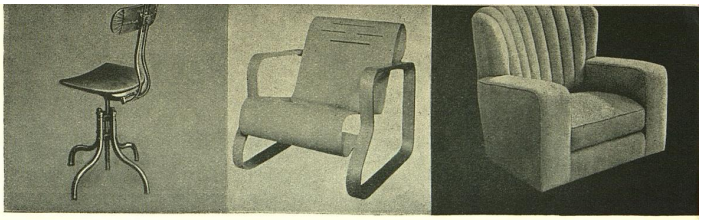
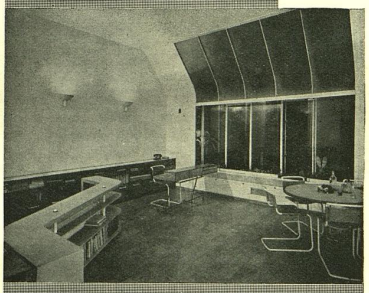


a b c

AN APPROACH TO INTERIOR DESIGN

d



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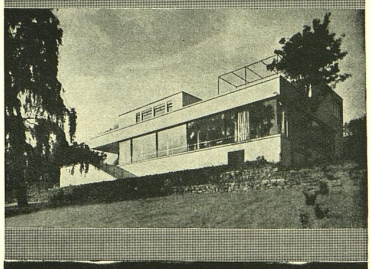

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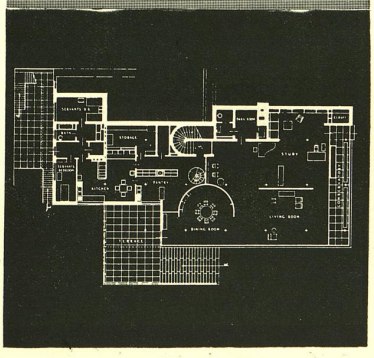
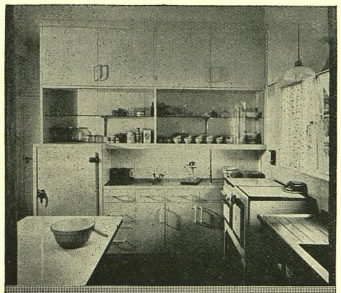


g

BY CLIVE ENTWISTLE

According to the much quoted precept of Vitruvius, there are three fundamental elements in any architectural work—commodity, firmness, and delight. In dealing with interiors the question of structure, or firmness, is not as yet a primary consideration, since rule of thumb methods are most usually employed in the manufacture of furnishings. The question of commodity, or function, however, is of importance, as is that of delight. The element of delight is capable for the purposes of practical criticism of a further clear division into æstheticism and humanism.

So in architectural interiors we may say we are dealing with the expression of three architectural elements (see the illustrations at the top of this page): use (*a*), beauty (*b*), and comfort (*c*), which though clear in themselves are yet never completely separable, since we are considering architectural creations which by definition must embody its three elements simultaneously. They may on the other hand be expressed in relatively varying degrees. The term "interior design" is largely a definition of convenience since, in any given instance, the interior of a building may be the logical determination of the exterior structure, and each be dependent upon the other. This relationship provides us with two alternative conditions which must be investigated as a first step to criticism. To clarify the point by two examples: in (*e*) is shown the interior of Mr. Wells Coates's own flat, and (*d*) is a photograph of it and the adjoining houses seen from the street. It will at once be seen that the main form of the room, at first glance original and surprising, is in fact dictated by the form of the existing structure. In discussing interior design therefore this limitation, whether for good or ill, must be recognized. In the case of the Tugendhat Haus (*f*) the architect, Herr Miës van der Rohe, has also planned the building (*g*), and the influence of this upon his interiors is clear in the poetic disposition



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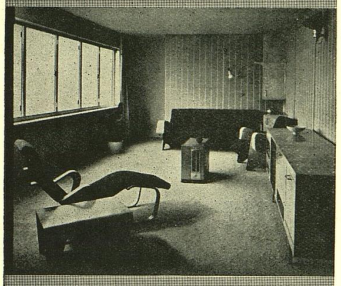

