



## **The True Art of Successful Interior Design**

By Paula Grace Halewski-Zarnick

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### ***Getting Started***

How does one begin interior design? I have met many intelligent, well-educated people who stare at a room and know to a certain point what they want, but ‘where do I start?’ creeps into their thoughts and a dull ache sets in. The ‘art’ of interior design doesn’t have to be mysterious. Applying basic principles will get you started and help you arrive at an exceptional result.

Let’s truly start at the beginning – why does the art of interior design exist? Interior design helps bring to life an interpretation of you through your home and to solve the functional and aesthetic problems you are experiencing. A simple example of an aesthetic problem is an imbalance of window placement in a room. This can make selecting window treatments difficult and the whole room may seem ‘off.’ When you walk from point A to point B and you frequently stub your toe on something, that’s a functional problem. Here, the traffic path needs to be addressed. Again, a very simple example but you can use your imagination, or your real life dilemmas, from here on.

Your home is your haven and it should function as you need it to and look and feel the way you want it to. Interior design is a very personal process. Quality interior design can help resolve the ache that comes when something is impeded.

There are three steps that you should take before making any major changes or purchases. First, define the rooms in your home as either public or private. Second, envision a design concept. Third, create a space plan for each area or room you’ll be working on.

### ***Public versus Private Space***

The public spaces in your home, rooms that you’ll be entertaining in, for example, and the private spaces, such as your master suite, are different. In most homes, flow will need to be considered. Flow refers to the way in which one room connects with the adjacent spaces and rooms; flow creates a rhythm and harmony throughout your home. This can be achieved with a flow of a particular color from room to room. It won’t be the primary color in all rooms but represented in each. Or it may be a geometric figure that is used generously here and singularly there in art, fabric, and wall and floor treatments in your home. The possibilities are many. This flow allows you, and your guests, to have a soft transition from room to room. You won’t feel ‘jarred,’ eyes wide with a moment of hesitation or disbelief. Instead, your senses will be pleased by the flow between rooms.

Private space is different. Here you should have whatever suits you on the most personal level, with an intimacy that will not be completely revealed to the outside world. Let’s say you have a theme of Victorian pieces

throughout your home. You may choose to have this theme enter your private quarters or not. You may prefer your suite to be spa-like and soothing. Scarcely adorned rooms with pale blue-green walls may be what is needed to soothe your mind and soul from your busy day; no Victorian anything in sight.

### ***Design Concept***

A design concept brings cohesion to a room (or home for that matter), an end result. It may be as simple as, “I want my home to reflect the sites and style of northern Italy.” Many of us don’t have something quite that definitive but we know what we need and also what we like — when we see it. You may need a family friendly room; so then, what do you like? Take some time to look through magazines and books and collect pictures of rooms and objects that appeal to you. You have likely heard this advice before. Have you actually done it? It really does help. Even if you initially see no relation between pictures you’ve chosen, eventually there will be. The information later in this article can help organize the selections you’ve made.

You may have also heard of ‘an inspiration piece.’ This is another method of grounding oneself. Do you have a piece of art that you adore? It doesn’t have to be a grand piece and it doesn’t need to be thought of as art by another. You just have to love it. I did my dining room inspired by my china. I love the clean lines, elegant colors, and the subtle shapes and patterns. I then chose wall, window, and floor treatments, furnishings, lighting, and accessories compatible with it. That was all it took. So look around you. Do you have ‘art’ that follows you even after several moves? Look at it; study it. What is it about that piece that you admire? The form, the texture, the way it makes you feel? You can extract from an inspiration piece some of the elements that will contribute to your design concept. A very personalized room can come from this approach.

### ***Space Plan***

This is a critical step as it may save you from making costly mistakes such as purchasing furniture that is too large for your room. By gathering certain information and drawing your room and furnishings to scale, you will learn a number of things.

