Interior Design 101 and the
Principles and Elements of Great Design

Overview

“Put your hand in mine and let us help one another to see things better.”

Claude Monet

In Week One, you will get a crash course on interior design and decoration. You'll easily be able to identify the principles and elements of great design, as well as engagingly be able to communicate them to your clients. There is a lot to cover, so hold on to your hats and enjoy every minute of it!

Objectives

After completing Week One training you will be able to:

- Understand the Principles of great design and the Elements that affect them.
- Identify the Architectural blend of style of a home, as well as the Home Style of your clients.
- Identify and create focal points in each room of the home, as well as emphasize them.
- Easily arrange furniture and artwork for resale and function.
- Understand how to accessorize any space, as well arrange art on walls.
- Understand the emotional and architectural effects of different colors.
- Easily recommend practical color choices to clients for both staging and redesign.
Training Module One – Interior Design 101

In the past, you may have relied on your intuition in order to decorate, stage or redesign, but no longer! This module will put words in the form of principles and elements to the intuition you’ve relied upon. Your vision will become more clear because you’ll understand WHY it felt wrong, as well as WHAT you can do to fix it for your clients.

Anytime you walk into a home whether you’re there for staging or redesign, you are a “composer” creating a composition. Webster’s Dictionary defines a composition as an “arrangement of elements in artistic form.” The way in which the architectural elements and pieces in a home are arranged will determine whether it feels right and is pleasing or harmonious. Doesn’t that describe what we do to a tee? The driving force behind a harmonious composition is your vision.

There is a fine art to composition whether in paint, music or decoration. There are also basic principles and elements that apply to the creation of a harmonious composition. I’ve read countless books that consistently disagree on the specific definition of the principles and elements of interior design, but have made a good attempt to clear the confusion in this lesson. Future lessons will also give practical applications of each principle, as well as how they relate to each room in the home. (Week Two)

Principles and Elements of Design

For ease of understanding and clarification, I’m going to break down the principles of design and define them as “a general, fundamental law or concepts of interior design.” I’m going to define the elements as a “component part of that principle.” While many would say that all of these are fundamentals or principles of design, I think you’ll see that the way I break it down helps to separate and clarify each one more easily.

In interior design, those principles are proportion, scale, emphasis, balance, rhythm and style. These principles will guide you as you direct the elements or components of design which are: line, form, color and value, texture, pattern, light and space.

Note: Broken principles are what make us FEEL wrong about a room or space. People don’t necessarily recognize exactly WHAT is bothering them but they know when it feels off or wrong. Why? We are all trained to look for correct proportion, scale, emphasis, balance, rhythm and style in everything we see! Understanding and following these principles is what will effect the composition as a whole and create harmony.

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Design Principle Cheat Sheet

For quick reference, here is a design principle cheat sheet but will delve into each one in this lesson:

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<tr>
<td>The relationship of one part of an object to its other parts. Each room or object is comprised of parts that should be in proportion to each other. i.e. An oversized lampshade on a lamp would make the object out of proportion</td>
<td>Considering the size and dimensions of one object to another. i.e. a small picture above a couch</td>
<td>The repetition of form, color, lines or texture in order to unify the space.</td>
<td>Creating equilibrium in a room by balancing the pieces to unify the space. Evenly distributing the visual weight of the furniture so no one piece overwhelms the room.</td>
<td>The style or mood of the room is cohesive or unified. Making sure the furnishings are in keeping with the style or integrity of the home and room.</td>
<td>Every room needs a focal point or emphasis. Ideally, this is the area that should draw the eye in the room.</td>
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Assessing First Impression

We ask our clients to give us what they their “first impressions” are of a room whether in staging or redesign. Meanwhile, you, as the composer, should be asking yourself the following “first impression” questions in order to recognize which principles in the room are being broken:

