



Interior Design in the 20th Century

Allen Tate

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C. Ray Smith

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To the Student

Any study of interior design succeeds or founders on how much of the subject is considered—on how broad and far-reaching are its boundaries and limitations. Some people consider interior design to be the selecting, assembling, and arranging of items to furnish a room. To others, interior design means designing furniture and other furnishings. Still others approach it first as affecting a space—designing the envelope, the enclosing walls, floors, and ceilings—then planning the items. A certain few embrace all these activities—designing the architecture of spaces as well as designing the furniture and furnishings; then assembling and arranging all these components into a cohesive, functional, and psychologically appropriate whole.

Here, we consider the latter approach, that is, the total process of designing interiors as it relates to a classroom studio. This book provides a guide for making interiors. It introduces beginning students to the most fundamental means with which to organize interiors. The aim is that students' designs be rational, intelligent, orderly, usable, and appropriate.

Part 1, "The Making of Interiors: An Introduction," therefore, offers a guide to *how* things are done—not *what* should be done or *what* should be designed, but the process of *how* designs are arrived at. The uniqueness of this section is its approach to the problem of design concept. Unless there is an all-encompassing attitude and concept, regardless of how much technical data a student has in the essential areas of drafting, construction, detailing, drawing, and visual presentation, a design solution will be devoid of content and character.

This section answers the following questions: Where do concepts come from? How does a student find a design approach to solve a problem? How does a student make a choice when more than one concept is possible? In answer, Part 1 discusses how the concept for an interior must arise from the existing architectural plan. Since almost all interiors are designed within existing buildings, this approach to concept and concept development becomes critical both to study and to the future practice of professional interior designers. Although the stylistic outlook of the authors is based on the Modern movement in design, the text explores a procedure that is ageless, timeless, and without regard to idiom. The objective is to provide a survey of design methodology and design influences that constitute the fundamentals of twentieth-century design.

Part 2, "The Design Process in Practice: Case Studies," includes answers to questions put to practicing designers of interiors about their design processes. Process, as these case studies reveal, is a development and distillation of each designer's past experience in education and professional practice. The authors

believe that despite the different personal approaches and specializations of the different designers, the case studies reveal an underlying methodology that is relatively consistent in broad outline and gives credence to the theoretical guidelines offered in Part 1.

Part 3, “Interior Design in Twentieth-Century America: A History,” presents a historical survey of twentieth-century interior design. It begins with precursors and outlines the evolution of the twentieth-century interior, then continues through each decade of our century to present the design contributions of the principal design directions and the principal personalities who contributed to them.

The historical precedents for twentieth-century design have been published repeatedly. No other interior design textbook concerns itself exclusively with today’s design. Nevertheless, the legacy from the past is delineated, and the foundations of twentieth-century interior design are outlined. This history has attempted to survey the full range of twentieth-century interior designing—not just the Modern movement, but also the traditionalist residential designers, the industrial designers, and the space planners who have made recognized contributions in our time. It should provide the background necessary to assist students in the search for solutions and sensibilities appropriate to the problems of interior design today.

What Is Interior Design?

In the popular mind, interior design is thought to deal mainly with items—objects only. In the best interiors designed today, these items have had only a minor part in the success and significance of the finished design. That part is not unimportant, but it is not the first priority. To consider items first is to leap from shore to midstream, leaving the primary problem of interior design unexamined. This textbook concentrates on the methods of decision making that give strength to design concepts. It explains why those usual items are of secondary importance and must first be put aside in order to consider the spatial problems relating to plan, elevations, and the architectural volume or character described by them.

Since the activity of designing interiors began as a profession, the confusion of talent or “flair” with the ability and desire to learn has prevented some students, at the outset, from useful analysis and decision making that could develop into method. Talent is elusive at best. A more reliable attribute—analytical ability—will prove far more meaningful in learning how to design interiors. Then the necessary human attribute of intuition can contribute its quality to the process.

