



European
Council of
Interior
Architects



THE IMPORTANCE OF AESTHETICS IN THE HUMAN BUILT ENVIRONMENT (2/3)

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INTRODUCTION

In 2021, the **New European Bauhaus**¹ placed a strong emphasis on the quality, inclusivity, and aesthetics of architecture. ECIA would like to underline the importance of aesthetics in our environments. **As interior architects, we have a great responsibility to ensure that the interior environments are aesthetic, sustainable and financially justifiable.**

Through this document, we want to shed light on why it is important to talk about aesthetic values within the built environment. By looking at the historical, what we are facing today and how we should develop the profession.

¹ [New European Bauhaus, 2021 \(europa.eu\)](https://european-council.europa.eu/media/1468424/attachment/ef901414-3439-4f60-b9f1-839a7d98389d.png)

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1. Retrospective

The professional who conceives space often comes up against a definition of aesthetics that oscillates between partisan subjectivity and total rejection.

The core of architecture is the balance between Beauty (Venustas), Sustainability (Firmitas), and Function (Utilitas). The Swedish architectural historian Elias Cornell summarized what architecture is about with the phrase "Aesthetic organization of practical reality."

In the fall of 2020, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, launched the vision of a New European Bauhaus (NEB). A movement based on sustainability, inclusion, and aesthetic values in the green transition.

The word "aesthetics" is, for some architects, associated with superficiality and subjective taste, something that risks being overshadowed by the functional and sustainable aspects of architecture. In the early 20th century, functionalism became a dominant ideal, often summarized by expressions like "form follows function." This philosophy argued that the appearance of a building or object should be the result of its function, rather than aesthetic considerations. The influence of functionalism has led many to see aesthetics as a secondary or even superficial aspect of the design process"

There has also been historical resistance to what is perceived as a "decorative" aesthetic – something that risks focusing too much on visual aspects at the expense of practical and sustainable solutions. This sceptical attitude was reinforced by architects such as Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe, whose works emphasized simplicity, purity, and stripped-down functionality. They believed that aesthetics was often misunderstood and that buildings should be "honest" and reflect their function and materials, rather than pursuing transient beauty.

However, the criticism of aesthetics is not always about a disdain for the visual, but rather a fear that aesthetic decisions may become arbitrary or too superficially trend driven. Architects who question "aesthetics" as a concept often do so in the pursuit of creating something more timeless and sustainable, rather than trendy or decorative. This is why a renowned architect and designer like Philippe Starck expresses himself saying, "We must replace beauty, which is a cultural concept, with goodness, which is a humanist concept." This statement aligns completely with the challenges we face as interior architects today.

2. What has governed interior architecture throughout the last century

The arguments of functionalism (“function creates form”) have long served as a bulwark against any forward-looking reflection on the notion of aesthetics. Functionalism is, in the light of the last hundred years, a comfortable dogma that spares the designer the pangs of doubt that surround the notion of “beauty”. Many “functional” buildings and interior are destroyed because they have become uninhabitable.

3. Reflections of the aesthetic

We need to distinguish between two major aesthetic approaches that we encounter in our daily work. The first, highly contextual and influenced by the trends of the times, is the marketing aesthetic that professionals need to maintain credibility with their customers. The second, more profound and less consensual, is an aesthetic of balance, even harmony? This is the aesthetic that human beings need for their immediate environment.

Whichever approach is used, at a time when the notion of sobriety is becoming more essential than ever to our European society, the interior architect has a duty to preserve a balanced relationship between the natural and the artificial, as much out of ethical concern as out of necessity.

The question of “aesthetics” when dealing with the human-built environment?

A realistic look at human nature means admitting that forms are not “durable” and that their aesthetics are temporal. The designer must set aside dreams of eternity and accept the ephemerality of certain proposals that are the testimony and landmarks of his or her era. Professional designers, architects and interior architects have a duty to be humble about the future of their creations.

Aesthetics in the human-built environment call upon visible ingredients: Colour, form, material, light, but also less perceptible ingredients such as sound, smell, touch, trajectories, perspectives, etc... Everything that contributes to a narrative and/or a form of comfort.

The history of Europe is a daily feature of our buildings, our indoor and outdoor spaces. If this history was built on technical ingenuity, it was also built on aesthetic dreams at the service of an influential discourse: great architects, cathedral builders, musicians, writers, poets, painters, sculptors - or famous creative currents: De Stijl, Bauhaus, Art-Deco, Memphis...

