



CLASSICAL AESTHETICS IN INTERIORS

Notes for Contemporary Interior Designers

A. JACKSON

*"INTERIOR DESIGN IS PRESUMABLY AN ART AND SINCE WE
LIVE IN INTERIORS, WE MUST ALSO LIVE IN ART"*

- Kevin Melchionne (1998)

.....

Thousands of years after ancient buildings have fallen to ruin, designers around the world are now turning to them to inform their contemporary aesthetic. Since the young milordi on the Grand Tour spearheaded the Greco-Roman revival of the 17th- and 18th-centuries, during which the allure of ancient Roman ruins and Palladian villas were chiefly in vogue, the language of classical architecture has



Charles Townley in his Sculpture Gallery. Zoffany (1781-90)

become contentious - especially throughout the thorny rise and fall of modernism. But now, as more designers are working outside of the strict architectural doctrine, classical aesthetics are finding new life: once again considered a fertile space for adaptation and acculturation.

In architecture, this movement back in time has been called New Classicism; in interior design, there has been no such label for this retrospective telescoping. Let's call it New Interiors. Far from an attack on modernism or an expression of architectural dogma, these classically inspired interiors are fresh with contemporary twists and cultural reshaping. The key prefix here is 're-': the designers aspire towards *reinvention* and *reinterpretation* - or, in the words of

UK sculpture studio Four Crowns, “rethinking and recasting” – by selecting aspects of classical design as building blocks to take into the 21st-century imaginary.

Despite this recent innovation, the principles of classical design in fact come to us in highly systematized and rule-based terms. In *De architectura*, Roman architect Vitruvius set out his Six Principles of Design, including order (*ordinatio*), proportion (*eurythmia*), and propriety



Woodcut 'Tacuino' edition of *De Architectura*. Fra Giocondo. (1511)

(*decor*). Meanwhile, the classical orders of Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian did not serve as merely guidelines to architecture, but were essentially synonymous with it. In working with this codified and categorized aesthetic, how can contemporary designers find breathing space for their own artistic conceits?



Notre Dame du Haut (Interior), Le Corbusier. (1955)

For 20th-century French architect Le Corbusier, the response was to build on the work of Vitruvius and develop his own scale of proportions, called the Modular. For contemporary designers, the answer lies more obscurely, in a

less strictly geometric vision of harmony. In the philosophy of classical design, each component of a building could not be separated for artistic effect, but

had to be integrated and made proportionate with the coherent, unified whole; for contemporary interior designers who consider themselves as working in 'the classical tradition', this prevailing notion of balance is crucial to their self-definition.

The principle can be seen in Professor Robert Adam's Experimental Solar House. Completed in 2001, this architectural phenomenon blends classical aesthetics with a very modern, environmentalist interest in passive solar power. The House's



Experimental Solar House. ADAM Architecture (2001)

classical features are most conspicuous in its portico and streamlined columns, which then give way to an interior designed to maximize natural sunlight and keep warm air circulating through – all the while heeding to the ideals of proportion and harmony.



Experimental Solar House. ADAM Architecture (2001)

An active manipulation of light and heat is an age-old consideration. The windows of the Parthenon deliberately directed sunlight towards the golden statue of Athena within, which in turn shone onto a reflecting pool of oil a few feet away. Professor Adam's manoeuvring of light's natural flow places him in this lineage of design, turned now to the

contemporary conversation around sustainable energy. In the House's interior, Adam is also able to play with our memory of the classical: glass balustrades in the main room *look* like a modernization of a classical theme, but those versed in architectural history will remember that the balustrade originated much later in time – in the Renaissance.

In a conversation for this article, Professor Adam noted that consideration has to be given to the classical principles developed in the centuries before us. He asserting that neglecting to study the historical development of the subject will inevitably lead to more examples of poor pastiche and meaningless designs, saying that, “without meaning, everything is purely decorative”. The necessity for contemporary designers to really understand the meaning behind classical aesthetics, and not just its trendy relevance, is justified by the fundamental function of the undertaking: to create a lasting fluidity. Professor Adam expands on this by stating, “as soon as you step into a house, your status changes,” a sentiment echoed in architect Stanley Abercrombie's *Philosophy of Interior Design*: “the wall... becomes an architectural event,” as it mediates between exterior and interior. Each is defined against the other, and the individual moves from observer to dweller, from pedestrian to homeowner or guest.

An example where these classical ideas are being rethought during this current decade can be seen in Mexico, with Terreo Studio's latest project. Tulum draws attention to this threshold of space through its façade: a series of Roman aqueduct-like arches, placed at ostensibly disjunctive points, but on closer inspection reveals a more methodical arrangement. With its simple, clean



Tulum, Mexico. Terreo Studio (2021)

design, it achieves what Romans were taught to value in a building: its ability to please and delight the eye.

Yet designers Eduardo Valdes and Alexander Landsberg have added a culturally significant twist: they have hybridized their gestures towards the classical with a distinctive Mexican aesthetic. The floor lining mixes stucco - a form of plasterwork connoted with the ancient world - with organic matter from a native

tree, while objects collected from all regions of Mexico are artfully placed on display. For Terreo Studio, the "wall" signifies another "architectural event" - from classical to contemporary, from a Roman-inspired exterior to a blended interior, one that still commits to the need for proportion among its decorative objects at the crux of architectural theory. Valdes and Landsberg say they wanted to create "a modern design ruin": an infrastructure where its longevity is somehow integrated in the design itself.