1. **What are the architectural features in the room and are they in proportion to one another?** Remember, the room makes up the whole, while the architectural features (windows, doors, fireplace, and moldings) should be in proportion. While you usually cannot change the features, you can change the way you see the features. Quickly recognize the positive elements you will want to emphasize while recognizing any problem elements that need to be distracted from.
2. **What is the size of this room and are the pieces in the room of similar scale to the room AND to each other?** I’ve seen many stagers break this rule in the interest of creating a sense of space. They’ll remove all leaves in a table or place a small sofa in a large room. While we want a buyer to notice the size of space, be wary of breaking scale.
3. **Is there a pattern or repetition of objects, color, form or texture to the room?**
4. **When you enter the room are the pieces balanced to each other and throughout?** If the room and walls were a rowboat, would it tip to one side?
5. **What is the architectural style of the home? What is the style of the rooms?**
6. **What and where did our eyes go first and was it positive?** Simply put, what was the first thing you noticed in the room? Many times it’s not what it should be!

When you can identify a principle that is not in harmony with the room, it’s easy to create solutions. In the past, you may have intuitively created solutions without being able to cognitively identify the principle being broken. A thorough understanding or “refresher” on each principle and element will help you to communicate with your clients exactly WHY, you are doing WHAT you’re doing in a room. In redesign and staging, communication as a form of education is critical to help your clients understand the value of what you’re doing! Let’s look at each one and how it relates to decorating, staging and redesign…
Proportion

What are the architectural features in the room and are they in proportion to one another? Remember, the room makes up the whole, and the architectural features are windows, doors, fireplace, and moldings, so they should be in proportion. While you usually cannot change the features, you can change the way you see the features. Quickly recognize the positive elements you will want to emphasize, while recognizing any problem elements that need to be distracted from.

Many times people confuse proportion with scale and vice versa. Proportion is the object itself and how the parts of the object relate to another in size. If the object is a table, one would expect that its proportions (legs and tabletop) be of similar size and weight. All things from a room’s floor plan to a simple vase have proportions. If one varies, the other parts are affected. When there is a harmonious proportional relationship between the parts of an object, it becomes pleasing to the eye. Many of the styles of furniture that stand the test of time does so because of it’s pleasing proportions.

Conversely, when something is not in proportion, it is disturbing to our senses particularly when it comes to interior design. Examples would be an oversized lampshade on a lamp, or rooms that have small windows on large walls.

**Hands On Exercise** - Look around your home and view the proportions of the objects that you see. Assess the furniture, wall hangings, mantel on a fireplace, and lamps. Notice that the proportions are not too small or large from each other?

Proportion and Rooms

Believe it or not, there is a science to correct proportion as it relates to shapes, thus furniture and architecture. To create a harmonious rectangle or shaped room, simple divide a square in half and add the halved part to the end of the square. If you measured a rectangular room or window you would find that the length of the object is usually 1.5 times the width or thereabouts. Problems arise when these proportions are quite a bit different.

**Tip:** You can visually alter the principle of proportion in a room by using the element of color. While dark colors bring walls towards you, light colors recede. In a long and narrow room, you can paint the end walls darker in order to visually alter the proportions. Likewise, it is always a good idea to keep ceilings light or white in order to promote height in a room.

**Tip:** Use sheer window coverings to create the appearance of larger windows or dark window coverings to give the window more visual weight.
Scale

What is the size of this room and are the pieces in the room of similar scale to the room AND to each other?

Scale has everything to do with relationship! Is the size relationship from one object next to another similar?

For fun, I like to compare scale to the placement of a Chihuahua (Daisy) next to a Great Dane or in this case, my very photogenic, 10-year old, pound dog, Abby who is actually a medium-sized dog. On her own, Daisy looks like a regular dog (kind of), but next to Abby, she looks very small, while making my medium-sized dog look quite large. The placement of different size objects next to one another exaggerates the size of those objects.