To create your space plan, gather the following:

- the size of the room, the wall space, any built-in cabinetry, and door and window placement (draw these details first prior to drawing anything else in the room)
- what the room will be used for and whether it will be multi-purpose
- the number of people in the room the majority of the time and their characteristics (for example, small children that can bump their heads on corners, a 6’5” man who needs leg room when he sits, an elderly person who has difficulty rising from a seated position)
- the natural and needed focal point(s)
- the natural traffic flow or the need to create one

By gathering this information, you will know how much and what type of furniture you will need, additional items required to accomplish what the room will be used for, and how the room will be oriented. Just think it through even if you have to have a ‘think tank’ with family and friends. The most common scale to use is ¼ inch = 1 foot. It doesn’t need to be complicated or a ‘Rembrandt;’ simplify this step by using ¼ inch graph paper purchased almost anywhere.

## ***The Next Step***

So far, you have defined your room(s) as public or private, envisioned a design concept, and created a space plan. Now you are ready to inventory what you have and make the changes and purchases to attain your design. What follows is the ideology and elements that will guide you with your selections. It is the use and placement of elements through furnishings, accessories, color, and light that bring the design to life; the ideology determines if the elements are done well.

## ***Design Fundamentals***

The fundamentals are known to most professionals as the principles of design. They are scale, proportion, rhythm, emphasis, balance, and harmony. These principles evaluate each element in a design (magnificent vs. mediocre – right vs. wrong). When you are making selections and / or arranging furnishings, keep these in mind.

**Scale** – the entire perspective. The objective with scale is for objects to be alike or harmonious in dimensions or mass. For example, in general, large scale furniture and motifs do well in large scale rooms. When you move from a smaller home into a larger one, you may think, ‘My furniture seems so small.’ It is not that your furniture is ‘small’; it is just not in scale with the size of the room.

**Proportion** – evaluates the relationship or ratio of parts to the whole. You have seen examples of an object out of proportion, I’m sure. When it happens, the eye is not pleased. A common one is hanging a small picture on a large wall creating too much negative space. The ratio of positive space to negative space is grossly disproportionate causing the entire wall to appear cold or underdeveloped. A larger picture, grouping compatible pictures together, or anchoring the small picture with a piece of furniture are some methods of solving this example problem.

**Rhythm** – speaks to the flow within a room and throughout your home. Recall the discussion of public versus private space. Rhythm is the flow of elements usually organized according to a scheme such as repetitive pattern. You can have a lot of fun creating rhythm. I used a diamond pattern in the window treatments and decorative pillows for a client’s master bedroom. She not only embraced this concept but added crystal pieces in the room to have it figuratively and literally sparkle.

**Emphasis** – is the important focal point(s) in a room. There may be more than one focal point but one will be primary. A fireplace in a family room will likely be the focal point of that room. There also may be a media center as a secondary point of interest. Furniture will be arranged such that your eye will be guided toward the focal points; in this example, toward the fireplace and media center.

**Balance** – is equilibrium though symmetry (mirror images from a center point), asymmetry (optically varying items from a central point to achieve balance), or radial (equilibrium based on the circle). Symmetry has a more formal appearance and feel, for example bookcases flanking the door of a den. Balancing with asymmetry is more difficult to accomplish as the eye is used to create it but the results can be wonderful.

**Harmony** – is creating a feeling of suitability through unifying elements and objects and adding variety for interest and diversity. The objective is to create an agreeable, appealing whole that won't tire in the long-run. For example, I've used the color red, a warm hue, as a flow element in my home. I have used neutral and cool hues also throughout to add interest and diversity; too much of a good thing can actually become monotonous over time.

### ***Design Elements***

The elements discussed here are used by artisans of all types — painters, sculptors, photographers, interior designers, etc. They have been discovered and refined over the course of history and are considered elementary and critical to all fine-art. They are space, shape, form, mass, line, texture, pattern, light, and color.

**Space** – as humans, we need both large and small areas to please our psyche. Incorporate both, or the appearance of both, in your home. There also needs to be a comfortable balance and proportion of positive, filled area, and negative, unfilled area. Traffic paths are negative space in a room yet functionally important. An example of too much positive space is filling a small room with oversized furniture. You can use large pieces in a small room balanced by massing, placing together, smaller scale items that allow for more negative space in between (this is also an example of asymmetrical balance).

