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THE WORLD SEEMS SMALLER,
CONSUMERS ARE MORE CULTURED,
EVERYONE IS CONNECTED
– AND DESIGNERS ARE LISTENING.

CHANGING AESTHETICS

BY JENNIFER GROVER PROKOPY



Some trends are fleeting, in one month and out the next. Others stand the test of time, leaving a lasting imprint on our environment. Every day, designers make aesthetic decisions that balance the momentary desires of clients and the lasting needs of society.

To make choices that leave a mark, leaders look to a spectrum of indicators and influences for ideas that raise the bar: fashion, economics, technology, nature, politics, travel and entertainment. More than ever, designers find that clients know what they want and aren't afraid to ask for it.

TECHNOLOGICAL BACKLASH

You can't walk a block today without hearing a cell phone ring, and remote controls exist for every function you can imagine. In reaction, design will step back from technology, turning instead to simpler, soothing surroundings without visible electronics.

"There is an overwhelming use of technology in environments today," says Dan Menchions, IIDA, ARIDO, Principal Partner in II By IV Design Associates Inc., Toronto. To balance this overload, he's concertedly trying to create more low-tech environments for people. (II By IV's SEVEN project was one of eight to win an award in IIDA's 30th Annual Interior Design Competition.)

The move toward simplicity will happen most in public spaces, he says, where

consumers are fed up with impersonality. "We're going to go back to more of a service industry on a one-to-one basis, and that will definitely affect design," Menchions says. Intimate scales, transparent materials, open spaces and flexible furnishings are encouraging personal dialogue and interaction in restaurants, clubs and entertainment spots.

While some are fed up with technology's pervasive and impersonal influence, there are others who want to abandon its emotionless aesthetic without losing its functionality. One place where technology will remain strong but cease to enforce its cool, hard edges is in home design, says Los Angeles-based designer Mark Cutler.

"It wasn't that long ago that a client requested we manufacture a series of black boxes with flashing lights so that his friends would be really impressed by the media equipment that he had," Cutler says. "This trend seems to have been replaced by one where people still want all the technology, but want it hidden completely out of sight, so it's now completely transparent but more powerful than ever?"

Ian Cummings, proprietor and design consultant for Kensington Interiors, Brighton, U.K., sees the same trend in his residential work in the U.K. and continental Europe. In recent years, his clients have focused their energy on refurbishing older homes, including modern standards. "They want the best of both worlds," Cummings says. "They want all the latest technology, but they want it in an early 19th century country house, (and) they want it out of sight"

Allen Ferrell, President of the international Color Marketing Group (CMG) and Manager of Color, Style and Market Trends at NorthPole USA, sees the same trend coming to pass most aggressively in the housewares and furniture industry, where consumers "want the look and feel of things of the past, but want new technology built into it." The soothing familiarity of retro designs has its attractions for consumers who yearn for simpler low-tech times, Ferrell says.

FAMILIAR TERRITORY

Some designers see an altogether different – and positive – influence of technology on their work. Diego Burdi, IIDA, ARIDO, Creative Partner at Toronto-based burdifilek, says technology has broken down barriers between the firm and its clients. (The firm also won a 30th Annual Interior Design Competition award for the Tip Top Lofts Sales Centre in Toronto.)

Innovations in communication "enable us to design in such a way that a client can really visualize what we're bringing to the table," Burdi says.

"There's a strong bridge that makes potential clients a lot more comfortable, because they can see what can be." The result, he says, is that clients are more knowledgeable and quicker to assert themselves in the design process: "In general people are looking for more aesthetic value." Clients are armed with more resources and are increasingly open to exploring more creative possibilities to fit their particular needs.

In the residential realm, consumers have made a giant leap in design education; professionals

agree that a glut of home and garden television programs is exerting a monumental influence in the United Kingdom and North America. "Today's society is a lot more design-aware," Burdi says, "and designers will be challenged in the future to create a more unique palette than you see today."

THINK GLOBAL, ACT LOCAL

With global communication channels widening, designers and consumers are more aware of design standards, says Bryce G. Rutter, Ph.D., DMI, IDSA, founder and CEO of Metaphase Design Group in St. Louis, Mo. "Consumers are increasingly smarter about what real, good design is," Rutter says, and in turn, they

judge their environment by a global standard that designers must acknowledge.

