

DO I DECORATE?®

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INTRODUCTION

As I wandered through the highly decorative chateaux in France, sat in 1940s cafes rich in detail, or ventured into chapels laden with symbolic references, I pondered why these places have a richness that is often missing from contemporary interior resolutions. Many interior designers seem to have rejected decoration as part of their core business. Yet over the last few years there does appear to be a challenge to the slick interiors, which were originally stimulated by a modernist mindset that believed in the value of minimal ornament, colour, and clutter. As a result, the minimalist interiors of light timber, glass, and stainless steel may not be the common formulaic response of the future as it has been in our recent past. Reinterpretations of the nineteen fifties, seventies, and eighties decorative styles have also arisen. Therefore, it is now opportune to revisit decoration in relation to interior design. In particular, the value of decoration in its relationship with the design concept and in the way that environments may exist interdependently with people are two issues that may be of importance.

I will introduce briefly issues involved in this ongoing debate through this discussion paper by presenting some of the aspects drawn from the literature. I will also discuss responses by interior design students to a number of images of a range of places which depicted varying degrees of decoration. Decoration differs from design, not due to the materials and elements involved, but rather due to the conceptual depth and process undertaken by the person creating the environment. The form and degree of decoration are fundamental aspects of any interior as decoration plays a significant role in how people experience and interpret the environments that they encounter.

EXPLORING DECORATION

As Abercrombieⁱ states, 'it is a tricky thing to get a balance of opinion of ornament. Neither the most consequential part of interiors nor yet inconsequential, it has at times been overrated, at other disparaged.'

The argument rejecting decoration has been linked to a number of core issues. For example, the modernists focused on the false illusion of the white or monochromatic images of classical architecture represented by works such as the Parthenon in Greece. Although this has since proven to be a false understandingⁱⁱ, the Modernists saw these works as a representation of purity.ⁱⁱⁱ They rejected the decorative excesses seen in the Victorian era taking a stance where all decoration was believed to be wrong^{iv}. In the extreme, Loos considered ornamentation as a crime^v. Along with others such as Corbusier, he linked 'cultivated civilizations with an absence of ornament'.^{vi}

Tate and Smith, although they define decorative accessories as not having a 'real function', they do point out that the justification of the decorative is to provide delight^{vii}. The impact of the decorative is the addition of richness and texture, comfort and identity, and the potential for discovery. Day^{viii} states that environmental design is the 'art of nourishing the senses' – the outer senses such as vision or taste, finer senses whereby we link with the intangible feelings about a place, and finally the inner self that is nourished due to aspects such as air quality and light.

Not all designers rejected ornament or decoration. Instead they advised how it should be incorporated. For example, Sullivan noted that ornamentation did not necessarily

undermine the structural or material expression, but that it could be used subordinately, and in fact, could add 'enchantment of soft tones and varied light and shade'.^{ix} There is also recognition that natural materials have decorative qualities. Ruskin's seminal works highlighted that materials should not be used to mimic others^{x, xi} while Frank Lloyd Wright stated that by their nature materials suggest ways of working with them^{xii}. Materials are not only decorative but their properties have an ability to connect with all of our senses^{xiii}. As they have individual qualities, such as warmth of timber or the cold, hardness of steel, their use will impact on the quality of the room or place.^{xiv} In minimal interiors the architectural elements are exposed and important in the nature of the place. Therefore, how they are treated is important in obtaining 'conceptual wholeness'.^{xv}

Tate and Smith also highlight how decoration should be designed not just added with attention to the impact on scale, symmetry, unity, spatial logic, and the like. Decoration can have pragmatic value such as environmental clarity and orientation in interiors. For example, this is important in aged care where people with dementia can use decorative elements such as paintings, wall hangings, or colour to orientate themselves within their residences^{xvi} and thus maintain a sense of independence.

