Design Principles and Practice

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Whether you will be working with redesign clients, staging clients or model homes, you will need to have some basic understanding of design standards. For many in the industry who have ‘loved to decorate’ much of this knowledge may have been innate, doing things the right ways ‘just because’. When trying to convey this information to clients, it is helpful to have reasons, real numbers and a skill set back up to justify your choices.

The Four Guiding Principles

The four basic principles that will control whether or not your projects will flow or be in harmony are balance, proportion (scale), texture and rhythm (movement). Let’s take a look at each of these concepts in depth.

**Balance** – Distributing the visual weight of objects around the room creates balance. In order to determine which pieces belong where, it is important to first evaluate the visual weight of an object. Glass tables for example create less visual weight than wooden tables – they seem to take up less space and despite their physical weight appear less dense in a space. Metal pieces typically visually weight more than fabric ones. Open pieces visually weigh less than fully upholstered or closed pieces. Having even visual weight distribution creates balance in a room.

Notice how the designer for this space carefully balanced both visual weight and clean sight lines. The wooden chairs both visually weigh less but are busier with both horizontal and vertical lines. The slip covered chairs visually are heavier, but offer clean crisp lines. Had this table been surrounded by 6 wooden chairs it would have felt busy to the eye, by adding 6 upholstered chairs, it would have felt crowded and closed in (no open space between the chairs). By alternating and shifting the balance, the space feels inviting and comfortable.
Balance is also achieved by harmonizing the amount of sight lines. Sight lines are effectively the places where our eye lands as we go through a space. If provided too many of them, the room looks cluttered and busy. To some degree this is a function of rhythm also, which we will go through later. Frequently, however, it is less rhythm and more an over abundance of sight lines. By reducing and balancing them rooms instantly ‘feel better’.

Notice the sight lines of these two photos of the same room. When you look at the first photo, you are likely to be immediately drawn to the bar stools, the vertical, horizontal and angled lines of the chair backs, rungs and seats. You may even follow it down the line to the chair off to the far left at the built in desk. Yet, you are unlikely to be drawn to the actual lines and aesthetics of the kitchen itself.

Looking back at the two photos again, this time ignoring the chairs themselves, your eye is likely to be drawn above the cabinets in the first photo – despite the fact that most of the photo is chopped off. Naturally our eyes are drawn where there is weight, color and texture. If you were decorating this property, you may want to place items above the cabinet to show off the homeowners belongings. If you were staging this property, it would be a distraction to what is being sold – the kitchen.

For staging purposes, we add accessories along the sight lines we wish to create. The sight lines are minimal and balanced along the areas that we choose to highlight.
Balance is all about distribution. We’ve discussed weight distribution and sight line distribution but there is one more balancing principle that you should understand in order to properly work in any space. The way we balance our spaces can control whether a space feels formal or informal.

- Informal look – typically informal homes or rooms look better if the balance is *asymmetrical* or not mirror image. The overall visual weight would match, however you would not have the same items. A good example might be a framed piece of art on a mantel may be right or left of center while multiple candles and a piece of wrought iron balance the other side.

- Formal look – typically formal homes or rooms look better if the balance is *symmetrical* or mirror image. A common example would be a dining room table with a floral arrangement in the center and a candle stick on either side.

Looking at the photographs above, while both are similar styles of decorating and may have even been found in the same home, one is significantly more formal feeling than the other. Understanding this design concept is important because it may help solve a client design dilemma – when they don’t know why their house doesn’t feel more welcoming (hint: it’s too formal feeling or too asymmetrical) or staging a home that has both formal and informal spaces.
**Proportion (Scale)** – This term typically refers to the size or dimensions rather than weight. When placing objects in a room it is important to consider their location to other focal points. Taller pieces belong on taller walls; wider pieces belong on wider walls, etc. Placing small pictures in groups can create a larger scale where one picture may have gotten ‘lost’. Designs will look ‘off’ if the scale of furniture or accessories is not correctly addressed.

We will discuss the proportion of artwork at length later in this chapter however, it is particularly important when hanging and grouping artwork. A rule of thumb when dealing with art is that the size of the artwork is the total dimension of the grouping. The total size of the artwork should be no bigger than 2/3 the size of the item it is hung over.

