



INTERIOR DESIGN 101

by Erica Swanson

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Introduction

Great style often flies in the face of established rules. Elusive, easy to recognize and difficult to define, true style is unconcerned with today's hottest trend and while it cannot be faked, it can certainly be nurtured and helped along. Understanding the basic elements and principles of interior design will bring you one step closer to understanding how, and when, to break the rules in creating your own personal style statement.

Interior Design is made up of five separate but equally crucial elements: line, form, colour, pattern and texture. These five elements, and how closely or loosely they interact with one another, make up a design's overall composition.

Composition, in turn, can be illustrated with seven basic design principles: unity, harmony, rhythm, emphasis, scale, balance and most importantly, function. These principles are the tools designers use to create a successful design scheme; think of function as the overarching objective and the remaining principles the means for achieving this success.

Principles of Design

Function

I am a firm believer in the axiom, 'form follows function'. While making a space more aesthetically appealing is certainly important, no amount of colour or beautiful furniture will transform an unworkable space into one that functions well. Before you begin any project, it's crucial to review your lifestyle, patterns, habits, and daily routines before any design or decorating decisions are made. Is your space supporting or hindering you? Are you able to complete your regular routines with ease? Does your home give you a sense of emotional comfort and physical ease?

While it's certainly helpful to have an understanding of blueprints and elevations, this stage is really about common sense; a determination of what needs updating and changing to better suit the needs of you and your family. Following the questions above, begin by getting clear on your exact needs now and in the future. For instance, do you need more counter or storage space in the bathroom for the morning rush? What about extra seating for holiday entertaining? Are your closets bursting with out-of-season clothing or hardly-used linens? Do you have enough display space for your ever-growing collection of art?

Function

Once you've thought critically about how you live and how your space may or may not be working for you, you can begin to draw up a Wish List of all the things you'd love if money were no object. While all of your ideas may not be possible, lateral thinking often reveals simple solutions to previously unsolvable obstacles.

Of course, function refers to the items within your home as well. If you're inclined to lazy Sunday afternoon naps on the sofa, there's no sense in purchasing an armless loveseat. If there are small children or pets in the house, you might wish to reconsider white upholstered furniture. Every object, from your furniture to your storage racks, should perform efficiently and with the minimum of care and maintenance you can realistically manage.

Whether your plans involve a decorative update or a complete to-the-studs overhaul, a home that functions well is the critical foundation to successful design. Always – function first, form second.

Unity & Harmony

Unity and harmony is simply an orderly blend of lines, forms, colours, patterns and textures. While unity refers to the careful avoidance of visual conflict, harmony assures the assimilation of various elements and objects throughout the room to create a unified whole.

Unity describes the relationship between each of the various parts of a space and how they relate to one another. If the room is traditional and feminine with a softly coordinating colour palette, the introduction of heavily linear or starkly modern furniture will throw off the entire composition. Similarly, a coat of glossy paint in a singular colour can unify mis-matched furniture or frames to create a harmonious connection.

Harmony can be achieved by thinking of the overall desired mood of the space. A blend of similar furnishings and monochromatic colours can be used to induce of peaceful, calming feeling. Likewise, the introduction of angular objects set against softly rounded pieces can inject a visual tension to produce an exciting, dynamic feeling so long as those pieces have a unified feel and aesthetic. The repetition of frames or other types of artwork can unify a disjointed space and coordinating fabrics can fuse together upholstered furniture from different eras and styles to bring the whole seemingly disparate look together.

Unity & Harmony

While there are no hard and fast rules, unity and harmony are achieved by paying particular attention to the overall look and feel of your space. The goal is to link common furnishings, accessories or decorative elements in colour, style, or form to create an overall pleasing visual effect.

Unity & Harmony



Notice how the overall formality of the architecture is unified with the furnishings by the judicious use of colour. The softness of the walls is echoed in the softly coloured furnishings and draperies. The area rug's palette is also soft and subdued.

Harmony is achieved with the introduction of dark and moody artwork. While boldly modern and abstract, the colours are in harmony with the rest of the room and help unify the scheme by echoing the darker finish of the coffee and end tables.

Interior design by David Powell of Powell & Bonnell
Photography by Ted Yarwood
Via Canadian House & Home