Decoration has also been linked to environmental understanding and associated behaviour by researchers such as Rapoport^{xvii} and Sadalla^{xviii}. For example, cultural and subcultural referencing to gender occurs in African villages, which demarcates areas and associated rituals; and more locally, this occurs in bars and hotels where furnishings indicate attendees and activities^{xix}. Weismann^{xx} has extended these observations to notions of discrimination in public places such as shopping malls and hospital wards, and similarly, I have explored discrimination in relation to cafes and dining environments^{xxi}. As Boys^{xxii} states objects and places represent the beliefs and nature of a culture, as well as, being part of a culture. Symbolic referencing is used to link people with context and with concepts that exist beyond the setting^{xxiii}

Consumption as a cultural driver emerged in America in the 1950s and in Australia since the 1960s and as a result the consumer, the media, and manufacturers have had a major role in determining taste since then^{xxiv}. Fashion is often linked to decoration and much work has been carried out to map colour trends over our history^{xxv, xxvi} and project the pending styles. The emerging of mass culture, youth culture, and the focus on green design has seen a shift in fashion, decoration, and design in relation to consumption. The current rash of media articles, books, programs, and product outlets is fostering a consumer orientated approach to environmental appearance. The deeper consideration of concepts and issues such as identity, experience, and longevity may well be missing. There has been much debate on the differences between how design professionals understand environments and how the public interpret them. For example, Porter^{xxvii} in 1980s found that, unlike architects, the public had 'an enthusiasm for richly coloured buildings'. Investigations of the applicability gap and post occupancy evaluations since then have sought to bridge the differences.

THE DECORATED INTERIOR COMMUNICATES

Research into the issues identified above and as applied to the twenty-first century is required. Therefore, as decoration is a fundamental aspect of any interior its role in how people interpret, and thereby experience, the environments that they encounter the following exercise was undertaken. First year interior design students were shown four sets of images. Each set were selected to represent a range of decoration. Sets were included for places to worship, to shop, to dine, and to view art. Students were asked to rank the interiors degree of decorativeness and to rank each image against a series of adjective-pairs such as cold-warm. As the ranking

between each adjective involved a five point scale, a neutral response was possible. In addition, all the interiors for each set were viewed collectively and the student asked to identify which they preferred. Statistical analysis has not been undertaken as yet but never-the-less points of interest have emerged.

The interior ranking by the student as decorative or minimal agreed with those proposed by the author. The adjectives used in this study were:

- a) Impression: expensive-inexpensive, youthful-elderly, fashionable-unfashionable
- b) Mood: welcoming-unwelcoming, pleasant-unpleasant, cosy-sterile, warm-cold, calm-chaotic.

The strength of ranking for each adjective naturally depended on the example being analysed. All of the adjective pairs were used at least once to capture an aspect of mood or personal connection and/or those of image or impression of the interiors. The findings show a great variation in response and these will be analysed at a later date. However, it is useful to note some of the impact of the interior environment characteristics on the impression made and the mood inferred from the image.

The two galleries presented in the images were highly contrasted. The first was an example of Siza's Art Galley in Spain which is white, modern, and minimal (Image 1).



Image 1:



Image2:

The second is a gallery at the University of Coimbra in Portugal, which is highly decorated with ornate ceiling and dado panel (Image 2). The students ranked the first as unwelcoming, cold, calm, sterile, youthful, expensive, and fashionable. Even so, the gallery was ranked as pleasant. The ornate gallery was also ranked as pleasant and expensive. However, in stark contrast to the first, it was ranked as welcoming, warm, chaotic, cosy, and elderly.

In regard to the places of worship, 2 were listed as minimal and 2 decorative. Three of the four worship places were traditional cathedrals with varying degrees of applied finishes—although all were ornate. The fourth was a chapel by Tadao Ando constructed in concrete with minimal ornamentation or applied finishes. Most of the students ranked the latter as being inexpensive or ranked it as being neutral at best. In contrast all of the others were seen as being more expensive. This may indicate that for these students certain materials have associations with prestige, power, wealth, and the like. Other dimensions were captured such as the three places of worship with the least decorative elements were ranked as calm, while the example with ornate altar and gilding was ranked as chaotic.