**Small spaces** – small spaces are a common dilemma for many. The most important trick here is to not undersize the furniture and art pieces. By adding a few larger or full sized pieces it will actually make the rooms appear larger. Adding more numbers of smaller pieces will actually help accentuate the smallness of the space.
**Very high ceilings** – this is becoming a bigger and bigger problem for people. While they make the rooms feel large, they often become design dilemmas for buyers and sellers alike! Frequently the best solution is to not worry about the highest parts of the room, or the 2nd row of windows. Create a lower ceiling line with curtains, railings or artwork bringing the scale down to size. Ultimately this will still show off the height of the room while making the rooms feel cozy and inviting.

**Rhythm & Flow** – A proper rhythm and flow is what helps your eye to move across the room. In order for this to happen, you must have varying eye levels for the eye to follow. Color is frequently a part of rhythm.

The yellow photo above is a great example of rhythm and flow. Notice the shape of the vases on the mantel. Notice the way your eye goes up and down over them as you look left to right.
Notice the red shells grounding your eye and helping to move your eye left to right. Next notice the undulation of the oysters as they rise up the wall, flowing not only up but again, left to right as well. Your eye has no choice but to move around this piece as you look at it. As a result, even if you would never have shells on your wall, somehow it is very pleasing for most people. (That said, I would not recommend doing this as an art piece for staging. This is an illustration of rhythm and flow only.)

Your job is to recreate this as you move a buyer’s eye through the property. Proper furniture and art placement is the key. You must have varying height, moving the eye up and down. You should use color to direct the eye and keep it moving where you want it to go.

Another rhythm and flow issue that is commonly missed or ignored by stagers is the visual plane. Imagine, if you will, an invisible line that is created by existing lines in the room. These will commonly be windows, doorways and molding. Walkways often create a visual plane well since you commonly need 24-36 inches for a comfortable pathway.

Notice how this rug ‘breaks the plane’ of the doorway? Because of this, it makes the area near the opening, and the overall visual of the room awkward. A better choice would have been:

1) No rug.

2) A rug that either went all the way across the doorway or stopped short of the door entry.

When a designer breaks this visual plane, awkwardness always ensues. Your eye has broken its movement and is no longer sure where to look. It does not flow across smoothly, rather it must choose which way to go and jump to that location.

Visual planes also frequently dictate how artwork should be hung. When hanging artwork over another object (including chair rails or molding) you must pay attention to the visual plane created by these objects. If hanging artwork over a horizontal surface you must hang them horizontally not at an angle. Typically the only time artwork actually looks good at an angle is when hung over a pre-existing angle (such as a staircase).
Color is often an important part of rhythm and flow because it helps to control the way your eye moves through the room. Because of this, color can impact the room dramatically. Often it creates the most dramatic changes. It is important that you know how to use color properly to create beautiful and balanced design that enhances the property you are working with.

A common rule of thumb when working with color is the rule of 70-20-10. 70% of a room should use the lightest color in a fabric or pattern, 20% should be used as an accent color (often a medium tone) and finally 10% should be a dark accent color. For more dramatic looks, these numbers can be reversed. Grounding colors or neutrals such as black, white and tan typically do not count toward these percentages unless they are used enough to account for at least 10% of the space.

Notice in this photograph that the wall colors were used to maintain the color theme of the staging job.

In this case, 70% of the design was beige, 20% was red and 10% was green. Black was used as a grounding color.

Also notice the way the percentages change from room to room keeping rhythm and flow in mind.

When staging, keeping the color theme flowing throughout the house is important to make the home feel as large as possible.

Notice how the bedroom in this same property kept the color theme. Clean sight lines, a balance of furniture, color and contrast keeps the design simple yet elegant.

When discussing color it should also be noted that it is important that a color needs to be used at least 3 times in visual range to work into a design. Randomly adding a new color in only one or two places is rarely visually pleasing. Rather it looks random and out of place.
Room shapes are another important part of flow. Let’s discuss some common and best ways to arrange various room shapes.

**SQUARE**
Common layouts for square rooms include both angles and straight placement.

*See how much more interesting angled looks?*

**RECTANGULAR OR BOWLING ALLEY**
Typically these rooms work best with angles or straight placement and commonly have more than one seating arrangement or purpose.

