FURNITURE FOR INTERIOR DESIGN

SAM BOOTH AND DREW PLUNKETT

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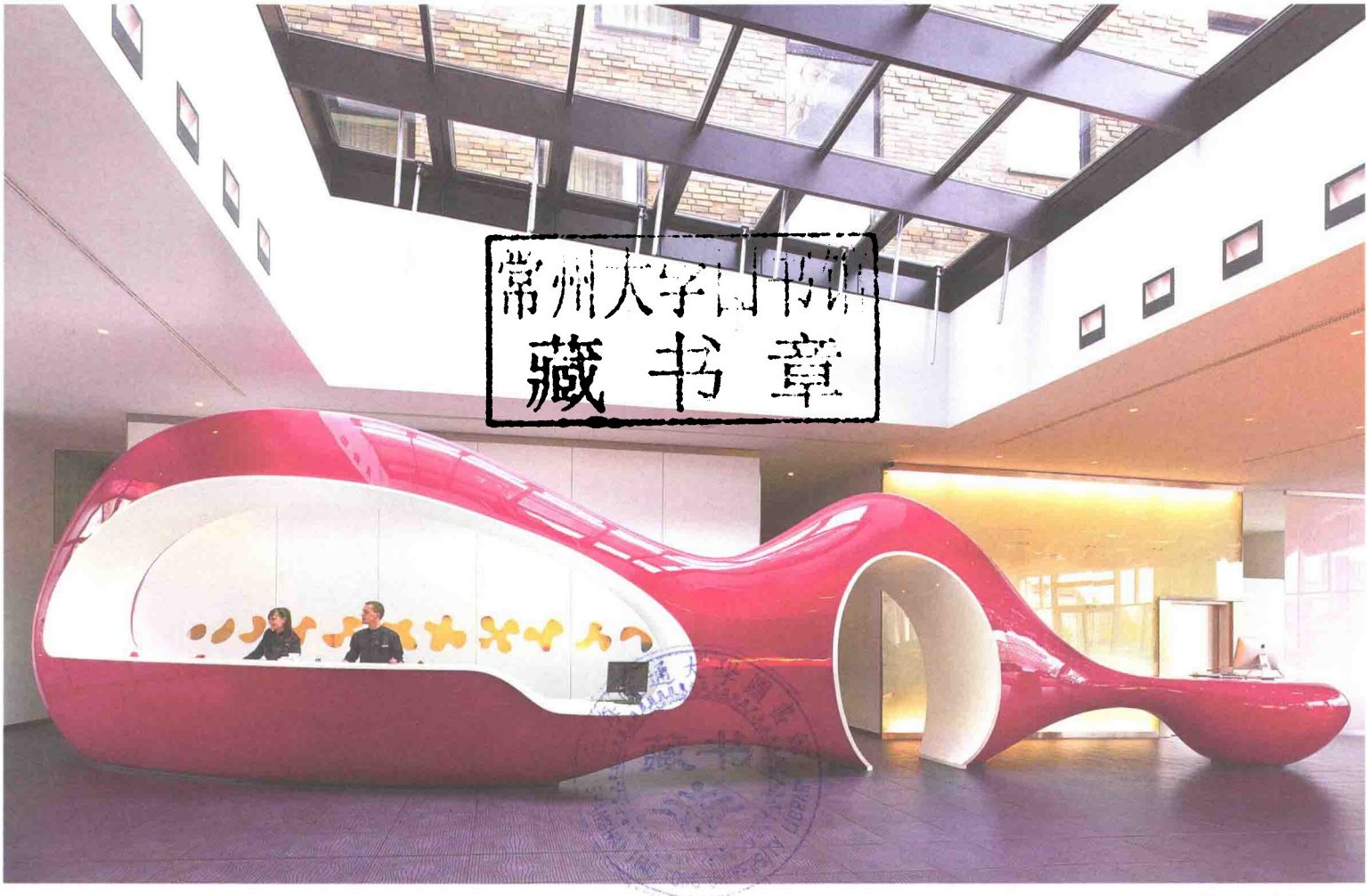