Both the Expensive-Inexpensive and Youthful-Elderly scales resulted in clear labels being applied to all the examples across all of the environmental types.

SUMMARY

Finally, it is important to recall that:

‘on the whole, people don’t look at architecture, nor at materials. They breathe it in. It provides an atmosphere, not a pictorial scene’.^{xxviii}

Decoration can be understood as a component of a designed space which affects perception, interpretation, and experience. The design concept can not be separated from the presence or absence of the decorative elements whether they are inherent in the structure and materials or are applied to the surfaces and spaces. Decoration has the potential to communicate with people within cultural and sub-cultural settings, and is understood to have characteristics such as being welcoming, to be cosy, and/or youthful in appearance. In addition, decoration may foster identity, a sense of belonging, and/or connection to place.

ⁱ Abercrombie, S. (1990) *A Philosophy of Interior Design*, New York: Harper and Row.

ⁱⁱ Middleton, R. (ed) (1982) *The Beaux Arts and Nineteenth-Century French Architecture*, London:Thames and Hudson.

ⁱⁱⁱ Porter, T. (1996) ‘Colour in the Looking Glass’, *Colour in Architecture, AD*, p8.

^{iv} Abercrombie, S. (1990) p91

^v Hearn, F., (2003) *Ideas that shaped Buildings*, Cambridge:MIT.

^{vi} Abercrombie, S. (1990) p92

^{vii} Tate, A. and Smith, C.R. (1986) *Interior Design in the Twentieth Century*, New York: Harper and Row. p57

^{viii} Day, C. (1999) *Soul in Buildings*, London:Torsons, p49.

^{ix} Abercrombie, S. p93

^x Ruskin, J. (1989, 1880) *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, New York: Dover Publications.

^{xi} Massey, A. (1990) *Interior Design of the 20th Century*, London: Thames and Hudson. p10

^{xii} Abercrombie, S. (1990) *A Philosophy of Interior Design*, New York: Harper and Row.

^{xiii} Ruskin and Norberg-Scultz in Abercrombie, S. (19) *The Philosophy of Interior Design*

^{xiv} Day, C. (1999) p120

^{xv} Tate, A. and Smith, C.R. (1986) p13

^{xvi} Cohen, U. & Day K. (1993) *Contemporary Environments for People with Dementia*, Baltimore: John Hopkins Uni Press.

^{xvii} Rapoport, A. (1982, 1990) *The Meaning of the Built Environment: A Non-verbal Communication Approach*, Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press.

^{xviii} Sadalla, E.K., Vershure, B., and Burroughs, J. (1987) ‘Identity symbolism in housing’, *Environment and Behavior*, **19** (5): 569–587.

Sadalla, E.K. and Sheets, V.L. (1993) ‘Symbolism in building materials: Self presentation and cognitive components’, *Environment and Behavior*, **25** (22): 155–180.

^{xix} Rapoport, A. (1982, 1990) p186-87

^{xx} Weisman, L.K. (1992) “At home in the future”, in *Discrimination by Design: A Feminist Critique of the Man-Made Environment*, Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, pp. 9–35.

^{xxi} Smith, D. (2005) Smith D.J. ‘Environmental Distinctions: The discriminating dining environment’, *Cahiers du CICALS*, October, 2005 (accepted for publication)

^{xxii} Boys, J. (1996) “(Mis)representation of society? Problems in the relationships between architectural aesthetics and social meanings”, in Palmer, J. and Dodson, M. (eds) *Design and Aesthetics: A Reader*, London and New York: Routledge, pp. 226–247.

^{xxiii} Porter, T. (1996)

^{xxiv} Massey, A. (1990)

^{xxv} Porter, T. (1996)

^{xxvi} Oberascher, L. (1994) ‘Cyclic Recurrence of Collective Color Preferences’, in Harold Linton (ed), *Color Forecasting. A Survey of Internal Color Marketing*, NY:van Nostrand Reinhold.

^{xxvii} Porter, T. (1996) p8

^{xxviii} Day, C. (1999) p113