**PRE-EXISTING ANGLES**
Rooms with angles nearly always require another angle to mirror or balance the space.

Common examples of pre-existing angles include fireplaces, transitions and bay windows.

**L SHAPED**
L Shaped rooms nearly always need to have multiple functions or seating arrangements.

Angles and straight placement are good choices. Think of the rooms as broken into smaller squares or rectangles.

While many of the room shapes allow for angle placement, please be aware that overdoing the angle is not good design. Don’t decide to just angle furniture to ‘create drama’. Most people prefer straight placement. Angled placement also typically takes up more floor space, which can make rooms feel smaller. Beds – particularly king sized beds - should almost never be placed on an angle.
**Texture** – This is the final part of the equation. Texture should be mixed in order to achieve balance, harmony and visual appeal. When the lines or the texture of a room feel harsh items such as fabric or greenery can be added to soften the look. When the room seems cold and unwelcoming, natural elements can help to soften the lines.

Notice all of the different layers of texture in this room.

- Rugs to soften the hardwood floors. Color in the rug to add dimension to the texture.
- Leather layered in a soft furry throw and velvet and satin pillows.
- Hard, dark, rich wood coffee table. (How different would this feel with a glass table?)
- Rattan woven lamps to balance the sleek modern leather
- A glass vase to balance the textured glass windows
- Greenery (orchid) to soften the overall look

Texture must be varied and present in all spaces to add warmth and interest. Whether the look is modern, contemporary, transitional, traditional or country (or anywhere in between), in order to create good design you must learn to add and vary texture in a balanced way.

Small spaces often benefit from monochromatic (tone-on ton) color schemes to make them appear larger. Texture must still be balanced to add interest.

Identify all of the various textures here – brick, wood, rattan, glass, metal, fabric, greenery. How do they work to achieve harmony?
Let’s look at the various texture elements so that you can understand how to layer these elements to create stunning visual effects and inviting spaces.

**Hard Surfaces** – These surfaces typically are wood, stone and ceramic. They can frequently be balanced with soft textiles, florals or greenery.

**Cold Surfaces** – These surfaces typically are metal, glass and ceramics. They can frequently be balanced with soft textiles, florals or greenery.

**Soft Textiles** – Fabric, Carpeting, and other soft luxurious items typically fall into this category. They are usually balanced by adding both hard and cold surfaces.

**Natural Elements** – These come in a wide variety of shapes, sizes and colors (which is fantastic for layering!). Natural elements are as the name suggests, made from nature – plants, florals, greenery, shells, bamboo leaf and rattan furniture or accessories. Frequently these are best balanced with hard and cold surfaces.

**Common examples of layering:**

- Using a skirted or slip covered upholstered piece of furniture on a hardwood floor or a low pile Berber or sisal rug.
- Using an open footed (feet exposed) sofa or wooden chairs on a shag or pile rug.
- Adding greenery or florals to kitchen or bathroom counters.

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Can you identify all of the textural elements in this space?

- Hard?
- Cold?
- Soft?
- Natural?
Lighting

No good design would be complete without proper lighting. Lighting can be a significant part of a decorating or staging job. Many homes are without satisfactory lighting. Ultimately there are four primary types of lighting. Just as with texture, layering the types of lighting will create the most balanced and beautiful spaces.

**Natural lighting** – This would be good old fashioned sunshine. Pay attention to where the light will be at different times of day. Will there be a glare on the TV or do you need drapes to block the heat of the afternoon. You may also want to be careful of certain wooden flooring – sunlight will actually darken the flooring and adding rugs will create ‘tan lines’ on the flooring. Fabrics and tapestries may also fade in direct sunlight.

**Ambient or general lighting** – This is light for the entire room. Often this is used to replace natural light. An example is:

- A ceiling fan light attachment
- Dome light in the center of the room
- Chandelier.
Often for a room to be functional, well balanced and well lit, multiple lighting strategies should be utilized in your design. When deciding on light fixtures and placement remember some of the following guidelines...

- **Table lamps and bedside lamps** should be tall enough to provide adequate reading light, but low enough that you won’t be looking at the bare bulb.