Laurence King Publishing

Published in 2014
by Laurence King Publishing Ltd
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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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Introduction

No furniture = no interior

Interior designers work within the shells of existing buildings, which are sometimes new but more frequently old and in need of adaptation to refresh tired aesthetics, create new identities and accommodate new functions. This book will explore the role of furniture in the process of that transformation of empty, underperforming shells. It will demonstrate the processes of designing, making and selecting furniture, and explore the strategies for its deployment.

The architect Norman Foster has said: 'Furniture is like architecture in microcosm.' As such, it must bear closer scrutiny than the exterior of any building because those who use it come, unavoidably, into direct visual and physical contact with it and are made more aware of its practical efficiency and of the aesthetic language it speaks.

The physical dimensions and aesthetic character of any building shell will, and should, influence the nature of a new interior inserted within it. Furniture will play a crucial – probably the most crucial – part in the refinement of the new installation and the physical interaction between interior elements and those who use them. It should comprehensively fulfil its practical obligation to support human activity without compromising efficiency or comfort, but it should also meet a less tangible obligation to stimulate and satisfy the aesthetic appetites of those who use it, regardless of how utilitarian or how hedonistic the activity it supports may be. While a designer must understand how to construct the major elements of walls, floors and ceilings, it is as important to master and refine the practical skills that shape the miniaturized architectural language of furniture. However grand the conceptual intention, poor practical resolution will invite and deserve a negative response.

Form will be defined by function. Generic forms have evolved to serve, and enrich, the range of physical and intellectual human activities, and these are the rudiments of an aesthetic language that is shared by designers and those who use their work against which each new piece will be assessed. Chairs must be for sitting on. Tabletops must be horizontal. Dimensions will be determined by the limitations of the human body, and materials by the diverse degrees of use and abuse to which they are subjected. However, while it is comparatively easy to meet these prescribed practicalities, ultimately the success of a piece of furniture depends on its capacity to satisfy and stimulate the user's sensory experience. Its texture and temperature will be intimately experienced. It will affect the acoustic of the room in which it sits for good or ill. Its smell can pervade and characterize a room. It will make an impression on those who use it and they may well leave an impression on it.

From the simple utilitarian layout of plastic stacking chairs in an otherwise empty and characterless meeting place to pieces that go beyond conventional definitions and expectations to become something akin to sculpture or internal architecture, furniture inevitably communicates symbolic, aesthetic and cultural values. The reception desk in the entrance lobby of an office can encapsulate the status and intent of the business. The chairs in the

The functional element, the conventional, albeit grandiose, chair on which the emperor of China sat, mutates into an expression of divine status.

Left
A newly elected president selects a chair that is comfortable – and thereby implies a more democratic intent.

Above
The ubiquitous stacking chair is wholly egalitarian and has achieved its dominance because it works. It is easy to sit on, at least for a limited period, easily adapted to different activities, easily stored and comparatively easy on the eye.

lobby of a hotel can signal the quality of the experiences it offers. The service counter becomes the signature of a bar. The same empty space can be populated with different furniture pieces organized in different layouts and each variation will give it a different identity – formal or informal, practical or romantic, tranquil or vibrant, without making reference to the architecture of the original shell, other than to use it as a foil to intensify perception of the new.

Throughout the book the word 'furniture' will be used to describe any element that is functionally independent of the walls, floors and ceilings that enclose the space in which it sits. It may be built into walls or fixed to walls and floors for most of the furniture created by interior designers, other than project-defining set pieces, is intended to resolve the idiosyncracies of layouts and sites. Equal status will be accorded the one-off pieces and the wealth of manufactured options that are available and are specified rather than designed.