Burdi hopes exposure to new cultures will spice up worldwide design and views of beauty. In his view, "there's been a bit of a wash globally," a sameness of design from country to country. "I remember going to Europe or the Far East 10 years ago and being awe-inspired," he says.

However, on a trip to Europe a few months ago, Burdi noticed a shift toward bland uniformity in some public spaces, particularly in airports. "You get off the plane ... and you're dropped into a mini-mall and you have to wonder where you are," he says. This foretells a backlash

AU NATUREL

Maybe it's a search for serenity in a world that seems to have gone just a little bit crazy.

Perhaps it's a pullback from the "irrational exuberance" Alan Greenspan nagged about in the late 1990s. Whatever the case, colors are getting more rational — and more natural — in much of today's design.

Margaret Walch, CMG, Director of the Color Association of the United States, says the color forecast for coming years is a "warm, earth-toned environmental palette that indicates a certain kind of conservatism, a wish for comfort and warmth." Look ahead a couple years, says Walch, and even the shocks of color she predicts — turquoise and bright Kelly green, for example — will still evolve from a "forward-thinking approach to organically derived hues."

Today's colors "are very rationally chosen," says Kaye Gosline, CMG, Director of Contract Carpet for St. Louis, Mo.-based Solutia Inc. "Feeling comfortable and secure about your environment is one strong motivation," Gosline says, and her firm's color predictions (developed by Gosline and Solutia Inc. Marketing Development Manager Ann Hurley) reflect a natural strength and warmth through a diverse palette.

In the carpet world, says Gosline, "silhouettes are becoming softer, moving away from hard techno edges." She sees more textures with patterns "so complex you don't see the detail until you're on it."

Patsy Kuipers, CMG, Color and Design Specialist with Invista, formerly Dupont Textiles and Interiors, Kennesaw, Ga., says that while "there's room for calming, soothing colors — the key is to make room for balance."

More utility-based shapes are coming down the pipeline, according to Abby Godee, IDSA, Director of Marketing for Smart Design, which devised OXO Good Grips. She says the strongest shape trends are driven by cues from consumers, who want functionality and a fun emotional connection.

"Look at your hand," Rutter says. "There are no straight lines or hard edges." He believes shape trends will move toward the simple and straightforward, driven by functionality and ergonomics. There's no reason, says Rutter, that shape in coming years can't be functional and beautiful at the same time.

against the homogeny and a return to the roots of local design in many countries.

Cities like Toronto, Mentchions says, are reacting in a different way to globalization – by embracing “design on every street corner,” he says. “Toronto is such an international city, with a very eclectic design style” that he feels will spread to other parts of the globe.

The formation of the “Euro zone,” the inexpensive air travel in Europe and the upcoming enlargement of the European Union, says Cummings, make it easier for designers to travel within Europe and work for clients in different countries, exposing many more consumers to design influences from across Europe. “It’s having

them little opportunity for relaxation or vacation. At home, cell phones, the Internet and cable TV keep consumers wired in to a 24-hour news feed. It’s no wonder that designers are seeing that clients’ behavior is in a trend toward “nesting,” a return to calming tones and casual environments, spaces where frazzled minds and bodies can escape and unwind. “I have noticed this trend manifesting itself in simpler, more comfortable and less ostentatious design requests, homes that act as havens rather than vehicles to impress,” Cutler says.

Liza Robinson Vidal, Vice President of U.S. operations for Bali-based Warisan, says consumers are looking for styles

But nesting is a uniquely American trend, according to Burdi. When it comes to other countries, he says, “I don’t think what’s happened in the last few years has affected design; I think everybody is just trying to put their best foot forward.” While the 9/11 attacks put a momentary damper on the world, he says most countries snapped back quickly: “We all froze for a few months. But then, clients said, ‘Life goes on, we have to move forward.’”

While home style in the United States is leaning toward the personal retreat, that doesn’t mean the nation is taking a timeout – design still moves forward. Burdi is amazed, for example, at the tenacity of U.S. retailers, who are using cost-effective tools like color and texture to keep design fresh on a budget: “The energy level is quite phenomenal. Although there are struggles right now, retailers are being a lot more innovative with a lot less to work with and still keeping consumers’ interest.”

