource per cat plus one extra for choice'. Cats are not ▶



► known for having a gregarious nature and therefore need to have the ability to get to a resource easily without having to share. What can appear to owners as 'queuing' or 'waiting their turn', is actually a subtle stress response in the cat who is not able to immediately access resources due to a more confident or territorial cat in the household. Not having enough essential resources can cause significant stress in cats. The PDSA's Animal Wellbeing Report (PAW Report) 2017 found that while just under half of cats live with at least one other cat, evidence shows that cats are not provided with as many resources as they need. Cats are the masters of disguise when it comes to hiding how they really feel so it is very easy to miss inconspicuous signs such as cat flap or litter tray blocking. This does not mean that a cat will block the resource by sitting next to it; they are much more subtle than that and may appear to be innocently washing their paws the other side of the room, while sending emotional warfare messages to the other cat!

Hints and tips for resource placement

1 Space resources out all around the house.

2 Cats prefer their water bowl to be away from their food bowl and are much more likely to drink more if they are separate. The same applies to feeding enrichment items, such as puzzle feeders which encourage cats to use their brains to 'hunt' for their food.

3 Place food and water bowls away from the wall so that cats have the choice to view the room and not worry about anything sneaking up behind them.

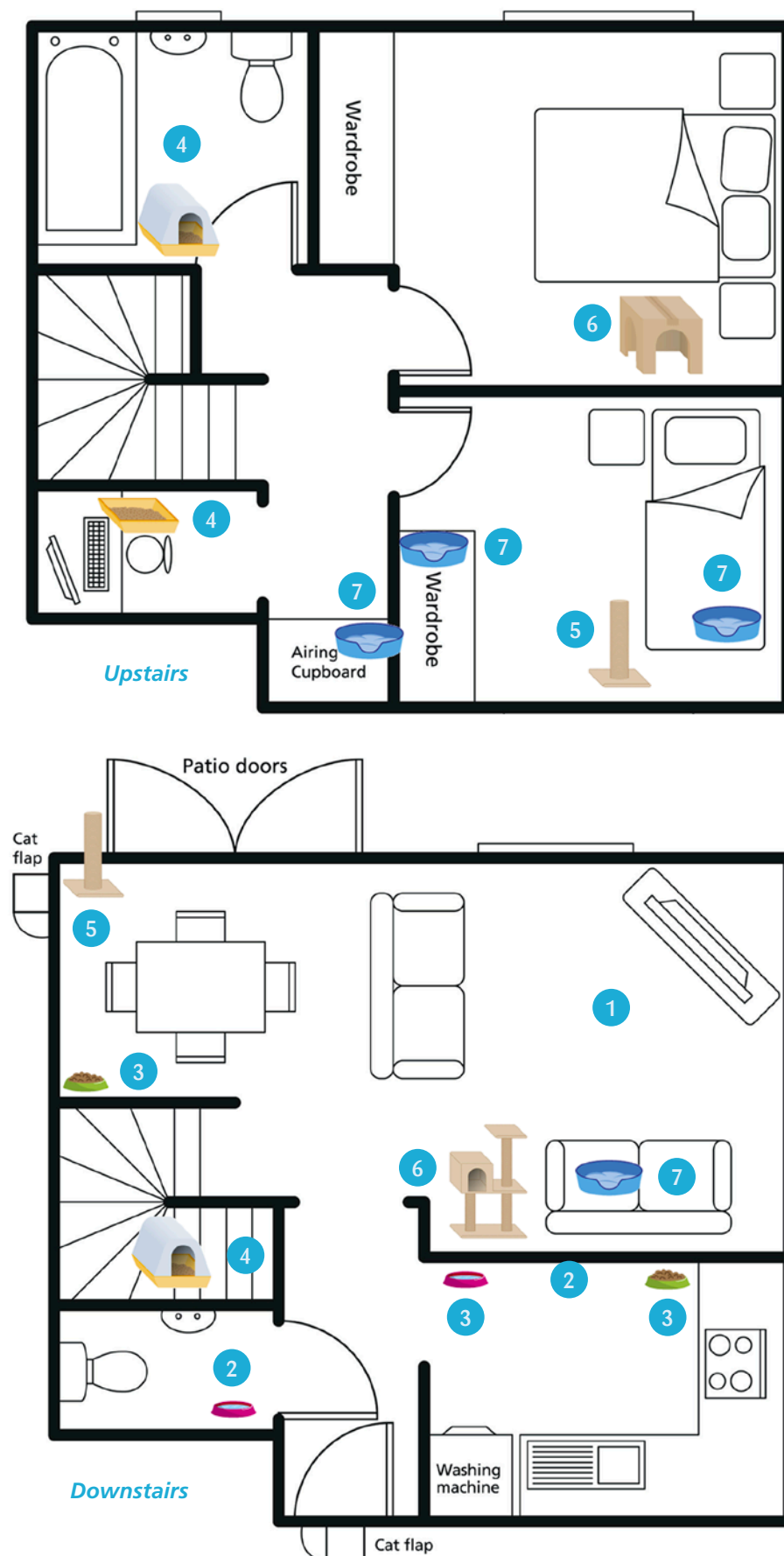
HOMEWORK

Draw a plan of your house and work out your cat's territory where they spend most of their time. Mark these territories in different colours on

your house plan to show different cats if you have more than one cat. Then aim to provide a set of resources per cat in their respective territories.

Keep food and water bowls separate

Desirable places floor plans



4 Litter trays should be away from all other resources for hygiene reasons, such as a covered litter tray placed under the stairs or an open tray under the desk in a quiet study.

5 For maximum impact, place scratch posts near to where they are scratching (eg your beds or sofas), near to where they sleep so they can scratch for claw maintenance when they first wake up, and near to entry and exit points for scratching marking whereby they leave vertical lines as a visual marker as well as a scent marker from the scent glands between their toes.

6 Cats like clutter! If your house is open plan, create plenty of hidey holes and elevated perches for your cat to survey their territory safely. A sturdy cat tree is a popular option with cats, as is 'cat shelving' with shelves placed strategically on the wall to provide access to other resources and cat walkways to rooms in the house which cannot be blocked by other cats.

7 As cats rotate their sleeping place regularly, cats need multiple sleeping place options. You may find the brand new cat bed is not flavour of the month. Try placing it somewhere warm, in a sunny spot and/or up high to renew its appeal.

These simple design tips can not only lead to a happier cat, but they also mean a cat is less likely to experience chronic stress which can cause both medical and behavioural problems, meaning a happier owner too. ●