**Shape and Form** – Shape is the two-dimensional outline while form is the three-dimensional configuration. With shape and form, think of those pleasing to the eye and that are well proportioned and complement each other. If you like geometric forms, you'll need to soften it by adding curved pieces. This will accomplish balance and harmony and ultimately a more comfortable feel.

**Mass** – is the actual or optical density of an object. The mass of a glass table will appear less than one of the same dimensions made of wood. This is known as optical density. In one of my designs, I placed an arrangement of three large scale upholstered pieces, a settee and two chairs, and two oval wood and glass end tables. The final piece to the arrangement was a rectangular glass coffee table. Given the scale of the room, moderate, and the focal point being on the opposing wall, I chose a suitably proportioned rectangular glass coffee table consistent with the grandeur of the furniture to decrease the mass of the arrangement as a whole. This brought balance and harmony and allowed full view of the point of interest in the room.

**Line** – is used to create width and height, or the appearance of activity, movement, or flow. The psychological effect of line ranges from secure (horizontal line), free or expansive (vertical), action-oriented (angular) to soft and comforting (curved). The most pleasing effect will have a balanced mixture of lines with one taking the lead role. The dominant line will be chosen dependant upon what feeling or image you would like to portrait.

**Texture** – is the actual physical feel or surface appearance of a furnishing or treatment. All fabric has texture but a faux wall treatment can also give the appearance of a texture when, to the touch, it may be completely smooth. The textures of fabric and treatments need to be compatible but varied for harmony. In a monochromatic room, texture is a critical element to plan for and vary to please the eye and maintain attraction.

**Pattern** – is forms arranged in an orderly manner. Combining patterns can be a bit tricky but beautiful. When combining, one pattern will be dominant with others in supporting roles. Color and scale also are important. Colors need to be similar for unity; scale needs to be varied for interest. The appearance and attributes should also be compatible. For example, silk and tweed may not be a good choice together because they are incompatible. Dupioni silk and damask would be a better choice.

**Light** – is a critical element in all fine-art. You can design a gorgeous room but if it is poorly lit, you may not be able to appreciate it. General (overall lighting), task (focused lighting), and accent (highlight and sparkle-effect lighting) are important in residential design. Colors, textures, and patterns can be true or altered primarily dependant upon your artificial lighting. The types of artificial lighting usually are incandescent, fluorescent, and tungsten halogen. Each light differently and possess characteristics that may or may not be desired. I recommend you do some additional reading on the topic or consult a lighting expert for some recommendations based on what you are trying to accomplish. That is how important lighting is in interior design.

**Color** – is the most personal and evocative element in design. We all have our favored and least favored color(s) and many people have associations to particular ones. Colors are considered warm (reds, yellows, and oranges), cool (blues, greens, and purples), or neutral (beiges, browns, black, grays, and whites). Light colors provide a more spacious feel; dark ones aid with coziness. Bright colors can be energizing; dull more soothing and easier to live with over time. It depends on what you're trying to achieve. A child's room will have a different color palate than a home office. An excellent, livable method of color selection and proportion is the law of chromatic distribution — larger areas of a room are kept neutral with brightest and more intense colors harnessed in the smaller areas. Whatever palate you choose, please don't make your final wall treatment selection(s) from tiny chips. Select colors that interest you, purchase the smallest containers available, and paint large white foam boards available at art & craft or office supply stores. Paint in the proportions you're planning in the room. Live with the colors for a while; move the boards around the room to see them at different times of the day and night in different lighting. This may seem tedious but it can save time, money, and sanity.

### ***'Finishing'***

Knowing the principles of artful interior design provides an excellent foundation. Applying the principles takes thoughtful selection and placement combined with your personal preference and imagination. Working with a professional can be very helpful as long as she understands, or helps you define, your style and together work as a team. Your eye is the ultimate judge of good design for you. It takes time and you may never be 'done.' It is like raising a child; there is always something to nurture, something to organize, and something that is not going to behave just as you'd like it to. That's part of the challenge and the beauty that culminates into ultimate joy when your house looks back at you and you see your home.

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