This book demonstrates that all successful design results from an examination and understanding of what is appropriate, what is possible within the confines of an existing space—not *What do I want?* but *What can be done?* The process of designing interiors must be largely intellectual so that study is possible; when design decisions are largely emotional, there is little opportunity for the beginning of objectivity.

Some Essential Definitions

An **interior** is a space that is enclosed by walls, floors, and ceilings. It has one or more entries/exits, and usually one or more openings, such as windows, for light and ventilation. Those enclosing elements may be composed of any number of materials and formed of countless shapes.

“Interiors” are distinguished from “spaces,” which can be fully outdoors, as in landscapes or the infinite cosmos, or partly enclosed, as in plazas or open-roofed atriums and courtyards. Interiors are distinguished by their ceilings, which provide the essential shelter against weather and the elements.

To **design** is to conceive, envision, plan, delineate, and compose things. The design method includes communicating the concept to the client-owner and to the craftspeople who will build or execute those designs. It includes appropriate use of materials, attention to scale, and attention to functional and psychological appropriateness.

Interior design has been defined as the creation and organization of interior spaces to perform specific functions within an architectural environment. Such interior spaces must combine the functional, technical, and economic aspects of design with the human, aesthetic, and psychological considerations needed by the intended users.

A formal definition of interior design, formulated by the National Council for Interior Design Qualification (NCIDQ), has been developed to help unify the varied directions and professional activities in the field today. The definition has been accepted by the major national design organizations in the United States and Canada as well as by the International Federation of Interior Designers/Interior Architects. It has also been adopted by the U.S. Government's Office of Personnel Management as the official standard classification of an interior designer:

The Professional Interior Designer is a person qualified by education, experience, and examination who:

1. identifies, researches, and creatively solves problems pertaining to the function and quality of the interior environment;
2. performs services relative to interior spaces, including programming, design analysis, space planning, and aesthetics, using specialized knowledge of interior construction, building systems and components, building codes, equipment, materials, and furnishings; and
3. prepares drawings and documents relative to the design of interior spaces in order to enhance and protect the health, safety, and welfare of the public.

Today's interior designers are involved in creating a remarkable array of different interiors—not only residences, clubs, and yachts, including large country houses and small urban apartments; but also palaces for rulers and the wealthy, seats of government and world headquarters, cathedrals and shrines, princely corporate office and production complexes, libraries and educational facilities, hospitals and hotels, airplanes and ocean liners. The scope of endeavor and the breadth of involvement for twentieth-century interior designers are enormous and exhilarating.

Decoration is an essential part of the design process. It involves the consideration of color, texture, and ornament. This consideration is an important part of all architecture and all interior design. The degree of concentration on this aspect of the design process is critical. Modern architects believed that inherent colors, textures, and the graining in natural materials were adequate decorative contributions to their architecture and interiors. Some practitioners have specialized in this aspect of design, and have considered it to be the primary activity if not the totality of the design process. Interior decorators have often been primarily concerned with the decorative effects or results of a combination of components in an interior. Interior designers aim to be essentially occupied with interior spatial effects.

Throughout this book, we refer to designers of interiors as “designers,” whether they personally classify themselves as architects, decorators, or otherwise. We have attempted to avoid distinguishing “interior designer” from “decorator” and “architect,” except where those titles clarify legal professional standings. In Part 3 this has not always been possible or appropriate. The objective is to concentrate on the

activity of designing interiors, not to distinguish ranges of activity or specialization or to stoke the fires of controversy or parochialism. For some, this middle-profession label will be equally inflammatory, perhaps; but they might ask if “designer” is not a better designation than calling all designers of interiors “architects” or “decorators.” The term “designer” focuses on the activity discussed.

Assembling is used in this book to denote that phase of furnishing an interior that involves selecting, shopping, specifying, and arranging already designed elements within an interior.

Style has been broadly defined by the critic Meyer Shapiro in relation to its scholarly and cultural definitions.

