

A photograph of a person sitting in a large, futuristic, white, U-shaped architectural structure. The person is seen from behind, wearing a blue jacket, and is looking up at a glowing, circular light source at the top of the structure. The structure has a smooth, curved interior and a dark, shadowed exterior. The overall atmosphere is one of modern design and human interaction with a built environment.

Rethinking Design and Interiors

Human Beings in the
Built Environment

Shashi Caan

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The architectural truism of “it takes a village to build a building” very much applies to the actualization of this book. The simple yet poignant questions asked by my students inspired me to search for a deeper understanding and to investigate some of the fundamentals of both human needs and design criteria. At the end of the project, I would like to acknowledge all those who have contributed to its completion. These contributions include many discussions, advice, research, and reviews of ideas and various versions of the manuscript. Apart from those people with whom I have interacted, there remain others who have worked to help transform the manuscript into the physical reality of a book. I express my heartfelt thanks for your effort.

As a teacher I must first and foremost thank all my students. I have learnt a great deal from them. It was their curiosity and persistent questioning of a need to understand design that forced me to seek comprehensive explanations for complex matters. The concepts in this book are born out of their quest for clarifications, and, in the process, it has enormously enriched my own comprehension.

I am grateful to Philip Cooper, Editorial Director at Laurence King Publishing, who not only encouraged me to commit these ideas to paper, but also patiently guided me through the intriguing process of writing and publishing. Indeed, my thanks go to the entire Laurence King Publishing team, who helped with the myriad aspects involved in the publication of this book. Without their support and help, my ideas would still be the subject of verbal debate.

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My more recent exposure to the world at large and the global community made me realize that many of the issues discussed here reach across countries and cultures. This experience was made possible through my involvement on the board of the International Federation of Interior Designers/Architects (IFI), both as a member and as its president. The various individual board members and member organizations worldwide have greatly contributed to the breadth and depth of my insights. The editorial expertise and discernment provided by both Kristi Cameron and Liz Faber was crucial for reaching lucidity and precision in a message that is near and dear to my heart.

Finally, I must thank my role model and sage advisor, Theodore Prudon. Without his unconditional support and encouragement this project would not have been possible. His consistent probing for substance gives this book its depth and his intellect is equally embedded in these pages.

In the end, *Rethinking Design and Interiors: Human Beings in the Built Environment* provides a series of connective ideas. They are shared with the intent to broaden the debate and to bring greater attention to the importance of designing environments for human occupation. Having articulated these thoughts, with enormous help and support from those mentioned here and many others involved in the process, I am optimistic that we are on the cusp of new opportunities for exploration, which will, by design, lead to better and more sensitively designed interventions.

Preface: Rethinking Design

Susan S. Szenasy
Editor-in-Chief, *Metropolis Magazine*

It is no secret to any observant person today that every profession and every process is in crisis. Approaches that were invented and then matured in the previous centuries feel hopelessly out of date. And all signs indicate that we are not yet prepared to meet the crisis. In many parts of the industrialized world the quick-fix mentality trumps the deliberate, systematic approach that could create long-term policies befitting a democracy. What brings this ineffectuality to crisis proportions is that we operate in a global economy characterized by the instant movement of capital while the people on the ground—with their local needs, wisdom, and material resources—are left to fend for themselves.

To understand this new context, we must expand our thinking to include the overarching needs of our time: dramatic and catastrophic environmental degradation worldwide, rapid and voluminous global communication, and unprecedented and life-changing technological innovation. These developments call for a new way of thinking about our world at every scale, in every culture, in every geographic location. Like other endeavors, design, that thoughtful human act which gives shape to all cultures, must be recast to embrace systems thinking.

You hold in your hand a book that points the way for the design of interiors in our newly complex world. It offers a deep dive into the things that make us human, our most intimate surroundings—our interiors—being one of these things. It explores our deep-seated and evolving relationship with our rooms, be these in our homes or any other interior where we spend a majority of days and nights. It traces this intimate relationship from the cave, where the first humans escaped from danger, to the high-rise corporate office where we carry on complex, yet invisible, electronic transactions in ergonomically sophisticated spaces.

While we graduated from the ancient cave to the modern office, we seem to have forgotten the very things that make us human: our basic need for shelter, for well-being, for social interaction. As you will learn here, each one of these topics, and many others subsidiary to them, have been and continued to be studied by social scientists through observation, documentation, and analysis. Now, this scientific approach must become the underpinning of design thinking. The art (beauty, emotion, intuition) of interiors needs a scientific foundation (observation, research, analysis).

Even as the profession continues to develop its ever-higher standards for the environmental footprint of interiors—through its demand for non-toxic, healthy material—it has yet to dig deep into the research on behavior and feeling, comfort and experience. While those who design interiors can document the relative greenness of their designs, their intuition tells

them that this is an incomplete approach to their work. Holistic design, or systems thinking as Buckminster Fuller used to call it, pays attention to all our senses—smell, sound, temperature, touch—as well as the natural and designed environments that support them.

You are about to embark on a fascinating journey of how art and science can come together for the benefit of those who inhabit interior spaces, for the natural environment in which we have all evolved, and for the profession that creates the inner space. In the process you'll reacquire yourself with such basics of the human condition as trust, dignity, and satisfaction.

September 2010

Introduction

As working professionals, designers of interiors do not question enough what their discipline really is or wonder about how what they do is perceived by the public at large. They exercise the skills they have so carefully developed, solve the problems immediately at hand, and have the gratification of seeing satisfied clients. But spend time with thoughtful young people who are studying design with an intent to shape meaningful environments, as I did while serving as the chair of the interior design program at Parsons The New School for Design, in New York, and you will quickly find they are seeking a more comprehensive definition of that expertise: How, exactly, does it relate to the other design disciplines and what is unique about it? Why do we need design for the interior?