You cannot believe how many photos and laughs we went through to get shots that were not blurred from these two crazy dogs! I’m sure you get the picture and hopefully a smile or two.
Here’s a simple formula to follow when assessing the scale of a room and its pieces:

1. **What is the size of the room?**
2. **Is the furniture to scale with the size of the room and if there are pieces not to scale, can you remove them?** For large rooms, choose large pieces and for small rooms choose fewer and smaller pieces (too many small pieces in a small room becomes chaotic and cluttered).
3. **Are the pieces to scale with each other in visual weight, height and size?** The end tables of a couch and side tables of a bed should never be more than 3 inches different in height. The same applies for the height of a coffee table in relationship to the seat of a couch. We’ll talk about visual weight next.

A small room with oversized furniture appears cramped while a large room with diminutive furniture appears empty.

One of the biggest mistakes you’ll usually see someone make is to put a small picture above a couch, which is already large in scale. The couch should rarely be the emphasis in a room, so let’s not make it one by placing a small object over it. Likewise the coffee table and end tables should be similarly scaled to the couch.
Visual Weight

When you think about scale of furniture in your rooms, you will deal only with how an object looks, its visual weight (not its actual weight). Each item has a visual weight that can change with shape, color and pattern thus effecting scale or relationship. Sometimes an object can have the exact same dimensions as another but not be to scale because of the visual weight factors above (shape, color and pattern).

You can group objects in order to create scale as well. In this picture the three pictures are to scale with the couch.

In our previous example, the small picture over the couch grouped next to other pictures gives the grouping correct scale to the couch.

Creatively change the size of an object in order to create correct scale…

You can change the size of a table by giving it a top and cloth in order to appropriate the scale.

The dark tablecloth gives it more visual weight as well.
The pattern of the couch gives it visual weight, so that it is to scale with the large ottoman.

A group of objects above a fireplace also helps to create scale.

A Few Rules to Remember About Visual Weight

1. **Shape Effects Visual Weight** – A round or fat lamp has more visual weight than a skinny-based lamp. The same goes for an overstuffed chair having more visual weight than a wooden chair of the same dimensions.

2. **Color Effects Visual Weight** – Bright colors add weight while neutral colors take away weight.

3. **Pattern Effects Visual Weight** – Bold patterns (like our couch above) add visual weight, while solid colors reduce visual weight.

Big rooms should have big furniture. Small rooms require small furniture and not a lot of it. Big rooms can easily handle bold patterns and color when it comes to furnishings. Small rooms should have visually light furnishings.

**Back to Abby’s Friend Daisy….**

We illustrated scale by placing Daisy next to Abby and can equally illustrate proportion by asking you whether there are any features on Daisy that are out of proportion thus giving her an adorably funny look?

Remember, scale is the relationship of one object’s size to another object’s size. Proportion is the relationship of the pieces of that object to itself. For example, Daisy is out of scale to Abby. Daisy’s eyes are out of proportion to her face. Scale and proportion go hand in hand and should compliment each other.
Rhythm and Symmetry

Is there a pattern or repetition of objects, color, form or texture to the room?

People are drawn to like objects: a pair of lamps, similarly colored accessories, and similar shapes in a room. All these are example of repetition and help to create rhythm, symmetry and cohesion in a room and home. Likewise we are drawn to symmetry as it relates to an echo of similar objects down a center point.

Note:

Symmetry refers to the same arrangement of parts, objects, or forms on both sides of an imagined or real centerline, which is usually seen in traditional arrangements. (see Mantel picture)

Asymmetry refers to the balance between objects of different sizes as the result of placement usually seen in contemporary settings. (We’ll detail this further when we talk about Balance)

Liken rhythm and repetition in a home as a steady beat in a song. While barely noticed in the overall composition, it is the tie that binds within the room and throughout the home. By creating repetition within a room and home, you are linking each space and creating harmony within the home. Conversely, it jars the senses if there is a complete change of color, style and feel, from one room to the next.

An easy way to create rhythm in a room is through the use of symmetry and pairs. Symmetry gives harmony to a room because it balances the tensions of the eye. We tend to view a room much like you would read a book, from side to side (not from top to bottom). When an arrangement is symmetrical, it will always contain at least one pair of items. Homes are an essential part of who we are and what we aspire to be. Rhythm through symmetry, pairs and repetition, results in a peaceful transition from room to room, as well as within a room.