Today, in the concept of the European New Bauhaus, the important thing is to place “interior space” within a perennial and realistic vision. But it's not so much a question of sustainable aesthetics as of a mode of conception that integrates notions such as frugality, reasoned choice of materials and environmentally friendly implementation.

The question of “culture”, whether personal or societal?

This is how the interior architect experiences the equivocation within which lies the culture of everyone, but also the more social, or societal, injunctions known as “trends”. The worlds of commerce and industry are subject to these fashions, in which architecture and interior architecture are less the result of functional research than of conjunctural scenography.

By contrast, (private housing and public interior space) homes, living spaces and workplaces, in their quest for sustainability, are looking for a more timeless aesthetic.

The user's culture and that of the interior architect are at the heart of the matter, and in all these situations, the professional is entrusted with the task of interpreting the culture, then conceiving and organizing the space.

4. How does the notion of aesthetic affect every day human life?

The question of harmony

Charged with taking into account and synthesizing functions that are as different as they are indissociable, interior architects combine all the dimensions of knowledge and awareness in their creations. He or she is a “generalist” whose aim is not simply to determine the form of an object or space, but above all to propose a coherent, harmonious vision of the art of daily living.

The question of “artistic creation” as a human parameter

Artistic creation is consubstantial with the human being. Thanks to their training in the applied arts, interior architects can synthesize art and technique, so that the immateriality of creation is immediately confronted with the concreteness of realization. He is a designer whose “conception project” simultaneously encompasses all the aesthetic and technical parameters required for its completion.

The question of “habitat”, or “living environment” as a definition of intimacy

The interior architect is undoubtedly the only person to draw his inspiration from the sequence of moments experienced, here and now, in the space entrusted to him. Unconcerned with defying the centuries, he strives to revive the colours of everyday life, to bring each living space, old or new, to life in the actuality of its use, and thus define his customer's intimacy.

5. Imaginary and aesthetics in the living environment

"A project doesn't just start with the architecture of the building. It begins with the country, the city, the street, and all this journey ends inside. It's tricky to implement this relationship to the interior in existing architecture, but it's rich to know this and to listen to what's going on around, within and beyond the walls. There's the material imprint of the place and ultimately a kind of awareness of the world"

Rena Dumas, architect and designer, France 1994

Habitat conception: a vision of the future

The role of the interior architect, a generalist of a particular kind, is to bring together the material (economic and technological), intellectual (scientific, sociological, ethical) and sensitive (imaginary, even irrational) data involved in creating a living environment and its components: It's a twofold act of creation, technical and aesthetic, based on the present and pre-empting the user's future.

The living environment influences lifestyle, and vice-versa?

Interior architects understand spaces and the objects they contain constantly affect their users. This impact is even more powerful as it speaks as much to their intelligence and sensitivity as to their bodies. The interior architect's "aesthetic" responsibility is therefore an essential aspect of his profession.

In the mid-19th century, the emergence of decorative arts applied to industry triggered a radical change in Western society's way of life. Consumer goods dedicated to the living environment became unavoidable parameters used by the architectural conception family, to such an extent that they influenced the way of life outside but above all inside the built environment.

Paint, electrical equipment, plumbing, joinery, lighting, carpets, floors and ceilings, etc... These multiple "components" are used unreservedly by space architects and designers in a sometimes-perverse relationship, at the heart of which aesthetics play a not inconsiderable role. But it remains possible to "make tabula rasa" of these commercial recipes and invent a way of life adapted to the customer and the space. The work of Le Corbusier and Charlotte Perriand in the mid-twentieth century, for example, demonstrated this.

Space design and lifestyle in the European identity

A number of examples of architects and interior architects who have influenced our ways of living, between the imaginary and the aesthetic:

- Adolf Loos (1870 - 1933)
- Otto Wagner (1841 - 1918)
- Josef Hoffmann (1870 - 1956)
- Hans Hollein (1934 - 2014)
- Charlotte Perriand (1903 - 1999)
- Andrée Putman (1925 - 2013)
- Frank Lloyd Wright (1867 - 1959)
- Charles & Ray Eames (1907 - 1978/1912 - 1988)
- Lina Bo Bardi (1914- 1992)
- Alvar Aalto (1898-1976)