But what exactly does it mean to create a "ruin"? The largely static nature of buildings turns architecture into an art of preservation, valorized for its ability to weather changes in history - even if it only ends up as a relic gesturing towards the phantasm of better days. Interior design, by contrast, is a more fluid, changeable, even ephemeral art. Rather than being the weight of history, it is

open to transformation and upheaval. It is a synchronic craft, or, in Abercrombie's words, "a celebration of a very particular time." Classical elements can perhaps offer a sense of endurance in this space less potently associated with longevity: they allow interior designers to embrace the ephemerality of their profession, while rooting their rooms in a timeless tradition.



Louis XVI Decor for a Private Parisian Salon. By François-Joseph Bélanger. Féau Boiseries

For instance, Parisian-based FÉAU Boiseries, with their specialty in producing neoclassical wood panelling, or *boiserie*, furnish their interiors with a touch of permanence. When interviewed for this article, Guillaume Féau neatly emphasized the need for the *boiserie* to cohere with the rest of the design

according to rules of proportion, even if it subtly infuses aspects from different periods. When it comes to working with the styles of other contemporary designers, Guillaume Féau told us, “we have to make their world closer to our world. We have to help them create a new form of language.” The “new language” sees the old world meet the new, and the result always has the potential to be “amazing.”



Griffins capital and cornice. Féau Boiseries

This longing for spaces that evoke the timeless is by no means exclusive to the western world. In its incredible global spread, the classical aesthetic is increasingly becoming an international aesthetic. Though less historically resonant in China, Yang Bing and Hao Liyun of Shanghai’s EVD Design brought their vision of classical elegance to life in their office space. Reorienting the ancient architectural grammar towards a minimalistic interior, EVD’s slender,



EVD Design Shanghai Office. EVD Design (2020)

almost tubular arches create passageways to a room with diaphanous curtains and a sculpture reminiscent of the Gaddi Torso. That Chinese designers look towards western classical history in this way is surprising, since there is no definitive historical reason as to

why the classical world would make its way into Chinese aesthetics. This aesthetic exchange works both ways: since the late 1600s, European interiors have been filled with imitation Chinese ceramics and oriental styles that constitute *chinoiserie*. But Bing and Liyun's choice to turn right into the ancient past ultimately stems from a universal aim: to foster a sense of eternity and spirituality.



EVD Design Shanghai Office. EVD Design (2020)

This ambition is also perhaps why Four Crowns have chosen to direct their classically themed works towards interiors. A Greek-style door case at a dining hall entrance combines scagliola – the ancient craft of manipulating plaster with natural pigments to imitate rare marbles – with the inscription 'NEL RELIQUI' ('leave nothing'). Though inspired by ancient *momento mori* emblems, Four Crowns' decision to apply the style to an interior and incorporate oversized bronze locusts in the design expresses an artistic, contemporary contribution to the classical tradition.

Speaking for this article as a familiar authority, Four Crowns' in-house artist noted that "every era seems to imagine that they're at the peak of civilization, that everything that's gone before was just a prequel. The classical tradition reminds us that other civilizations can be equally as great - and also pass into obscurity."



NIL RELIQUI 'Leave Nothing' Doorcase: Four Crowns (2015)

It is Milan-based Studio Peregalli that engages most fully with the philosophical questions of interiors. Duo Robert Peregalli and Laura Sartori Rimini - world-class visionaries in this domain - use their own "reinterpretations" of history,

centred on academic scholarship, as a “bridge toward the future”, positioning themselves as Janus-faced mediators between our memory of the past and our images of what’s to come. For Studio Peregalli, the work of classically informed design and of cultural “archaeology” can help us imagine forms beyond the present. When asked about the spread of classical aesthetics to parts of the world without a shared Greco-Roman heritage, such as China, Laura and Roberto argued that effective contemporary designers must undertake their own cultural Grand Tours. Essentially, the Grand Tour ideals are just as much about the cultural investigations and lessons as they are about the classical design principles in continuum. This outlook was summarised by Laura, who said that they, “as designers, need to bridge the beauty and thoughtfulness of the past with the efficiency of the future.”



Milanese palazzo's entrance hall. Studio Peregalli. Photo by Massimo Listri.

The revival of interest in classical design is thereby not a form of architectural puritanism, nor of straightforward homage. In an era increasingly devoted to online spheres – and increasingly divorced from the material world – *New Interiors* brings us back in touch with ways to aesthetically conceive of time itself. It opens us up to what 19th-century writer François-René de Chateaubriand expressed as “the fragility of our nature ... a secret analogy between destroyed monuments and our own fleeting existence.” In a living room filled with both emblems *and* glass balustrades, stucco panelling *and* regional décor, we can revel in the passing present, revive a timeless past – and even imagine an imminent future.

.....

For their contribution, encouragement and invaluable insights, a special thanks to Professor Robert Adam, Guillaume Féau, Laura Sartori Rimini and Roberto Peregalli.