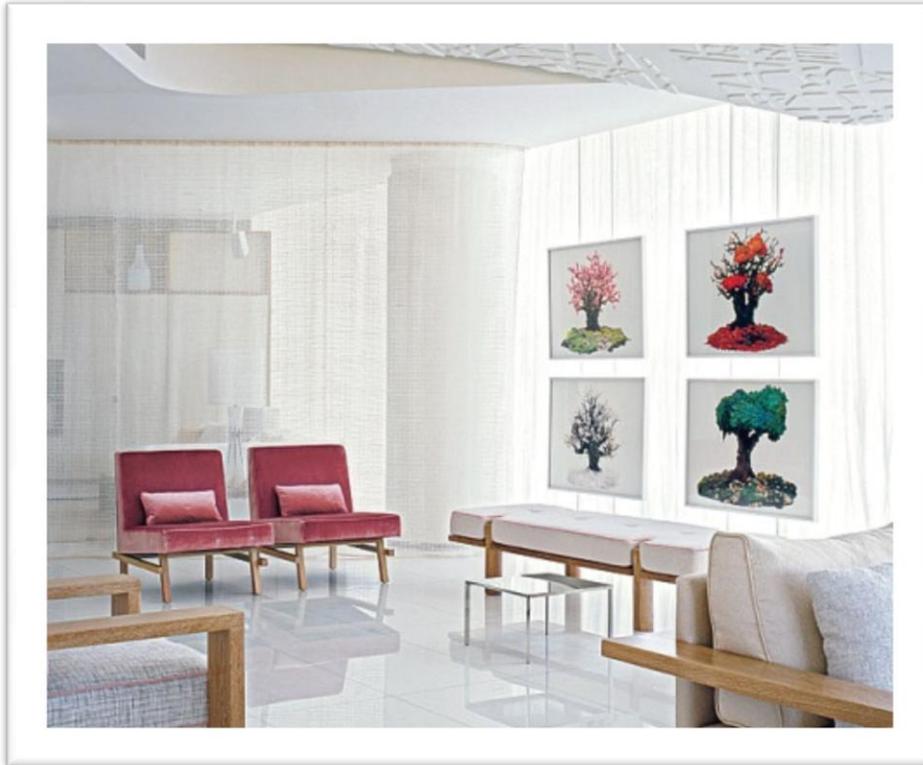
Rhythm

Rhythm is especially powerful. Your eye should move easily around the room from one object to another without being jarred or “tripped up” by any one object in particular. There are exceptions to this, of course, such as the deliberate placement of a show-stopping piece or situations in which the furniture placement takes advantage of a captivating view.

For most situations, however, the focus should remain on creating a sense of rhythm through repetition and contrast to create visual interest. This can be achieved by utilizing the same colour or pattern at various intervals to keep the eye moving throughout the room or by directing the eye to various points through the use of similar forms or shapes.

In any case, rhythm lends a sense of visual cohesiveness and should be considered an important component of your overall scheme.

Rhythm

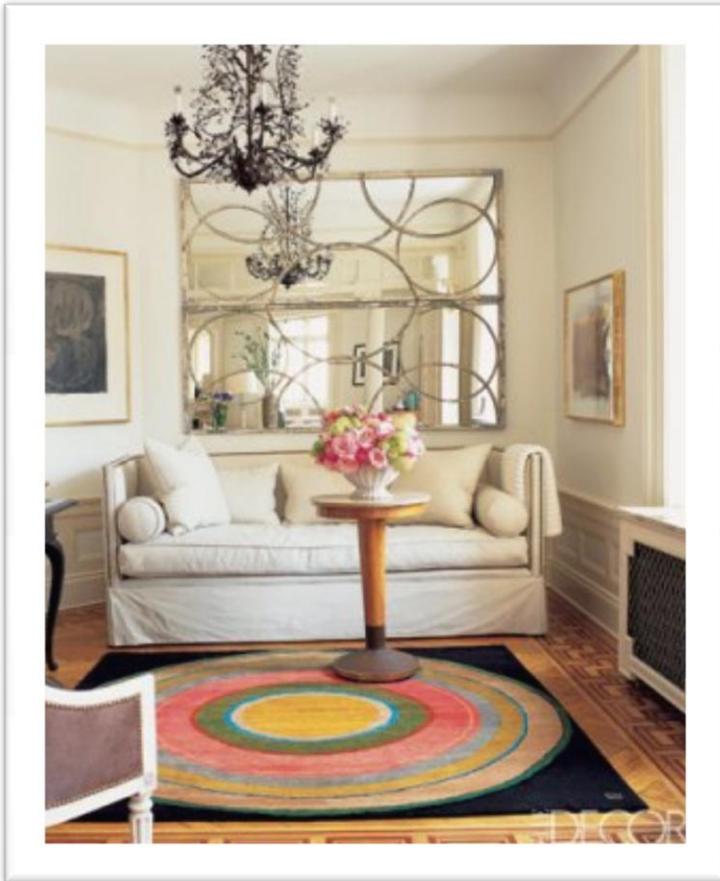


A regular rhythm is achieved by keeping the intervals between the objects relatively the same. This approach tends to be formal in appearance.

By hanging the images in a grid-like pattern, your eye travels from the artwork to the square furnishings, then to the square coffee table and on to the square floor tiles. Through repetition, your eye is drawn around the room easily without being jarred or stopping abruptly in any one area.

Interior design by Joe Serrins Studio
Photography by Vicky Mokbel
Via Architectural Digest

Rhythm

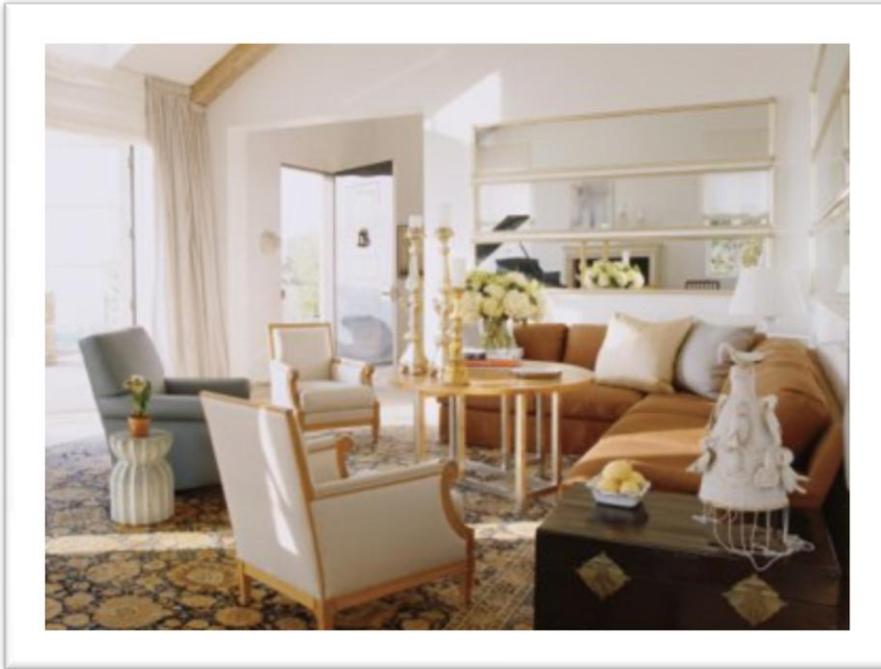


Flowing rhythm has a more natural, organic appearance and isn't as concerned with uniformity. Flowing rhythm is also generally much more relaxed.