- **Chandeliers** should be hung approximately 30-36 inches above the table and be about 12” narrower than the table it hangs over. If the room is smaller than 10x10 opt for a 17x20” chandelier. If the room is 12x12, 26-27” would be about right. 14x14 rooms or larger should have a chandelier between 24-36”.

**Local or task lighting** – This is exactly as it sounds. Typical task lights are:

- Reading lamps
- table lamps
- floor lamps
- desk lamps

**Accent lighting** - meant to provide warmth and coziness. It is also to highlight various elements in the design such as artwork. Some common accent lighting is:

- Under cabinet lights
- Uplights (frequently in plants)
- Candles
- Focused light (such as art lighting)
□ When adding lampshades to crystal lamps or chandeliers, they should NEVER be off-white or cream. If looking at the white family, only use pure white. Any other variation will make the lamp look dingy.

□ For a less formal look, try mixing and matching lamps in a room. Stacking lamps on books or other level decorative object can offer a great change from the usual and raise a shorter lamp to proper lighting height.

When balancing light in a room, reflective sources may also be included. Glass, mirrors, reflective metals and crystal will often help bounce light around a room creating a beautiful shimmer and glow. These are often seen as the jewelry of design.

Artwork

Art is another item many homeowners simply do not have enough of. Sometimes this may require us to “think outside the box”. Look for items such as baskets, small chairs, empty frames or other useful decorative objects that can be used as substitutes.

As already discussed, size and scale are some of the overriding factors when determining what pieces to use in appropriate placement. Below are some basic guidelines that will help in your decisions regarding artwork:

□ Use groupings when you need a larger piece but none are available. When working with groupings, pay attention to balance, color and texture. Make sure things are visually equally distributed.

□ When working with groupings, it is usually best to arrange them on the floor before attempting to hang them. This gives you the option of rearranging pieces multiple times and measuring accurately before making holes in the wall.

□ When arranging multiple pieces of art as a single grouping, spacing should be relative to the size of the individual pieces. If the pieces are smaller, art should be hung more closely together than if the pieces are large. Often we can take visual cues for spacing from pieces of the art itself. Using the width of matting or framing can be a great guide.
You can use groupings to create a more casual or formal look for a space. Typically horizontal lines tend to be more casual and elongate spaces whereas vertical lines tend to be more formal and add extra height.

If hanging art on an empty wall where there is nothing to visually anchor the art to, such as a hallway, the art should hang such that the center of the art is approximately 60” off of the ground. This is true even for groupings. Treat the center of the group as the center point.

If there is something to ground the art to, such as a table, chair rail or sofa, the art should be hung approximately 6-12” above the grounding point. The height distance has to do with the proportion of the art. Generally speaking the art should still be approximately 60” to center. If the art is not tall enough to be centered at this height and only 12” off the grounding point, chances are your art is too small for its location. An exception to this is if the art is being hung at eye level for seating (such as by a sofa or table lamp).

Art or groupings of art should not be larger than approximately 2/3 of the size of the pieces of furniture they are paired with.

Let’s do some measurements:

Determine the height of the artwork then divide by 2... 42” high

Plus 60” (center to top of art)

Subtract distance from top of art to wire (make sure it is pulled taught as if on a hook) = 4”

21 + 60 = 81 – 4 = 77”

This is where your hook belongs ...

The math works roughly the same over an object, just add the height + 6-12” then subtract distance from top of wire. (ex: 42” + 10” = 52” – 4” = 48” above grounding point to hook)
Tips for hanging artwork –

- When hanging art on wallpapered walls, cut a small “V” or “X” in the wallpaper with a sharp knife. Slightly lift the wallpaper and attach nail or anchor. This will allow the homeowner to hide the mark if they decide to change the art or move it.

- When working with plastered walls, drill a very small hole in the wall first. Cover with tape and then hammer nail or anchor into place. This will help keep the wall from crumbling.

- Use the proper hangers for the job. Some art pieces have preinstalled hooks for wire, others require art hooks. Pay attention and use the correct anchor and wire techniques. Not paying attention to this step can cause you to accidentally break the client’s art or damage the wall.

Focal Points

Understanding focal points is perhaps one of the most important aspects of both design and staging work. Focal points come in many shapes and sizes, but are frequently the biggest selling aspects of a home. Additionally, it is not at all uncommon for multiple focal points to exist in the same room.