By style is meant the constant form—and sometimes the constant elements, qualities, and expressions—in an individual or group. The term is also applied to the whole activity of an individual or society, as in speaking of a “lifestyle” or the “style of a civilization.” . . . in general the description of a style refers to three aspects of art: form elements or motives, form relationships, and qualities (including an over-all quality which we may call the “expression”).¹

More simply, style is what a designer—or indeed any person—develops as a way of presenting himself or herself. It is not an overlaid thing, but an integral aspect developed over the years. As the critic of writing style William Strunk has observed,

Style has no . . . separate entity; it is nondetachable, unfilterable. The beginner should approach style warily, realizing that it is himself he is approaching, no other; and he should begin by turning resolutely away from all devices that are popularly believed to indicate style—all mannerisms, tricks, adornments. The approach to style is by way of plainness, simplicity, orderliness, sincerity.²

Style, then, results from a search. It comes not at the beginning of a career, but, if at all, during—perhaps even after—the long development of design practice.

Taste has always been elusive of a universally acceptable definition. It is an ability to discriminate and distinguish appropriateness, quality, style, craftsmanship, and personality of contribution. It can be acquired, perhaps, only through interest and exposure, experience and practice. It is said that it cannot be learned. Yet it is not inborn in the same way that sensory ability to taste flavors is inborn, nor is it made and developed the same way as tastemaker critics help to fashion the “taste of the day.” These three different kinds of taste—discrimination, the sense of flavors, and fashion-making—if borne in mind—can help students arrive at their own acceptable definitions of taste.

Function is the word designers use to mean “the activity performed.” That activity can be performed by human action or by a working part, such as the action of a drawer, or the action of a chair in providing support. Structural engineers use the term to mean the ability of a structural member to support something. Students are counseled to distinguish failures in function, which might cause physical disasters, from failures of comfort, which may be mere nuisances and inconveniences.

Aesthetics is the study or philosophy of the beautiful. Theories about what constitutes the beautiful have been numerous throughout history. The aesthetic aspects of interior design are, essentially, the visual and psychological appropriateness to the functional requirements of the specific interior under consideration.

The relation between *function* and *aesthetics* is one of the fundamental balances to be achieved in the applied art of interior design. For interior design is unlike the fine arts of painting and sculpture, which have no requirement to function for

any human or mechanical activity. Interior design must apply its art to the required functions of a client or clients. That makes it an applied art, and creates the delicate balance between function and aesthetics that is a matter of endless discussion in the field.

Modern has two meanings to us today. The first generally connotes the modern sensibility, the Modern Age, the modern world and lifestyle as we know it in the twentieth century. The other, a more specific use of the term, designates the Modern movement in design. That movement, described in Part 3, began in the first decade of this century and developed an antihistorical and purposely abstract approach. It is based on the ideals, goals, and aesthetic of the Industrial Revolution, with its respect for the machine.

Modern interiors are, therefore, those interiors that include not only the elements assumed under the above definition of an interior, but also the developments since the Industrial Revolution that we have come to consider essential in our shelter and architecture. Those elements are plumbing, sanitation, ventilation, heating, functional efficiency, privacy, and personal possessions, including furniture.

Modern interior design as a profession is practiced by a wide variety of people. They include interior designers, architects, industrial designers, decorators, furniture dealers, and graphic designers; and the design staffs of department stores, of corporations, and of federal and state governments. Other professionals who actively contribute to interior design include engineers; lighting designers, acoustical and audiovisual specialists; food facilities consultants; behavioral scientists; programmers and planners; draftsmen, detailers, and renderers; exhibit designers; colorists; furniture and textile designers, manufacturers, and suppliers; specification writers; photographers, graphic artists, painters, and sculptors; landscape designers, contractors, management consultants, and accountants.

What Makes a Professional?

We live in the age of professionals. The politician and the actor are called professionals, as are athletes who receive a salary. Few people recognize that to be a professional means something more than "to be in a business." That something has to do with what you do, why you do it, and also how you become equipped to do it.

In a commencement address at Brown University in the 1930s, Chief Justice of the United States Louis Brandeis defined a "profession": First, the necessary preliminary training is intellectual in character, involving knowledge and, to some extent, learning, as distinguished from mere skill. Second, the occupation is pursued largely for others, not for oneself. Third, it is an occupation in which the financial return is not the only accepted measure of success.