In this image, your eye is drawn around the room through the repetition of the circular shape. Beginning with the sculptural mirror to the circular area rug, on to the circular table and finally to the circular bolster pillows, the continuity of the circular shape gives the room a sense of flow and effortless ease.

Interior design by Diana Vinoly
Photography by Thibault Jeanson
Via Elle Decor

Rhythm



Progressive rhythm, by far the most dynamic of the three, is concerned with deliberately leading your eye around the room for a particular effect. Progressive rhythm is most easily achieved with accessories such as graduated accessories for instance, or with patterns or shapes that force the eye to follow.

The circular-backed sofa in the room to the left draws the eye around the room in one sweeping motion. Without this, the room may have appeared boxy, stilted and uncomfortably angular.

Interior design by Diana Vinoly
Photography by Thibault Jeanson
Via Elle Decor

Emphasis

Emphasis refers to the focal point of a space. A natural focal point occurs in rooms with a singular purpose such as a bedroom, where attention is given to the most prominent piece in the room. Created focal points can be seen in rooms with more than one purpose; living rooms and family rooms, for instance, where the rooms are large enough to contain more than one point of visual interest. It must be noted, however, that these two points should never compete; they must blend and relax with each other, making it comfortable for the room to contain both. One of the points of interest should visually dominate and take 'centre stage', while the other creates a balancing effect to the eye. Think of a living or family room that is also the television-watching room; either the fireplace or the television should dominate, never both.

The emphasis of a room can be created by converging lines, contrasting sizes, the colour and texture of various pieces in a room, or the arrangement of furniture. Emphasis is crucial in bringing a sense of purpose to a room, lending a more substantial feel and disputing the notion that the room is for decoration or show only.

Emphasis



By positioning the furniture and lighting to both face and frame the fireplace, the focal point is emphasized. The softer colours of the upholstery also helps keep the eye firmly planted on the darker stone.

Interior design by Andrea Crawford
Photography by Ted Yarwood
Via Canadian House & Home

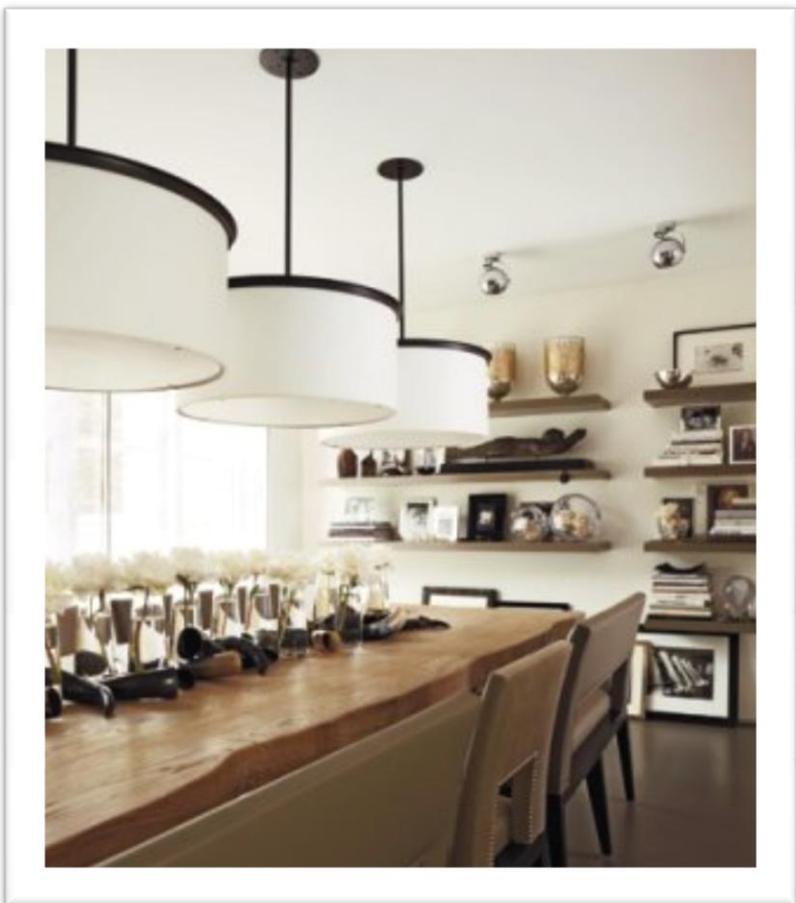
Scale

Scale is one of the most difficult principles to master but done effectively, can make the difference between a mediocre design and a brilliant one. While proportion is the ratio between the size of one object to another, scale refers to how the size of that one object relates to another in context of the overall space.

Think of a gargantuan chandelier for instance; placed in a grand, formal dining room, the chandelier is in proportion to the rest of the room. In a small dining room, however, that same chandelier then becomes the star of the show simply by virtue of its sheer size in relation to the room and the rest of the furnishings.

The general rule of thumb is to vary the sizes and proportions of each object. By ensuring a textural or colour link between them, objects will play against one another for an interesting and exciting effect.

Scale



The oversized shades in this kitchen keep the eye firmly centred on the dining area. Their grand scale injects a sense of drama and theatricality in this otherwise 'quiet' space.