It is unlikely that designers will often have the opportunity, or obligation, to devote the time necessary to produce a successful piece in the pressurized design phase of the vast majority of interior projects; it is questionable whether it would always be appropriate to do so anyway. The complexities of designing something as apparently simple and familiar as a chair – the fine-tuning of dimensions and testing of the structure – demand their own expertise. Mass production of tried-and-tested pieces by specialist designers in specialist factories is, almost inevitably, more efficient and cost-effective. Throughout this book, mass-produced furniture will be described as 'specified', meaning that an interior designer will choose pieces from a manufacturer's pre-existing range, specifying the model, finalizing options for materials and performance if necessary, and the number of pieces required. There are occasions when the particular needs of a project will justify the production of a small number of bespoke pieces, such as restaurant seating or shop display systems, and an interior designer can and should seize enthusiastically the opportunities they offer for creative speculation. The manufacture of pieces in limited numbers is classified as 'batch production' and the work is usually carried out, off site, in a specialist workshop.

Many of the elements that most emphatically establish the identity of an interior – bar counters and reception desks, hanging rails and display plinths – are unlikely to be available ready-made. Their size or their importance in creating identity demands that they be project-specific. Whether they generate or augment decisions about the whole, they should be compatible with the material palette of the walls, floor and ceiling, and with other pieces specified from manufacturers' catalogues. They need not be complex. Their detailing should be honed to clarify expression of the conceptual idea that underpins them and to simplify the processes of their production.

Before choosing to reinvent the chair or any other generic piece, a designer needs to be sure that his or her creation will be genuinely better than one that already exists and that, regardless of its visual qualities, its practical performance will meet its obligations. From Charles Rennie Mackintosh and Frank Lloyd Wright, through Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier, to Philippe Starck and

Norman Foster, architects and designers have developed furniture intended for a specific interior that has gone on to be produced in volume and to find a life beyond that for which it was originally created. Most of these project-specific pieces have undergone subtle modifications to make them compatible with large-scale production. Some, designed and still prized for their visual qualities above all else, lack the simple, practical refinements that would make them natural choices for modest everyday use. The same designers when designing chairs intended for mass production from the outset have the ability to resolve the equation of style and comfort more successfully.

In the last fifty years, interior designers have increasingly moved beyond their traditional territory in the domestic sector to create public interiors, for leisure and retail businesses, and semi-private workplaces. This has encouraged and supported specialist furniture designers and the growth of manufacturing and retailing companies that find it profitable to specialize in one or more of these areas. Increased production has followed increased enthusiasm for interior design in private and public sectors and that growth spurt has been accelerated, in the last quarter of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, by significant shifts in design philosophies.

The advent of Postmodernism in the late 1970s and early '80s undermined the primacy of High Modernism. Designers, of both interiors and furniture, began experimenting with forms that were generated more by subjective expression than objective application of process, the result of an acceptance that function is not just about practicality, which is comparatively easy to achieve, but about giving aesthetic pleasure. This willingness, on the part of designers, to create in a, perhaps more democratic, language, accessible to lay consumers, met with disapproval amongst the hard-line acolytes of Modernism but ultimately has prevailed and consumers' enthusiasm for it is demonstrated in the universal success of IKEA and other more modestly sized chains, and single shops that have found their own niche.