- Natural focal points – These are usually views or vistas. A beautiful window with a view is certainly a selling feature. Depending on the view or vista often it can dramatically increase the value of the home.

- Architectural focal points – By definition, these are built into the property itself. Frequently it is a fireplace or built-in bookcase.

  Our goal is to accentuate the architectural focal point, making it important and appealing to potential buyers.
What happens when focal points compete against each other? First and foremost you have to decide which focal point is the most important one to consider.

In the room on the right, there are opposing focal points – both natural and architectural. There is a water view out the windows, while a fireplace looms largely in the design. Both are important. This stager decided to address the focal points by facing one (windows) while naturally surrounding the fireplace with a comfortable seating arrangement. To further enhance the space, a mirror was placed over the sofa (unseen in photo) to reflect the view to those seated with their back to view.

**Bookcases and Built-ins**

When working with bookcases, it is important to watch the empty space as much as the pieces you arrange. Overcrowding can look like clutter. Because these pieces are typically more formal in content, even in casual spaces, some form of symmetry is typically required.
Mix materials used on the bookshelf (ie. porcelain with wood, books and greenery)

Choose colors that will coordinate with each other, and the books if possible

Use tall picture frames or small paintings for higher vertical lines

If matching items are used, such as a pair of vases, put them on the same shelf with one directly on it, and the other with a book or two underneath

Use different shapes – mix something square and round on the same shelf

Use paperbacks to stack items or store them behind other books. Consider removing the jackets of hard cover books and store them elsewhere – the colors and texture of the spines will look nicer without them

Notice how much more pleasing to the eye these bookcases are when there is more empty space. Look for the symmetry and use of mixed materials. Remember to balance the visual weight of objects and vary the height and texture.

Rugs

In nearly every countdown of design dilemmas by almost every major source you’ll find a commonality. The improper use, placement or size of rugs nearly always makes the top 10 list of decorating mistakes. Why this is such an issue is a mystery. I have a feeling it has to do with the discount stores that usually only sell smaller rugs, leaving many to believe these are sufficient in size for good design. Unfortunately few spaces can actually benefit from anything 5x7 or smaller. Let’s see why....
Proper rug rules –

- In dining rooms, rugs should be at least 2’ larger than the table on all sides. This means that for the average 4 x 6 table, you will need at least an 8 x 10 rug.

- Living room rugs should be large enough that at least one piece of furniture anchors it. Anchoring simply means the furniture has its feet resting on it. 5 x 7 is the smallest a living rug should ever be. It can be acceptable for the furniture to run along the perimeter of the furniture, but this is not usually ideal.

- 4 x 6, 3 x 5 and/or 2 x 3 rugs should only be used as utility rugs such as entry way rugs, foyer rugs or kitchen rugs.

- Rugs should NEVER be alone in the room, unless they are entry way or hallway runners. This always gives the illusion that they are random or worse yet, hiding something – think of this as Aladdin’s Magic Carpet.

Rugs can be used to create definition in large open floor plans. This helps to make the spaces feel larger, warmer and less confusing.
More Miscellaneous Tips & Techniques

- Accessories should be arranged in odd numbers for greatest visual appeal.
- Silk and dried flowers typically lose their appeal after about 3-5 years. Consider this a shelf life, particularly for dried flowers. After this date, they should be discarded and replaced with new ones.
- When staging, anything that was once dead should be removed. This includes mounted animals, urns and dried flowers.
- Artificial plants usually need to be fluffed and shaped. This is an important part of creating appeal with them.
- Look to natural elements when working with redesigns or owner occupied staging jobs. Often cut leaves, flowers or even beautifully shaped sticks from the owner’s yard can add tremendous appeal.
- Use greenery to soften harsh lines. Trees can really add warmth to a space that feels cold or harsh. Smaller plants can soften the lines of a bookcase or cold surface.
- Make sure to pay attention to the height of objects. Height should be varied for maximum appeal.
- Watch sight lines. If trying to show off a great view or placing items on a coffee table in TV viewing line, make sure you don’t block the view you are trying to show off. Remember, some views will be seen sitting down, not just standing!

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