It should be noted that in a large room, you need large objects to fill the space and make it appear more intimate. In smaller rooms, consider introducing a few oversized objects for dramatic impact. This will trick the eye into thinking the room is larger than it actually is and lend the room a sense of importance that smaller objects simply can't impart.

Interior design by Kelly Hoppen
Photography by David Garcia
Via Metropolitan Home

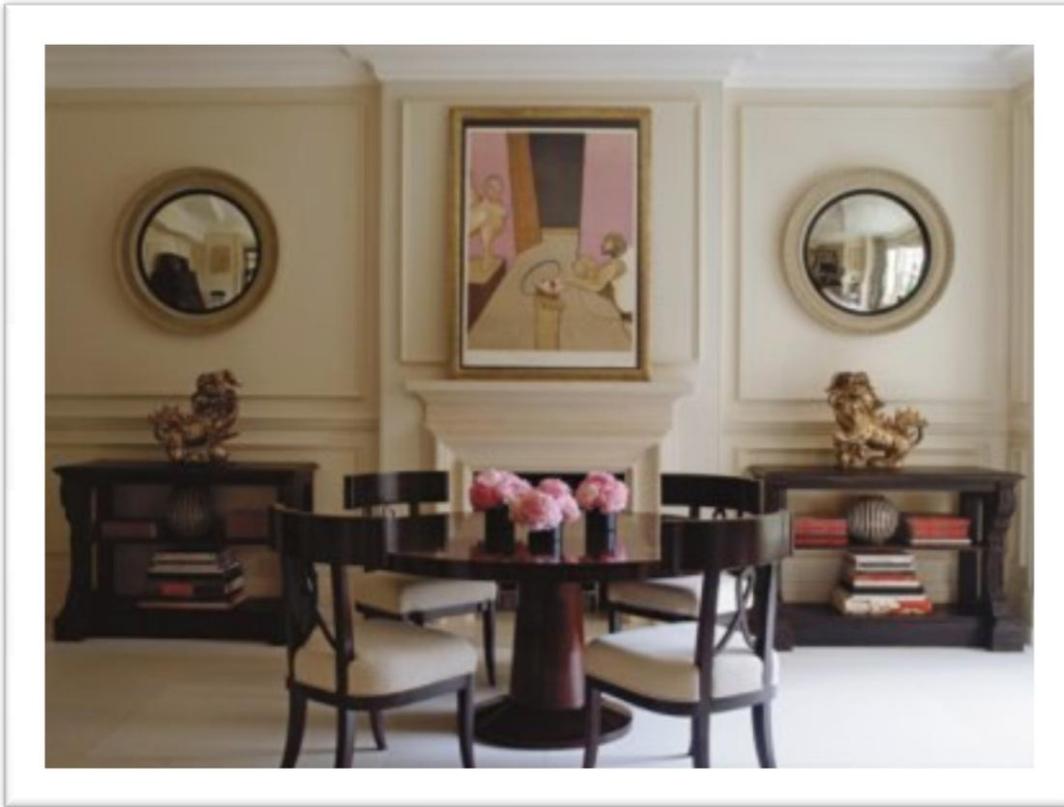
Balance

Balance is the art of creating visual equilibrium or approximating the visual weight of objects throughout a room for a balanced look. Balance can be created with symmetry; mirroring one side of an area or room to the other with furniture, artwork or accessories. While generally more formal in nature, symmetry is suitable for modern bedrooms or living rooms to lend a clean, calming aesthetic. In order for symmetry to work well, introduce an element of asymmetry to create interest and subtly stimulate the overall composition. Whether through a singular piece of furniture, flowers or a small accessory, that one element will create the visual tension required to keep the design from appearing monotonous or stifling.

Balance can also be created with an asymmetrical approach by introducing objects or furnishings that off-set an imbalanced area in visual weight. This can be achieved through colour, size or shape depending on the requirements of the design plan.

When planning your design scheme, begin by imagining your room as a grid and ensure that objects, artwork, furniture, window treatments or architectural features balance each other in colour, shape, pattern, or scale.

Balance

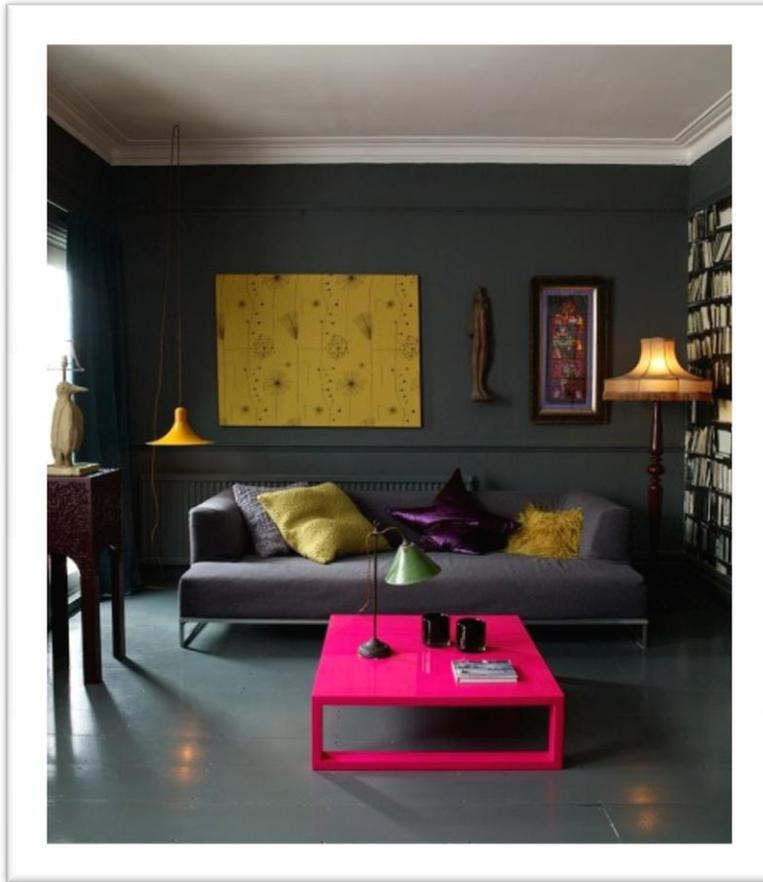


Not only is this dining room symmetrical, it's also balanced by the skilful placement of round shapes to play off the boxy dimensions of the room.