Initially the historicism that underpinned Postmodernist theory encouraged what were primarily light-hearted reinterpretations of traditional archetypes. The scale of furniture offered a productive area for experimentation and the chair, as the most complex of the familiar forms, presented a particularly promising testing ground for the new ideas. The historicist wing was most assertive in North America and its theoretical protagonist, Robert Venturi, produced a series of flat-planed plywood chairs that parodied, with painted pattern, the forms and mouldings of the most recognizable and respectable historical styles. While Alessandro Mendini's colour-spotted 'Proust' armchair (see opposite) was probably the most monumental example of historicism there were other activists, also based in and around Milan, who generated a European version of an alternative contemporary aesthetic. The Memphis group, led by Ettore Sottsass, argued the need for a more democratic aesthetic and drew on the language of the coffee bar with its colourful plastic laminates. They shared with the North Americans a predisposition for pure geometry. In stylistic contrast but philosophical alignment to Memphis was a movement, epitomized by Mendini's 'animal' pieces for Studio Alchimia, which set out to give identities to furniture that drew on natural materials and form, purporting to touch something visceral in their audience. While North American historicism lost its impetus quickly – perhaps because it constrained designers' imaginations within the canons, however freely interpreted, of historical, primarily Classical, precedent – the Italian models offered greater freedom of expression and that found an enthusiastic market, particularly in the new design-led cafés, bars and restaurants that increasingly dominated the leisure sector throughout the 1980s and thereafter.

Far left
Alessandro Mendini's 'Proust' armchair caricatured traditional form but acknowledged its subversive intent by the 'pointillist' paint finish that melded fabric and frame.

Left
Starck's stackable chair has chrome back legs and a moulded plastic seat and front legs.

Artist: Starck, Philippe (b. 1949)
Title: Louis 20 Chair, 1991
Location: Museum of Modern Art (MoMA)
City: New York
Country: USA
Period/Style: Post 1945
Genre: Design
Note: Blown polypropylene and polished aluminum, 33 3/16 x 18 1/2 x 21 1/2' (84.3 x 47 x 54.6 cm), seat h. 18 3/8' (46.7 cm). David Whitney Collection, gift of David Whitney. Acc.n.: 52.2000
Credits: Digital image, The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Scala, Florence

The potential of new technologies and the enthusiasm for sustainable design increasingly influences the way designers think. For their 'Plopp' range, Zieta Prozessdesign, have evolved a method of making objects from two sheets of ultra-thin and ultra-light steel, cut and welded by laser and inflated under high pressure, which gives strength, rigidity and stability to match those of the equivalent conventional pieces. The pieces may be inflated where and when required, reducing transportation costs and storage demands.

While die-hard Modernists loudly regretted the rejection of austere objectivity in favour of what they denounced as decorative frivolity, designers generally could not resist the new freedom for expression and experimentation and their output quickly found an enthusiastic audience of buyers that had eluded Modernists. The potency of the new furniture was given aesthetic and, more significantly, economic credibility with Philippe Starck's 1982 Café Costes in Paris and its eponymous chair. This three-legged, plywood, leather and metal piece perfectly complemented his historically referential interior without any overt borrowings from precedent. Its extraordinary form captured designers' and enough lay imaginations to precipitate the torrent of Starck furniture that followed. Quickly, other designers took inspiration from his redefinition of generic forms and took advantage of the market enthusiasm for furniture's more agreeable Postmodern face.

Starck moved on to transform the vocabulary of hotel design but crucial to each of the exemplars he presented was its bespoke furniture. There were several distinctive pieces in every project, each of which asserted its own identity but contributed to a complex but coherent whole. There can be few interior designers who do not, at some point, consider a Starck chair for their projects and they are now as common in chain restaurants as they once were in luxury hotels.

The subsequent significant changes that followed the fundamental stylistic shift to Postmodernism related to production processes rather than style. Digital design linked to digital manufacture evolved at the same time as a growing concern for sustainability. Furniture can have little or no effect on the environmental performance of a building and only choice of materials, cost of production and transportation costs will have bearing on the design decisions. Proliferating legislation protects materials and the environments in which they were harvested.

While digital design would encourage more elaborate proposals – and therefore more costly in terms of materials and production – it could also be used to minimize material waste. Once programmed with data about the configuration of units to be produced, CNC (computer numerical control) machines (see p.120) automatically calculate the cutting pattern necessary to maximize the number of units that can be culled from source materials, and each unit can be unique without adding to cost or time.

