

Designing Interiors is Art and Science

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Life for the twentieth century man is a ritual punctuated by his continuous procession through man-made environments. It is ironic that, given these structures so intimately affect one's professional and personal life, the average person still invests little thought or financial resources to ensure that the surroundings are fashioned to suit his needs.

Time has come for interior design, often maligned as the "pillow fluffing" profession, to stand up and be counted as not only an art, but a science that, if applied appropriately, will benefit all facets of the users' daily lives.

Often overlooked is the fact that for the interiors to work, a variety of issues have to be successfully resolved. Some of these include: space planning, human engineering (ergonomics), acoustics, lighting, color physiology and psychology, as well as maintenance and life cycle expectations on the furnishings.

In planning the space layout, both the short and long term goals of the occupants need to be addressed, so that all information gathered regarding their daily operations can be tempered by the reality of future demands. The relationships of activities within a specific room and between a series of spaces have to be analyzed to establish logical adjacency criteria.

Space planning that observes task sequencing will facilitate work flow, and eliminate redundant backtracking in the course of the day's activities.

Ergonomics has gained prominence as a field that affects everything from product design, to furniture layout and interior construction. Efficiency studies, closely tied to this field, enable a designer to configure work areas and specify their dimensions for best job performance.

It is also through the help of ergonomics that specialized populations such as the disabled, young, or elderly, can be served. The interior environment can be made more "user friendly" via this approach of customizing all furniture, fixture, and equipment height and space specifications according to the users' needs.

The presence of sound, or noise, depending on the context of discussion, is ever pervasive in the interior environment. The ability of people to screen out distractions varies, but their concentration and productivity usually suffer from inadequate acoustical control.

Noise reduction can be achieved through the use of sound absorbent materials on all surfaces where sound waves can bounce from, namely the windows, walls, ceiling, floor, lighting fixtures and furnishings. Additionally, a design that requires strict privacy can also have the choice of adopting a variety of construction details and sound masking devices throughout the space.

Lighting is an integral element of any functional interior. Yet the quality and quantity of light have often been tackled so haphazardly that it hardly ever suits the user's needs.

Scientifically, the IES (Illuminating Engineering Society) have guidelines on recommended lighting levels for a wide range of tasks. Unfortunately, the perception of light in the environment is not solely objective. The human eye also evaluates its surroundings in context of each light source's color rendering. It may even react to lighting as a behavioral cue.

In an earlier study, it was found that executive performance declined under uniform lighting while clerical staff favored routine work under such conditions.

Color and light, as discussed in my previous article, are so heavily intertwined, that the discussion of one will be incomplete without the other. It is important to understand that an object's color is determined by the type of lamp used, as well as its inherent texture and porosity.

One should select the color palette and light source with a specific purpose in mind: whether it is to produce an inviting environment that encourages repeated visits, to make an object stand out from its background, or to produce a safe and efficient work condition.

To meet the challenge of the 90's, interior design is increasingly technology driven. More than ever before, differences in quality or durability may not be discernible to the naked eye. As a result, designers have to be knowledgeable of the latest manufacturing techniques when evaluating a product's ease of maintenance and life cycle for calculation of its subsequent return on investment.

Also notable are advances in the industry like smudge-proof laminates, stain resistant carpet yarns, and fiber protection systems, which address the furnishings' maintenance and appearance retention aspects.

As predicted by John Naisbitt of Megatrends, society has exploded from an either/or culture to one comprised of a multitude of options. The proliferation of goods and services available to the professional designer is a firm testament to this development. The ultimate triumph, is perhaps, this awareness of the numerous possibilities from which the client and designer together can forge a new dimension towards the era of truly user-responsive environments.