The round mirrors compliment the rectangular side tables and the circular pedestal table brings a softer look to the ornate mouldings and linear fireplace.

Interior design by Paolo Moschino
Photography by Timothy Kolk
Via Elle Decor

Balance



For an asymmetrical or imbalanced room, balance can be achieved with architectural elements, furniture or decorative accessories to visually off-set the unevenness.

Although the artwork has been hung off-centre, the scale of the piece on the left is balanced by the darker colour of the pieces on the right. The two distinctly different lamps, although similar in colour, also help tie the overall composition together by framing the back wall and breaking up the rigidity of the square sofa and rectangular frames.

Interior design by Paolo Moschino
Photography by Timothy Kolk
Via Elle Decor

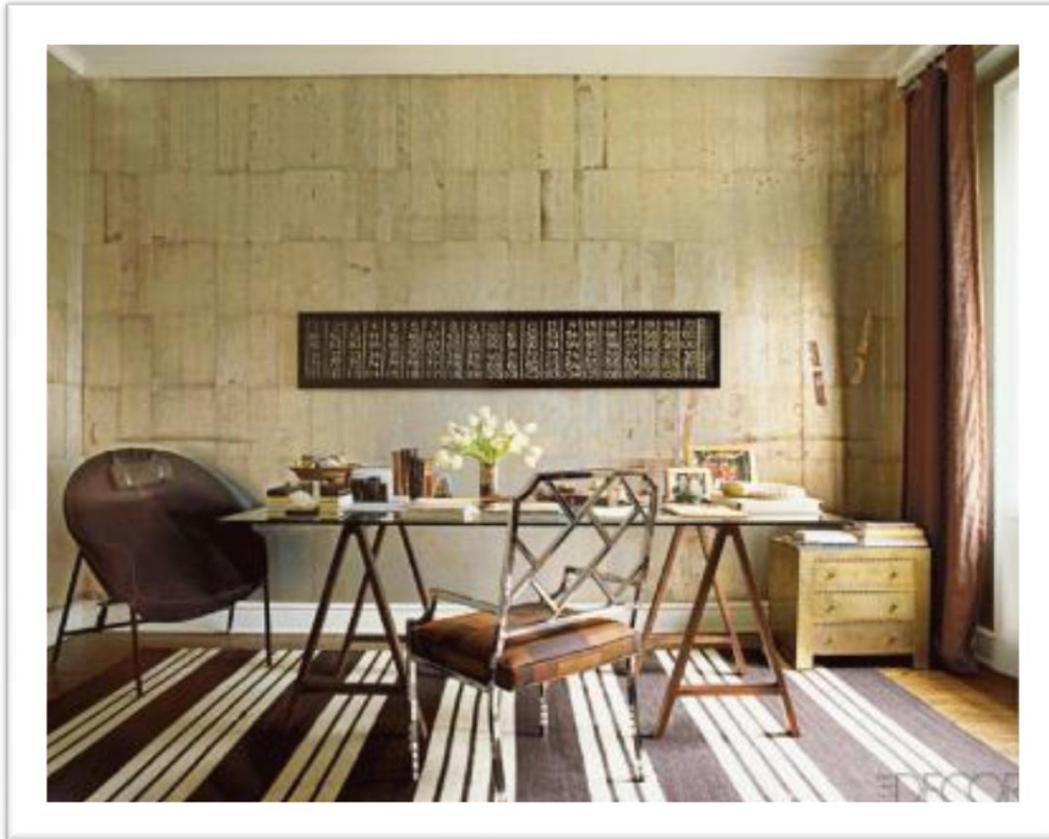
Elements of Design

Line

Although this element is impossible to isolate from the others, the lines of a room have a tremendous impact on the overall look and feel on the space you are trying to create. Your eye will move around the room according to which lines are present and how those lines interact or intersect with one another. Thus, you can either work with the existing architecture in drawing attention to a particular feature or area or you can distract the eye by drawing attention elsewhere.

There are many ways to manipulate how your eye will move within and throughout the space. Horizontal lines, for instance, give the impression of a relaxed environment. Vertical lines draw the eye upward and are more active or energetic than horizontal lines. A predominance of horizontal and vertical lines without the softer diagonal or curved lines to balance them, however, will have an overly masculine aesthetic. If that's not your objective, consider introducing a mix of both strong and soft lines to create a balanced and comfortable environment.

Line



With its strongly linear lines, this office has a dramatically masculine, nearly austere aesthetic.

Interior design by Nate Berkus
Photography by Pieter Estersohn
Via Elle Decor

Line



Diagonal lines are dynamic and work best in modern, lively interiors; spaces where the added visual energy makes sense. Note that too many diagonal lines can inject a sense of confusion so these are best used sparingly.

In this image, the eye is immediately drawn to the overhead beams. The effect is softened somewhat by the arch that both bisects and bridges the room but the overall aesthetic is still dramatic and energetic.