Reuse and recycling, however, present the most obviously sustainable response to the problem – providing the processes do not use excessive amounts of energy. There are published guidelines from a number of reputable sources but, given the comparatively recent emergence of the subject, advice frequently changes and what was considered good practice is supplanted. The internet provides a comprehensive and generally reliable source of information.

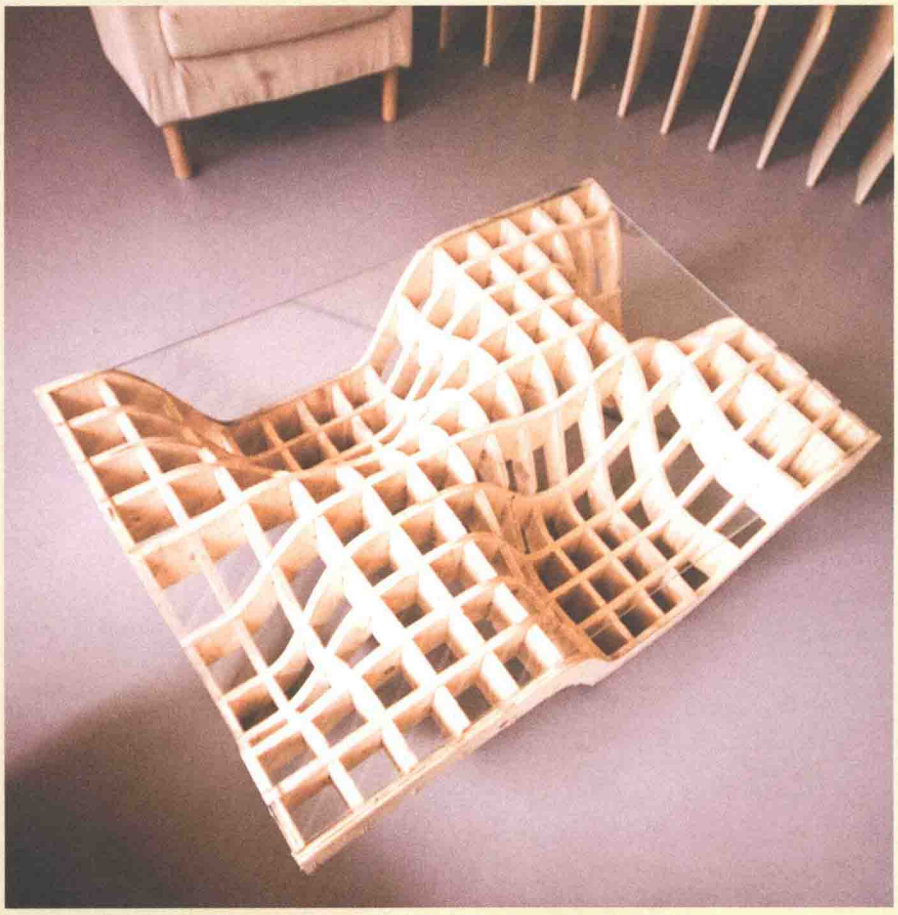
Another relevant and increasingly significant area of concern is that relating to 'Universal' or 'Inclusive' design. Both are dedicated, primarily, to making buildings usable by as broad a spectrum of people, with or without disabilities, as possible. To a degree, the same priorities should apply to furniture design. Obviously furniture layouts are critical, to allow easy passage for wheelchair users and the semi-ambulant. When designing chairs, one should consider how users, particularly the old, can lower themselves into and rise from them. Colours are a crucial consideration for the visually impaired. Legislation principally covers buildings but the principles are ones that should also be embraced by all designers of furniture.

Designing is a collaborative process involving the client, the maker and other consultants; that collaboration can, and should, be a source of inspiration and pleasure. Searching for, finding and specifying existing pieces that complement an overall vision is an opportunity to collaborate, albeit vicariously, with every designer who has ever sketched a first tentative idea and nurtured it to realization. Online catalogues present the designer with an extraordinary range of choice, but the right search words produce an instant

shortlist of familiar and unfamiliar options including the necessary information about performance and price that can clinch a choice. There is, however, no substitute for trying out the piece at first hand – actually sitting on the chair, leaning on the table – to test for comfort and efficiency.