Certainly the training of interior designers fits into this definition. If we accept it, however, we see that the athlete, whose work is largely skill, does not qualify as a professional. Neither does the fine artist, who may have had a rigorous education, but whose work is done largely as self-expression and not for others.

Financial return seems to be the accepted criterion for determining a profession, and many professionals do make vast incomes. When criticism is leveled at interior design as a profession because the work is said to be undertaken primarily for the affluent, we can answer that the same can be said for the professions of law and medicine when the client or patient is rich. However, when a service is needed, and professional assistance is available, the amount of money spent for the assis-

tance or earned as a fee for the service is not a viable criterion for judging professionalism. When a designer plans interiors for a hospital, a school, or a public library for a fixed amount of money, the same level of expert contribution is expected—and is compensated in the same way—as when a designer plans a residence on a limited budget or a palace for a potentate.

Still, a career is best undertaken for motivations other than profit. Not the least of those better motivations is that one truly *likes* the activity in which one plans to spend the time and energy of one's life. The Brandeis definition may be too idealistic for all of us, but it is good to take its high ideals at the beginning. Its direction will give breadth and scope to our work and will give us, like the angels, a long way to fall.

As a profession, interior design—even at this late point in the twentieth century—is new and still emerging. It has gained credibility in every educational region of the United States. In each region one or more schools offer programs in interior design that lead to the granting of a degree; some schools offer graduate work in the subject.

Around the profession of interior design, recognized organizations have formed. National organizations investigate and qualify interior design programs by establishing minimum standards. Other national and regional groups have attempted to create standards for professional practice. These organizations also provide forums for discussion on problems of design as well as information on products, methodology, technology, and the psychological implications of interiors as an important part of the manmade environment.

Among those groups that investigate and qualify interior design programs and that develop educational standards in America are the National Council for Interior Design Qualification (NCIDQ), the Foundation for Interior Design Education Research (FIDER), the Interior Design Educators Council (IDEC), and their sponsoring national professional societies: the American Society of Interior Designers (ASID), the Institute of Business Designers (IBD), the Institute of Store Planners (ISP), and the Interior Designers of Canada (IDC). Many of these groups have been represented on a committee working with the American Institute of Architects (AIA) to establish and refine a standard contract document for interior design work.

The Need for Interior Designers

Before the twentieth century, the range of interiors made considerably simpler demands on designers in terms of functional planning. The technologies and processes of each activity and profession were less categorized and specialized. Around the turn of the century, countless elaborations of procedure—in hospital and laboratory spaces for the practice of medicine, in courts and prisons for the practice of law, in department stores for retail trade, and in offices for corporate administration—brought greater and greater needs for more specific and knowledgeable planning and provision of interior equipment. The twentieth-century interior designer, therefore, arose to focus on these constantly developing subprocedures and subcategories of activity. Throughout the twentieth century the practice of interior design has itself witnessed a steady development of specialization.

Interior designers are needed to concentrate on this specialization. But further, as any number of historians see it, technical and professional innovations have always been the result of someone's initial desire to make something beautiful. The current thinking is that bronze was developed for jewelry and urns before it was used for weapons. Iron was used for the wrought-ironmakers' craft before it was a construction material. Pottery and ceramics were developed for decorative

objects before they were used for purely practical purposes.³ Interior designers can recognize that aspiration to the beautiful, and they can take pride in the fact that their aspirations reflect the roots of our civilization.

The Act of Creation

The old adage that creation is one-tenth inspiration and nine-tenths perspiration has a majority of believers. It also has interpreter-philosophers of a much more heady bent. Benedetto Croce's tenet that "expression is intuition" summarizes the belief that we have not thought out something until we have expressed it. Whether in words or stone, painting or drawing, expression and thinking go hand in hand. We must put down or put out our thoughts before they are realized. All of our past experience comes to bear in this self-conscious realm, where we piece it all together in a dream state. Until this dream-state thinking is realized in some physical form, we have not created.