Interior design by Waldo Fernandez
Photography by Firooz Zahedi
Via Elle Decor

Line



Curved or free-flowing lines are soft, unstructured and feminine in appearance. Think of soft, round chairs or round frames; both have a much more yielding appearance than hard lines. Also note that too many soft lines can impart an aimless, 'wishy-washy' appearance so these are best applied in smaller doses as well.

The feminine aesthetic, created by the soft curving lines of the sofa, the gently sloping lines of the armchair, the undulating lines of the ottoman, and the gently cascading lines of the sconces, is wisely balanced by the strong linear lines of the fireplace and artwork. Otherwise, the room may have taken on a weak or imbalanced appearance.

Interior design by Waldo Fernandez
Photography by Firooz Zahedi
Via Elle Decor

Form

Form is simply the three-dimensional shape created by various lines. Every piece of furniture and accessory you introduce has a form. Consider what currently exists and how those forms could be complimented by the addition or subtraction of competing shapes. A boxy sofa, for instance, might be balanced with a circular coffee table. Bookshelves are often much more pleasing to the eye with the addition of free-form sculptures and round accessories to balance the linear look of book spines.

As above in our discussion regarding the lines of a space, if you are aiming for a masculine look, consider square or rectangular shapes to emphasis strong, linear lines. If you are aiming for a more feminine atmosphere, try adding round or curvy shapes for a softer look.

Colour

Colour is by far the most powerful element of the design process. With the capacity to alter your mood and shift how you experience a space, colour defines the overall aesthetic direction and should be considered first and foremost before choosing any permanent fixtures. But while choosing a scheme can seem like a daunting process, it's rarely as scary as it seems. Forget the trends. Forget what the neighbours are doing. Find the colours that speak to you; that you gravitate to again and again. This is where you'll find the basis for your colour scheme.

With that in mind, there are a few hard and fast rules when it comes to colour. Think of this lesson as the foundation. Once you understand how colour works, feel free to bend the rules and stretch the boundaries. After all, interior design is a very personal thing.

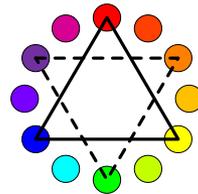
Colour

There have been considerable breakthroughs in the last several years in regards to how we understand and relate to colour. For now though, we'll stick with the tried-and-true colour wheel. Instantly recognizable, the colour wheel illustrates the relationship between primary, secondary and tertiary colours as outlined below:

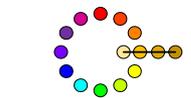
- Primary: Red, blue and yellow; the building blocks of the colour palette.
- Secondary: Orange, purple and green; the mix of roughly equal parts of the primaries.
- Tertiary: Everything else; mixes of uneven and variable amounts of primary colours.

Colour

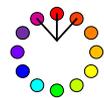
The primary colours are connected by solid lines and the secondary colours by dashed lines. The tertiary colours aren't connected at all:



The relationships of these colours and how they can be utilized for effective and pleasing colour schemes are described below:



Monochromatic



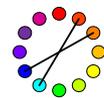
Analogous



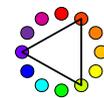
Complimentary



Split
Complimentary

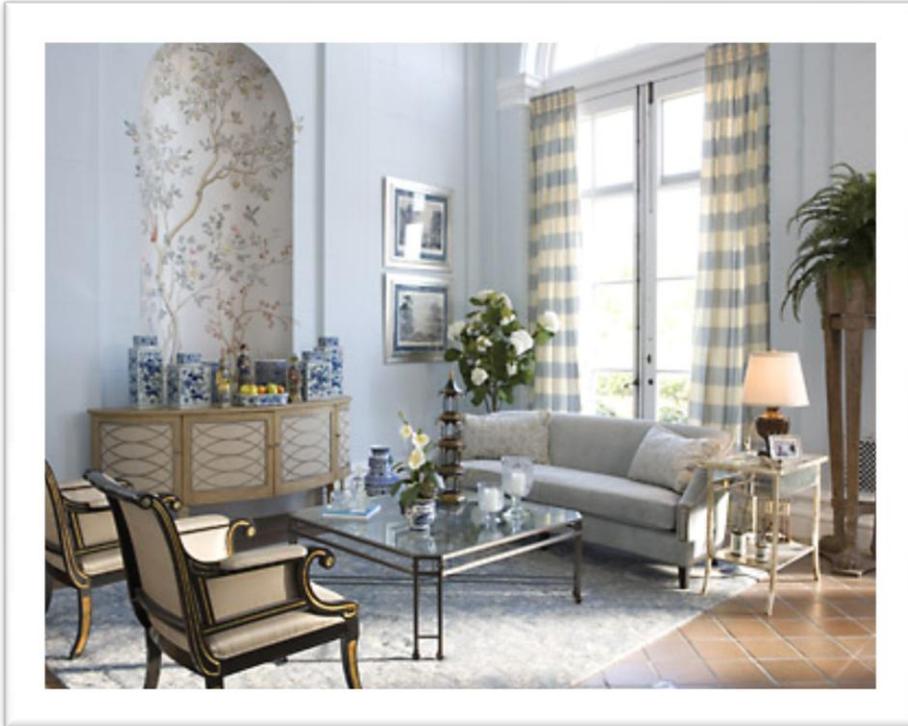


Double
Complimentary



Triadic

Colour

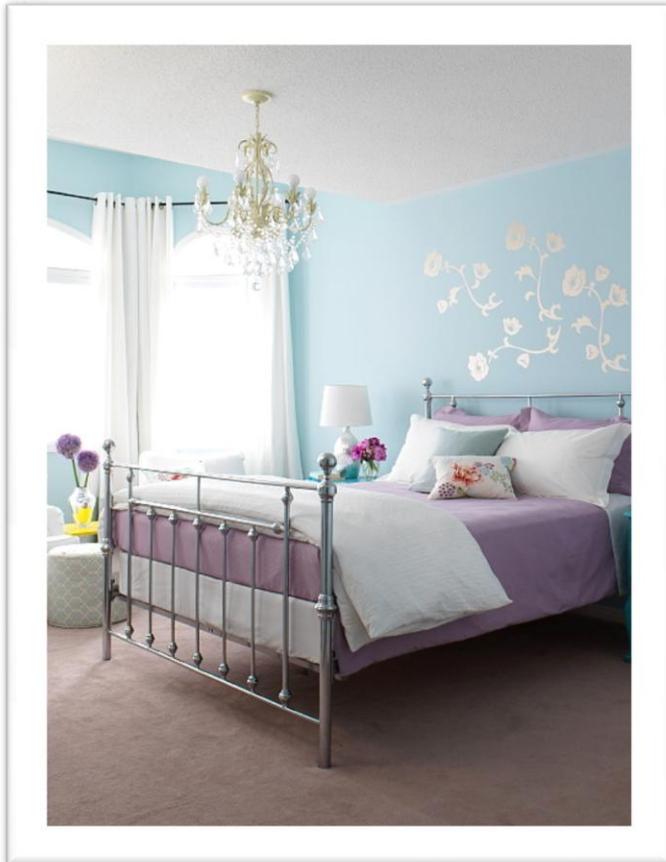


If you want to create a monochromatic scheme beginning with a soft blue for instance, start with your favourite blue and layer furniture and textiles in that same colour throughout the room for a soft and calming effect.

Although this room is a blend of various sky-blues, the overall look is grounded with the addition of the darkly stained side chairs and the glass and iron coffee table. All monochromatic schemes require a visual break; one or two elements to create enough visual tension to underscore the monochromatic palette.

Interior design by Anne Tarasoff & Gail Tarasoff-Sutton
Photography by Keith Scott Morton
Via Elle Decor

Colour



If you'd like a lively and dynamic colour scheme, consider using complimentary or analogous colours. Even if using softer, less saturated colours, the contrast will create excitement while still being harmonious.

The colours used in this image are pale and subtle but by juxtaposing blue against purple, analogous colours, the room becomes lively and dynamic without being jarring.

Whichever direction you choose, keep in mind that colour, including everything from the colour on the walls to the colour of your tiniest accessory, will have an impact on your overall scheme.

Interior design by Margot Austin
Photography by Donna Griffith
Via www.margotaustin.com

Pattern

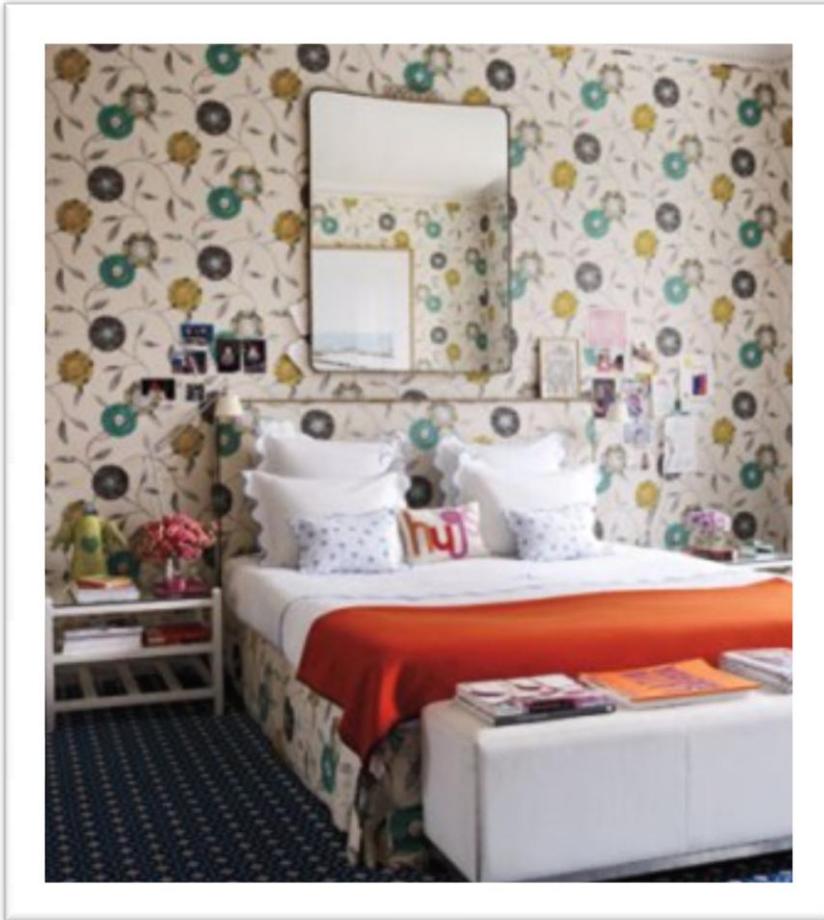
Patterns inject a space with personality and are used to both highlight and disguise particular features within a room. Whether on furniture, draperies, area rugs or within artwork, patterns can enliven a space and carry a colour scheme throughout the room. Patterns should be considered carefully, however, as without regard to their scale, colouring, or intensity, patterns can overwhelm or dominate an otherwise successful scheme.

Three factors must be considered in the selection of patterns:

- The size of the room versus the amount of the individual pattern in the room.
- The scale of the shapes and colours of which the pattern is composed.
- The intensity of colours within the pattern.