The walls, floors, ceilings and openings that define the nature of a space also define the limits within which a designer may think and create. First inclinations will inevitably be to redefine boundaries significantly, subdividing or connecting, knocking down or knocking through, treating the existing building as a blank canvas on which to make grand, perhaps grandiloquent, gestures. More often, however, the opportunity to remove existing elements is not on offer. Some buildings will be legally protected because of their architectural merit or simply because their age makes them a crucial contribution to their location. There are also times when the existing building shell, although not officially protected, has qualities and elements that the designer may wish to incorporate into the new. For other projects, financial priorities can rule out an extended construction period, particularly in competitive commercial environments where high rents and local taxes require that trading begin as soon as possible. With short-term rentals, clients may hope to transport pre-existing fixtures and fittings to new premises. At the other extreme, in the most competitive commercial sectors, businesses need to reposition themselves at regular intervals, to keep pace with rivals and to assert their continuing relevance to their target customer group. Commercial interiors tend to have a lifespan of about five years. For all these scenarios, furniture pieces, large and small, which are easily transportable, offer a solution and the most viable way to transfer identity between premises or redefine the character of existing spaces. Modestly sized furniture pieces that constitute the brand identity of multiple outlets are more easily accommodated within the diversity of available shells than are the large-scale gestures of new walls and levels.

Furniture, whether one-off or batch-production (a limited series of identical pieces), allows a designer to explore and experiment with forms, materials and methods of manufacture, unrestrained by the established practices and preferences of the mainstream building trade. As new digital techniques have revolutionized the way furniture is made and the technology used to explore and resolve ideas is becoming increasingly compatible with that used to programme the machines that translate them into reality, so designers' intentions can be communicated and implemented with the click of a mouse. There is no longer a need for makers to interpret instructions and negotiate compromises acceptable to designers. Digital machines have no preference for the



Left
CNC techniques allow complex and unique elements, each with slots for interlocking joints, to be cut with perfect precision. The accuracy of the process ensures that the points on the ribs for the support of the glass tabletop are in exact level alignment.

Left
In this bar the same technique as with the table on this page enables the plywood ceiling ribs to share form and material with wall fins and supports for the bar and shelf.

simple and the repetitive, and no fear of the complex and singular. Prototyping and batch production have become economically feasible for the most modest projects.

The argument made against computer-aided design and computer-aided manufacture by those wedded to the notion that creativity is dependent on hand-drawing and hand-making was that it produced uniformity of design, but designers can now better realize their individual inspirations and those who truly understand the capacity of digital technologies for both the conception and realization of ideas can explore forms that were, rightly and recently, regarded as unrealistic.

The acceleration of technological innovation is also providing a cornucopia of new materials and composites. The materials database Material ConneXion claims to add 50 to 60 new materials to its library each month, some so experimental that a use has still to be found for them. Ambitious designers should aim to keep up. It will often be immediately obvious that some innovations will be useful additions to their visual vocabularies. Others should be filed in the memory for recall when prompted by the particularities of a future project.

New ideas are not exclusively derived from the output of the high-tech or petrochemical industries. Concern for sustainability has given impetus to the search for renewable and organic-based composites and with that has come a

revival of interest in traditional materials and methods of manufacture. Traditional is more likely to be local and local is more likely to be sustainable. It is no longer a contradiction to use state-of-the-art technology to process traditional materials or traditional artisanal techniques to work new materials.

Digital technologies have also fundamentally transformed in a few decades, and seem bent on further transforming, ways of living and working and, consequently, have led to the reinterpretation of familiar furniture pieces and new ways of deploying them. The typewriter that replaced the pen was displaced by the desktop computer that is now being usurped by the laptop and the entire content and operation of an office may be fitted on the touch-screen of the instrument that has evolved from, and still retains the increasing anachronistic label of, 'telephone'.