In its simplest form the act of creation is an interaction of the mind with a handcraft in materials. For interior design students those materials are drawings and models, and for them the work of expressing a thought—a concept—in drawings and models is the act of creation. Indeed, for most designers, drawing is designing. The two are virtually synonymous and inseparable.

Drawing is not only creative expression, it is thinking itself. Drawing is essential to conceptualization. A drawing may not be superb as classically pure drafting; however, it can convey necessary information. Sometimes, even at the early stage of development, a student's drawing may also be expressive and convey feeling and the emerging character of an interior. All students of design must draw, but not all of them will become outstanding in that craft. Still, at each line of the pencil, the possibilities change and new thoughts are germinated; for drawing is thinking.

Most students do not easily grasp what the act of developing a concept is, because they have not been through this process often enough to recognize it. But they should begin thinking at an early stage that a concept is something that always changes and becomes something new. They should begin to understand that a concept is a whole without parts. When designers become one with their drawings, we say that their nerves come out of their fingertips, that they get the idea into their hands. This is the methodology for arriving at a physical, form-making concept of design.

This textbook, then, in Part 1 offers a guide to acquiring a methodology that will help students arrive at concepts for their studio problems and will further help them to realize those concepts. Through Part 2, the text also provides an insight into the approaches, outlooks, inspirations, enthusiasms, and special techniques of a distinguished group of practicing contemporary designers of interiors. Finally, in Part 3, the book presents facts—names, dates, locations, theories—from the past and present that every serious student of design should be familiar with, and that every enrolled student has made a commitment to be responsible for.

The Student's Need for History

For all students of interior design, the history of twentieth-century interiors is essential to understanding today's practice. Students at the beginning of their careers need to know where the traditions of their field have come from, for several reasons. First, new professional careers are built on the foundation of inventive genius in the past. That foundation includes both an understanding of the events that contributed to design progress as well as a knowledge of the names, dates,

and locations associated with those original inventions. Second, history itself influences the future and provides a basis for aesthetic judgments. As the philosopher George Santayana warned, “Those who do not remember history are destined to relive its mistakes.” Learning from the mistakes of the past, in other words—including learning from what we do not like—is essential to making progress in the future.

The Scope of This History

This history of interior design in twentieth-century America aims to demonstrate that interior design is a tangible record of the values, technology, economy, regionalism, and genius of its evolving culture. Much of that culture has been influenced by European design movements, and those influences are part of twentieth-century interior design in America. Therefore, Part 3 of this text is not merely a history of styles and personality designers, but is also a history of plans, materials, functional changes, design influences, and idioms—and therefore of society.

It outlines the concurrent development, within the profession of interior design, of several directions that have often been considered mutually exclusive. For the history of twentieth-century interior design in America is both the history of the Modern movement and the history of traditional decorating during that time. Modern architects and designers have created significant interiors throughout our century and have made original and lasting contributions to twentieth-century interior design. Twentieth-century decorating arose, not as a new activity in our century, but as a new and separate profession. The decorators who work in that tradition have had much immediate influence on the total spectrum of interior design in America. The development of these professional directions has been concurrent, if sometimes conflicting.

Both directions—the Modern movement and traditional decorating—are part of this history of the profession that designs interiors. That is one of the aspects that makes this history different from other interior design histories. In addition to these two directions, Part 3 also surveys the contribution of a third professional direction—that of industrial designers and the later space planners. The specific contributions of each direction and how they have related to each other are outlined here.

This history also aims to describe three levels or strata of design activity and interest within our population. Along with the innovative, original concepts of vanguard designers—those concepts and images that have changed the vision of our age—this history also describes what was most popular in each decade. What was most popularly seen, understood, and desired is compared with both vanguard original invention and the mainstream of design practice and design education.

The Format and Organization of This History

Part 3 begins with a survey of the precursor developments that led to the modern interior. After this introduction, the history is organized by decades; that is, a chapter is devoted to each decade of the twentieth century. Following each chapter is a list of recommended further reading.