THE GENERATION GAP

Design for all generations will come of age in the coming years, according to Jim Mueller, Chair of the Industrial Designers Society of America’s Universal Design Special Interest Section. In the United States, aging baby boomers are driving a trend toward more accommodating spaces. Design for this audience

a big effect, bringing in the possibilities of many new colors and textures, fabrics and furnishings from all over the world,” he says. “The increased exposure to new design approaches is a growing influence.”

COMFORT ZONE

In the United States, people are working harder than ever – and have been rewarded with an economic slump that allows

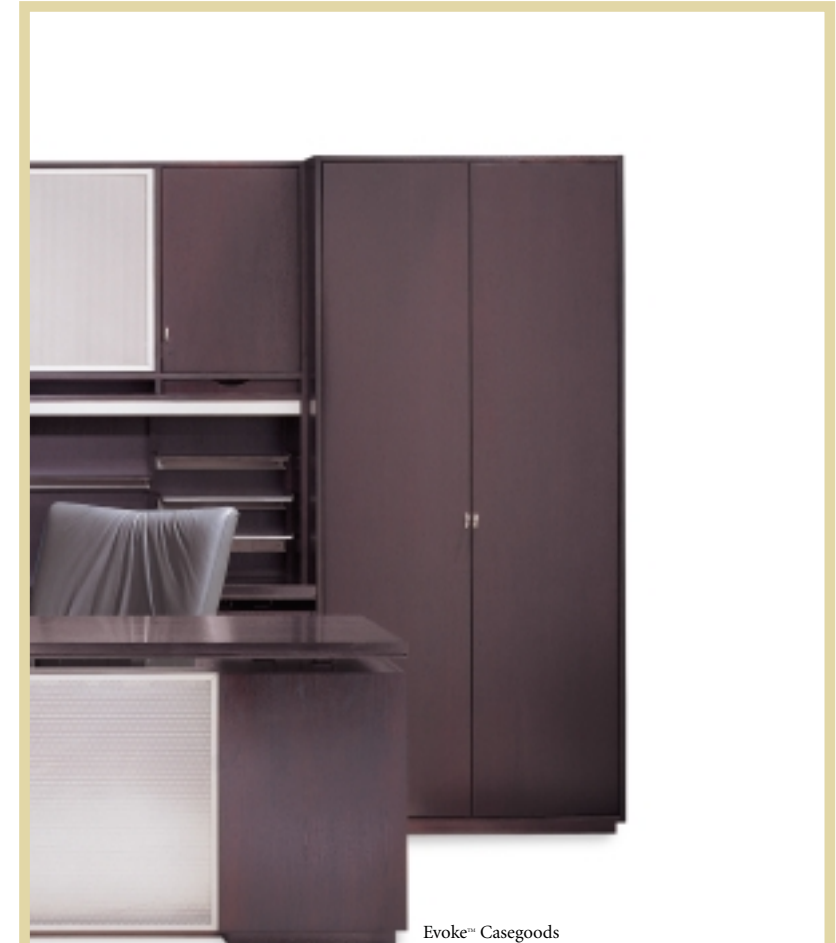
that contribute to the creation of nurturing environments that will last. “Because they are nesting, high-style designs that are not comfortable are out,” Vidal says. “Consumers are looking at style as something that will last beyond next year’s fad. There is a return to substantial, natural materials and simple designs that are satisfying to consumers’ ideas of value and beauty.”

must satisfy real-world needs, Mueller says, while accommodating what he views as “traditional senses of beauty and value” that embrace a simple, clean aesthetic.

“Baby boomers are dealing with long-foreseen demands on their resources that are even greater than most have planned for,” Mueller says. “Their savings for retirement have been decimated by national economic factors.” In reaction, this generation “will work longer into their lifespans, increasing the emphasis on ergonomics for aging workers in workplace design, especially equipment and furniture.”

“At the same time, design in the home will emphasize reinforcing functional independence of elders seeking to ‘age in place’ for as long as possible,” Mueller says. “This will boost interest in universal design in architecture, interiors, appliances, furniture and fixtures.”

This same trend is affecting design in Europe, where Cummings says his clients are placing a greater value on design ideas that will last for many years. “Natural, muted, easy-to-live-with colors are very popular” for creating spaces that provide lasting comfort, he says. “Life is getting more and more demanding ... and people are looking for a place they can relax. Our client base is aging a bit, and they want something that’s easier to live with and will stay looking good for 10 years.”



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