The first keyboard writing instruments were operated by full-time specialists (typists) but the words they typed were composed by someone else, someone without the time to master the machine well enough to avoid mistakes that could not then be invisibly mended. The process demanded skills that, although not easy to acquire, were not highly regarded.

The first computers offered those who composed the words the means to commit them to screen for consideration and then to paper. Few of the new computer users acquired typing techniques that matched those of the dedicated typists but mistakes could be made to disappear without trace and immediacy compensated for sloppy technique. Word processing machinery began to dominate the office desk and, before wireless connections, cable management was a crucial concern. The dedicated typist disappeared or assumed a new role, coping with the acceleration of administrative tasks that were generated by accelerated production of information.

Laptops have more capacity than the first desktops and may be taken and used anywhere. They incorporate in a compact shell a battery of unprecedented creative, communication and research tools. They are changing the definition of a working day and a working place.

The smart phone and the tablet further miniaturize, and fuse, the workplace and the social sphere. The workplace remains a locus for motivational and creative direct personal interaction, albeit in the face of digitally delivered distractions. Traditional person-to-person social interaction is increasingly conducted in the expectation that it will be communicated to, and scrutinized by, others on social networking sites. Perhaps paradoxically, that scrutiny demands that events should be conducted in contexts (interiors) that flatter the participant and impress the scrutineer.

Clockwise from top left
A mechanical typewriter, which, because it was unforgiving of errors, needed a skilled operator.

An early desktop computer, which, with its keyboard and mouse wiring and printer, required more work surface than a typewriter.

Each iteration of personal computing redefines how the mechanisms of life are conducted.

The portability and wireless connectivity of the laptop blurred boundaries between work and recreation, office and home.

Predigital/postdigital

In homes, the furniture that once filled rooms to accommodate cumbersome entertainment systems with multiple wirings has become redundant, replaced by personal, pocket-sized devices and wall-hung televisions that are as thin as paintings. The opportunities offered to individuals to fine-tune their recreation and to create private spaces, which are as likely to be made by earphones as they are by four walls, do not necessarily need new interpretations of conventional furniture pieces but, inevitably, these will evolve, just as different cooking techniques, fast food and slow food, new ingredients and ways of eating from around the globe have changed the rituals of eating in the home and the landscapes of restaurants.

Good furniture design has always added an appropriate aesthetic dimension to the end products of ergonomic and anthropometric data. In the last few decades digital technology's precipitous redefinition of all aspects of human conduct suggests that a definitive conclusion must soon be reached but history instead demonstrates that, while change may decelerate, it is constant and will continually present challenges and opportunities to designers. While the grammar of how spaces are used is changing, designers might be wise to draw on and add the lessons of cultural histories and the communal consensus to their interpretation of new technologies and materials. Technological innovation offers possibilities and the designer's role is to find ways to exploit and maximize a potential that was unanticipated by those who made the technological innovation but the result can only be validated by those who may choose to use it.

Inspiration is becoming more eclectic and stylistic options are becoming greater, but the process of design – dependent on human creativity – remains constant. It involves taking an idea that exists as an abstraction and finding a way to make it a reality. Ideas come from seeing, touching or otherwise experiencing something that triggers the first imaginative impulse, even if the original source is far removed from the ultimate intent. It is probably true that the further the final outcome has moved from the first manifestation, the better it will be, because it has been subjected to and shaped by progressive waves of analysis and criticism. Designers cannot allow themselves to be solely subjective. They have an obligation to their client, and their client's clients and customers, which means that their ideas must be tempered by objective assessment of what will elicit appropriate responses from users. This is as true for the interior designers in the public sector as it is for those in the most competitive private realms.

A home office expresses its occupant's preferences and priorities more precisely than a shared space.