This chronological division was made for convenience—for understanding and for study—rather than being based on actual divisions in design development. Development in design history, as in the rest of life, is gradual. It spreads out across decades—as across countries—drifting and filtering slowly from single vanguard inventors in one decade to professional acceptance in the next decade. These time lags in understanding and acceptance are such, in fact, that design inventions

may not become supported by existing technology until two decades later. And sometimes acceptance by the broadest sector of the population occurs as late as three decades after the invention by the original genius. This is the historical progress of ideas. This history aims to provide an outline of that progress in the field of interior design in our century.

Because of its broad scope, this history may offend both camps: the Modernists, to whom the decorators may seem minor personalities; and the traditionalists, whom the architects may consider as having missed the point. Modernist architects may say, “Just delete all the minor personalities and concentrate on the major form-givers”—by which they mean Modern architects, regardless of their influence on or contribution to interior design. Traditionalist decorators may say, “Just leave out all the architects and tell us what the decorators did”—by which they may mean women and traditionalism, regardless of their overall influence on or contribution to interior design.

My goal, however, was to be inclusive. The decade of the 1980s was, perhaps, the first of this century in which such an overview of interior design could have been possible. Before, the crusade of the Modern movement and its taboo against historicism and decoration so polarized architects and interior designers against decorators that none of those camps would have wanted to be included with another in the same book. The two approaches were so antithetical that neither was willing to acknowledge, much less associate with, the other. Some of that feeling of singlemindedness still obtains.

However, for more than twenty years the direction has been increasingly toward inclusiveness in design. Since the mid-1970s this pluralism has become predominant—more interior designers are espousing the Modern movement, while more and more architects are re-adopting historicism and decoration. It is most apparent, from any reading of twentieth-century design history, that there has been a continuous pluralism of individual expression and approaches, from decade to decade. All are part of the full palette of interior design.

In this history, then, all candidates are considered as part of the force contributing to interior design advancement. There is no polemic, no taking sides with either Modernism or traditionalism, with architects or decorators. Indeed, it has been my aim to present the contributions of each designer or individual, of each school or idiom, on its own merits. There is, therefore, little critical evaluation from today's or the author's point of view of the work of any designer or idiom—except the fundamental criterion for selection and inclusion in the history. Instead, I have tried to present, as accurately and fairly as I see it, the goals, aims, and ideals of each: how *they* wanted to shape the world or the interior; not how *we* think of what they thought, not how the world of today may evaluate their success or the validity of their goals.

What I have tried to include in this history of interior design in twentieth-century America, therefore, are the objective facts of history. The evaluation of those facts will change from year to year, or at least from decade to decade. Critical opinion on almost all of the idioms, developments, practitioners, and works has varied—wavered—cyclically throughout the century. I have tried to say what each aimed to do, what each wanted to do, and what seems to have been positively accomplished in that direction.

Because evaluations will change again, I have avoided criticizing the obviously negative points, evident omissions and commissions of various designers—for example, the actual comfort of much innovative furniture, or the significance of Surrealism in interior design, or the lasting benefits of office landscape. Instead, I have aimed to describe and present as palpably as possible what innovative furniture has been, what Surrealism in interiors has been, and so on. The objective facts will, I trust, remain unchanged.

Nor must this be taken to indicate that all the objective facts about interior design in our century are stated here. There is a wealth of data and information on engineering, construction, manufacture, and installation elsewhere. The Suggested Reading lists following each chapter of the history section direct attention to many of those sources. So it will be the responsibility of each reader—teacher and student alike—to evaluate the facts presented in terms of their own day, in terms of the idiom prevailing in their schools or communities, in terms of the personal preferences of the moment.

Notes

1. Meyer Shapiro, "Anthropology Today," *A Modern Book of Aesthetics*, ed. Melvin Rader (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960).
2. William Strunk, Jr., and E. B. White, *The Elements of Style*, 3d ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1979).
3. Cyril Stanley Smith, *A Search for Structure* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981).

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