Mantels – It’s almost instinctual to arrange objects on and around a mantel in symmetrical ways. Make your centerpiece powerful and arrange around it with matching candlesticks, plates or as in the picture at right, objects d’art.

Look at the picture to the right. How does it make you feel? Symmetrical arrangements generally are naturally pleasing to our senses and provoke a relaxing and soothing response. When symmetry and cohesion are lacking, it creates a sort of visual ambiguity, which is psychologically upsetting.
While not a symmetrical arrangement, rhythm is created through the use of:

- Pairs - Curtains and dice
- Pattern – Pillows and ottoman
- Color – Red as an accent color

All of these factors help to create movement and cohesion in a room.

The bedroom in the same home above has both symmetry, which is particularly pleasing in a bedroom where peace and sanctuary are promoted, as well as rhythm in color by weaving the red as accents throughout the home.

**Hands On Exercise:** Walk through the rooms of your home and note the rhythmic forms, colors, patterns and styles. Note any rooms that seem out of place to the rest of the home and see if you can’t promote rhythm by bringing in pairs of items, color or pattern.

**Danger:** There is a danger with using too much rhythm and symmetry, so don’t overdo it! Think rhythm in terms of the larger context of cohesion, repetitiveness and balance while creating gorgeous associations within the room and from room to room.
Balance

When you enter the room, are the pieces balanced to each other and placed throughout the space?

Balance is another important principle related to rhythm, symmetry and space. It refers to the equilibrium among forms in a room. All of the furnishings, large and small, should be distributed evenly throughout the space, not just to one side of the room, for example.

**Visualization:** On a piece of paper, draw a large dot one inch from the left side of the paper and stare at it. Because it is not centered, it appears to “weight” the paper down to the left and is upsetting to the eye. To relieve the tension, we need to place another large dot an inch from the right side of the paper on the same axis as the first dot.

The key to balance is the vertical line or central dividing line that has objects placed on each side that balance one another thus complimenting each other. For instance, two framed pictures of relatively equal size and visual weight look appropriate hanging side by side on a wall, whereas the pairing of two pictures of unequal size and visual weight seems awkward and out of balance.

I like to use the example of a rowboat because it provides a powerful visual of the potentially disastrous results of not being balanced! Balanced relationships between objects can be either symmetrical or asymmetrical. Just like you can have two children on one side of rowboat and one equally weighted adult on another, you can balance same (symmetrical) or different but equally weighted objects throughout the room (asymmetrical).

Quantity also affects balance. A room with too little or too much furniture can look out of balance. Rooms that are crowded can be confusing. Too many patterns can create visual chaos. You eye will have no idea where to look first. A well-designed or staged room will direct your eye. Every object should feel as though it belongs to the composition and has purpose. Ultimately, the furnishings should feel as though they are distributed somewhat evenly about the room.

**Visualization:** Think about famous works of art particularly landscapes. Usually when you reverse them balance is still achieved through the careful use of color, pattern and weight.

**Hands On:** Walk through the rooms of your home and note the balance in each room by drawing your invisible plumb line down the center. Purposefully tilt a painting on the wall and stand back. Your need to straighten it out displays the tension felt when a room is out of balance.
This bedroom is a beautiful example of a properly balanced bedroom. Notice the rhythm in colors, objects and style. The matted prints while not completely symmetrical are given interest. The pair of lamps, boxes and pillows unifies and gives cohesion to the space. This boat is not going to tip!

**Balance AND Emphasis** is achieved in this living room arrangement. The two club chairs add cohesion while balancing out the couch opposite. The similarly patterned pillow give rhythm through repetition while being equally balanced one on each side.

**Emphasis** is achieved because our focal point, the fireplace is properly highlighted or emphasized through the arrangement of the furniture.

**Style and Emphasis**

The next two principles of good design: Style and Emphasis will be given their own days, so stay tuned and give yourself a much needed brain break!