In general, small patterns consisting of small shapes and subdued colours will have a more subtle effect than the use of a large pattern with distinct, contrasting colours. Larger patterns, particularly those with brighter or more intense colouring, can visually shrink the room. Similarly, smaller patterns with subtler colours can open up the space and create visual flow throughout the room if all other elements are in harmonious or complimentary colours.

Pattern



As the various patterns in this bedroom are similar in scale and colour intensity, none of them dominate or overpower the room. Even with the busy wallpaper, the deep solid orange bedspread offers some visual relief and balances the overall scheme.

Interior design by Christine d'Ornano
Photography by Simon Upton
Via Elle Decor

Pattern



In contrast to the first image, the lack of patterns in this crisp black and white living room is no less dramatic. The black and white colour scheme is punctuated by the cowhide 'pattern', giving a sophisticated yet edgy appearance.

Interior design by Joseph Mimran
Photography by James Tse
Via Canadian House & Home

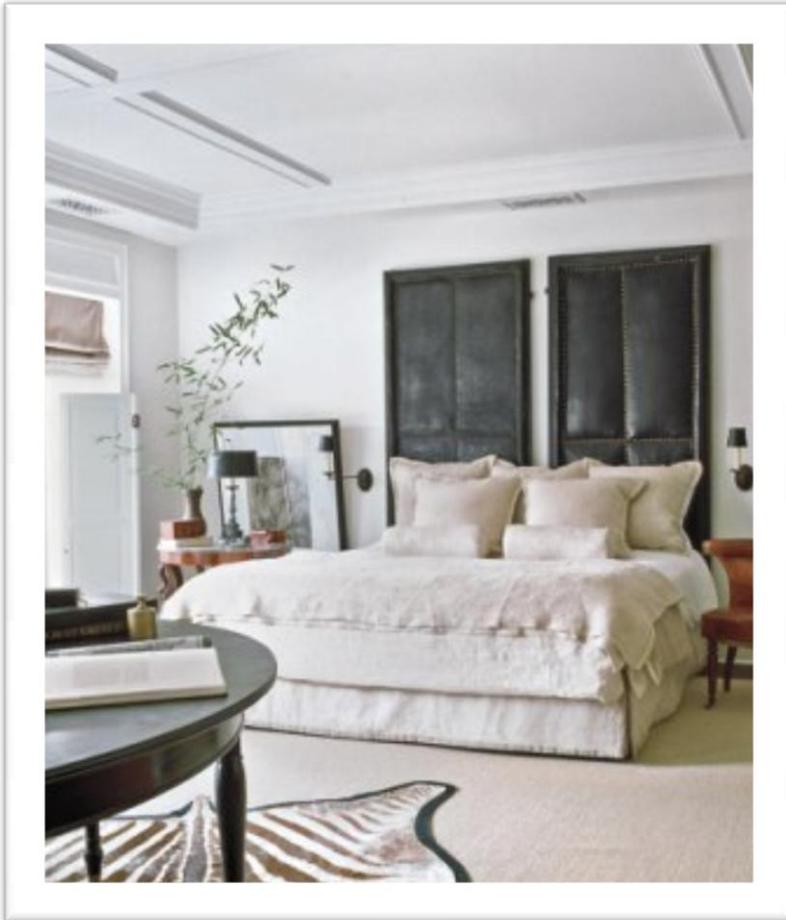
Texture

The final element, texture, refers to the tactile and visual conformity of the surfaces of items within a space, and of the space itself. At its heart, texture can be viewed as a very subtle pattern. Even the grain in wood and the weave of solid fabrics can have just as much impact as an obvious pattern. Think of the textural sensuality of wool and cotton or velvet and silk; in a room without any pattern, these textures help create the depth and complexity necessary for successful design.

At the most basic level, there are four primary types of texture:

- Rough: Hewn wood and stucco; these textures can visually reduce a space.
- Smooth: Glass and chrome; these textures transfer light and visually expand a space.
- Hard: Brick, tile, glossy woods, and opaque glass are considered hard surfaces.
- Soft: Primarily fabrics, but surfaces with a matte finish can also be considered soft.

Texture



The bedroom in this image beckons with its sumptuous textures. From the softness of the linens, the buttery leather of the side chair, to the glossy reading table and natural hide rug, the textures in this room offer a sense of visual depth and physical comfort.

Unlike the other elements of design, textures have their greatest impact and effect when used in combination. The contrast of hard and soft, smooth and rough can inject a sense of drama and interest.

Interior design by Darryl Carter
Photography by Simon Upton
Via Elle Decor

Conclusion

These five elements and seven principles are the foundation for creating a successful plan and should be considered at every step in the design process. Of course, while it's true that rules are made to be broken, until you have a solid understanding of what those rules are and why they exist, you'll never understand how best to bend them to your advantage.

Your next task, then, is to apply this knowledge in creating the home you envision. The trick is simple: know who you are. There is no greater design advice a designer can impart to help you on your design and decorating journey than to encourage you to make courageous decisions.

With these principles and elements in mind, choose what ignites your passions, makes your heart skip a beat, gives you pause, or makes you smile. Your truest essence should be reflected in the place you call home. After all, it's not about Stuff, it's about You.

A Few Final Words...

Whatever you do in your decorating philosophy, be brave....never wish you hadn't taken your vision right to the end. Make a bold statement.

Roger Banks-Pye, Colefax and Fowler Interior Inspirations

A Few Final Words...

A person with a real flair is a gambler at heart.

Billy Baldwin

A Few Final Words...

Make every room a living room.

Alexandra Stoddard

A Few Final Words...

Trust your intuition; it will never, ever fail you.

Erica Swanson