As someone trained in architecture, industrial design, and interiors, I know all too well that, at their core, all design disciplines share certain skills. But I am also very aware of the fact that what they are concerned with is not necessarily interchangeable. Yes, architects deal with interior volumes when they design buildings, and they think about how the shape of those spaces will affect the occupant. And industrial designers think about the comfort and functional requirements of the individuals who will spend hours sitting in their chairs while at work or traveling, and the surrounds of these products. Designers specializing in interiors think about how people occupy and experience spaces, and how to arrange and use the objects that fill them in a way that enables us to recognize who we are as individuals, and how we relate to others, as well as creating the many other intangible qualities that make us successful through the success of our environment. This is not only limited to single rooms (of any scale) but also to the narrative of the experience created in the transition between interconnected volumes (with or without literal walls or ceilings). At the core of interiors is an understanding of abstract qualities of shaping this negative space or void. All these complex parts need to come together to form a cohesive whole.

Shaping the spaces we inhabit is human nature. Since we first abandoned sleeping under the open sky for shelters with roofs and walls, we have been modifying our surroundings by adapting and shaping all the components intended to support and improve the quality of our lives. Interiors and design, therefore, are intimately connected to who we are as a species. Interiors most closely define human beings, our behavior and emotions, within our built world in a way no other discipline does. This answer did not satisfy my students; they needed one that more clearly and better defined the parameters of the discipline and thus the career they had chosen: interior design.

After leaving my position as chair at Parsons to pursue the international commissions my firm had acquired and to assume the presidency of the International Federation of Interior Architects/

Designers (IFI), I began to realize that there was an even bigger issue at stake. Not only do we not understand the role of design for interiors as it exists today, but we are on the cusp of extraordinary global and societal changes that will profoundly impact requirements for how we live and thus the places where most of our lives are spent: inside, which will affect, for that matter, all design. We are fighting to survive on a planet whose ecosystems our very success as a species has thrown out of accord. As we struggle to accommodate our growing numbers in increasingly dense cities and buildings, we are becoming ever more urban dwellers. In the not too distant future, we will inhabit structures so large and so complex that they constitute entire neighborhoods and communities. This will present us with new challenges for creating interior spaces. It will force us to remember why we began to design in the first place: to improve the human condition and provide ourselves with a measure of physical and psychological comfort. So facing all of those challenges, what will this discipline have to become?

We are at a critical moment in the history of the world but also in the evolution of design disciplines. To meet the challenges we face, these disciplines need a better foundation upon which to build, which will require the development of a scientific understanding of how the built environment affects us. Designing interiors will also mean embracing a much broader engagement with, and responsibility for, our societal and environmental actions and making certain this knowledge is embedded in both education and practice. This book endeavors to outline how today's practice developed and why the discipline is perceived as it is. How it must change by gathering the data—phenomenological and sensorial—and must include a greater understanding of human behavior and how it can be influenced through the language of design. Once we can better quantify and qualify the human experience of objects and spaces, we can align this new design knowledge with our educational and design processes. This new knowledge will finally foster a greater appreciation for, and connection between, the built environment and its occupants. It will engender and promote well-being and facilitate human advancement.

The need for this design research is not limited to any particular design discipline but will form part of a common language, and will allow for ever more collaborative practice even while specific disciplines grow more specialized. But of all the design disciplines, interiors have an important role to play in leading the way toward developing the core body of knowledge that will inform all design practice: the interior fulfills, and always has fulfilled, our most basic need for shelter. While the future of humanity is tied to its past, the history of this past is expressed not in stylistic periods but in how we have evolved as human beings. This comes from within us. And thus design has to come from within to envision and craft a sensitively responsive and responsible future built world.

Shashi Caan
September 2010

Chapter One

The Search for Shelter

11

Man was first a hunter,
and an artist: his earliest
vestiges tell us that alone.
But he must always have
dreamed, and recognized
and guessed and supposed,
all skills of the imagination.

Guy Davenport
*The Geography of the Imagination*¹



An early human painting in a cave. While the purpose of prehistoric cave painting is unknown, examples are generally found in areas that were not easily accessed. Although many theories exist, the popular belief is that they were done for a greater purpose than mere decoration. The earliest interior was created when our ancestors discovered the inside space of the cave. That environment created a space that was safe from the dangers of the outside world, and one where new forms of self-discovery and delight could flourish.

Human evolution and design shape each other. Design, always a search for appropriate solutions to problems, has evolved from utilitarian and indigenous applications into the formal practice we know today. It springs from the wells of our own nature—to create, through imagination, the means of human betterment—and has become ubiquitous in all facets of life. There is nothing we encounter that is devoid of design.

To design well, however, we must take essential human needs and behavior into account. While we have some comprehension of our functional and stylistic requirements, we have not yet developed a necessary understanding of our visceral and psychological needs. To fathom what these are, it helps to consider the very first habitable environment—the cave—for that is where humans originally dealt with their most basic need, shelter, through conscious intervention. By taking up residence in that first interior, they uncovered design as the means by which our longings for safety and security could be realized. The cave allowed them to feel protected from harm and free from anxiety or doubt, and the minute they went inside, they gained a very different understanding of who they were and began to evolve in a way that was quite different from what would have happened if they had stayed outside.

The story of the evolution of the interior is thus a reflective history of us and our intrinsic need to improve our experience of the world. This is the reason we design. Exploring the deep past of the human habitat is, then, not solely a look backward but part of the view forward. Knowledge of the built environment's humble beginnings enables us to start to understand more clearly the impact it has on people. Only once we recognize this connection can we begin to build the comprehensive body of knowledge that is essential to move design forward. The design profession(s) necessarily must deal with our fundamental sensory, cognitive, and bodily needs as we embrace