6. The interior architect, a player in the quality of environmental aesthetics

A necessary mediator in the architectural conception family, with a background in applied arts, crafts and project management. Mastering aesthetic and cultural trends imply an in-depth understanding and ability to interpret, predict and influence the styles, behaviours and values that define a society at any given time. The interior architect is trained to:

- Study the evolution of art, design and fashion trends over different periods.
- Understand the socio-political and economic factors that have influenced these trends.
- Keep abreast of contemporary art, design, fashion and architecture.
- Recognize the impact of cultural movements (e.g. minimalism, maximalism, ecological design) on aesthetics.
- Analyse how cultural changes influence public tastes and preferences.
- Explore how new technologies (e.g. AI in art and architecture, 3D printing in fashion and design) shape aesthetics.
- Understand the role of digital media and virtual spaces in shaping trends.
- Understand cultural trends.

7. Our challenges today

Aesthetics (beauty) in our interior environments has become even more significant today, especially in relation to digitalization and increasing mental health issues. Digitalization affects how we live, work, and interact, which in turn influences our demands and expectations of the environments we inhabit, the humanistic aspect of our surroundings.

Aesthetics can serve as a powerful counterforce by creating interior environments that support well-being, concentration, and social interaction. A movement based on sustainability, inclusion, and aesthetic values in the green transition places a great responsibility on shaping environments that are both ecologically sustainable and socially accessible, without compromising aesthetics and quality.

It is a comprehensive transformation of the roles, methods and goals of interior architecture. This perspective creates new opportunities, but also greater responsibility, to shape environments without compromising any of the perspectives. Below are some implications for interior architects:

Interior architects become key players in creating environments that are not only visually appealing but also minimize their climate impact. This requires increased knowledge of eco-friendly materials, energy and resource efficiency, as well as selecting products with low emissions and long lifespans.

Reuse and circular solutions become a natural part of the process to contribute to the green transition. It involves creating spaces that are accessible and appealing for everyone, regardless of age, physical abilities, or cultural background. The interior architect needs to be attuned to how spaces can impact and accommodate diverse users and create solutions that are flexible and adaptable over time.

Aesthetics play a crucial role in creating environments that people feel connected to and want to preserve. By prioritizing beauty and aesthetics, interior architects can help create spaces that people care about, with a value that extends beyond mere function and economics. This can increase the likelihood that people will take care of and preserve these environments, which is itself part of a sustainable design philosophy.

The green transition often means that interior architects focus on integrating natural elements and biophilic design. By incorporating natural materials, greenery, and designs that evoke nature, interior architects can help strengthen people's connection to the environment and create indoor spaces that support well-being and reduce stress.

To work within this movement, interior architects need to take greater responsibility for the materials and manufacturing methods they use. Choosing ethically sourced materials, collaborating with producers who prioritize fair working conditions, and selecting local or recycled resources are ways to promote a fairer and more environmentally friendly approach.

Sustainability also involves creating spaces that can evolve and adapt over time to reduce the need for constant renovations and wasteful resource use. This requires flexible design solutions that can adjust to changing needs and remain aesthetically and functionally relevant in the long term.

To tackle these tasks, we also need to hone our skills in interviewing and communicating with those who will use the spaces. Education needs to focus on the artistic and technical aspects, but also on the interaction and trust with those who will use the spaces. This connection is key to our work. The main task of the interior architect is to ensure that the environment works for the people who will inhabit it.

8. Conclusion

Like the architect or designer, but more intimately, the interior architect is not satisfied with functionalist answers to his projects alone.

Through his artistic culture, based on the teaching of applied arts, he develops an awareness and sensitivity to discourse, and a meaning to his vision of space. Aesthetics and meaning are inextricably linked, because narrative draws the individual into multiple perspectives, multiple visual and sensory scenarios, renewed by each journey, each temporality, each new situation.

Our interiors (private, commercial, industrial...), because they are experienced on a daily basis, because they protect us from the gaze of others, because they offer intimate or meeting spaces, because they appeal to our intelligence and our senses, construct a rational and poetic narrative of human life. This is how they influence our relationship with ourselves and with others. And this is how interior architects see the living spaces they design: a balance between the interior (spirituality) and the exterior (the cosmos). His role is to harmonize these relationships on the scale of the individual and his present.

The interior architect's role in society will need to be strengthened. Our ability to create aesthetic environments that are sustainable, harmonious and counteract mental illness will be invaluable in an increasingly complex world. A common approach in Europe where our education is strengthened as a separate part of architecture.