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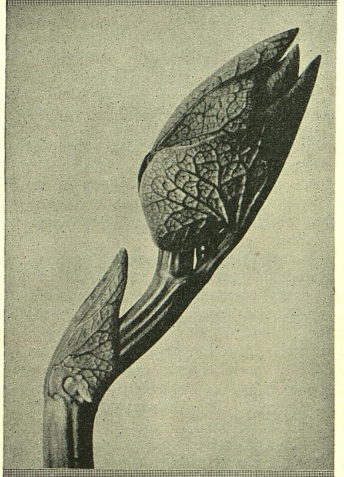

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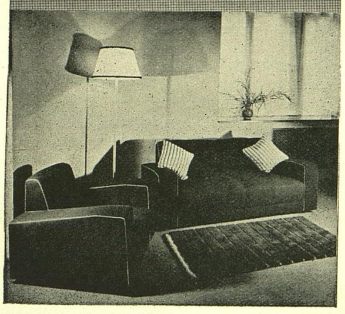


k

of the steel columns, the gracious proportioning of the rooms, and the plate-glass wall linking the living-room with the garden and tropical conservatory.

This, then, is our first design criterion. In order to judge of the success of the design we must examine the difficulties or possibilities presented by the structural framework.

We are now able to return to our premise, and see in what ways the three qualities of use, beauty, and comfort may be expressed in a given scheme, and how we may judge their expression. First let us select examples of interiors which seem primarily to express each of those qualities, in order that for the rest of this article we may be sure of speaking the same language.

Function

In (*h*) is shown a kitchen designed by Mr. Maxwell Fry. The forms look essentially machine-like. The surfaces are prim and clean. Textures are polished or enamelled, not for considerations of appearance, but in order to wash freely and not to hold contaminating dirt. The various apparatus for storing and cooking food is clearly arranged with a view to saving labour, and with knowledge of the problem and its requirements.

What appeal or attraction there may be is primarily intellectual throughout: everything obviously works well. One can visualize with pleasure the convenience of disposition and service which such a kitchen would afford to the user. Thus, though beauty and comfort are secondary considerations, yet at the same time it may seem that by a true fulfilment of function the room is in fact pleasant to look at and comfortable to work in.

Æsthetics.

Our next quality is that of æsthetics. How much can a particular scheme of design excite our æsthetic emotions, as distinct from our intellectual and sensuous emotions? Another definition here for the sake of clarity; by æsthetic emotion I mean the type of emotion which may sometimes be aroused by classical music, a sunset, or snow shadows and other such stimuli which punch directly at the solar plexus of sensibility.

In interiors such a quality is expressed mainly in two ways: in form and in colour. It is not practical to illustrate colour in print from this point of view, so we shall confine ourselves for present purposes to form.

From the living-room designed by Marcel Breuer (*i*) one receives the immediate sensation of new, rather organic looking shapes. They have for some, including myself, a very direct appeal which cannot be attributed either to their apparent usefulness or their comfort alone. It may be useful to try to see why this particular type of shape is pleasing. I have used the word "organic" deliberately, for it seems to me that the clue to their appeal lies in this quality. They are shapes that somehow conform to what we expect of nature or life expressed plastically. In type they are not unlike certain plant structures (*j*). They have an economy of line and form comparable with that of a leopard, or an orchid.

We may further see that, apart from a purely visual analogy with natural forms and laws, the pieces of furniture concerned do in fact fulfil their particular purposes with economy of material, and appear well adapted to the requirements of the senses.

So that here again a relatively high level of expression in one quality, beauty, automatically produces appeals both of function and humanism.

Humanism.

The third quality is that of comfort. By comfort here I mean not so much the general comfort and new facilities for making life more complicated offered by contemporary technics, which I regard as functional in kind, but rather the humanistic appeal to the senses derived, for example, from oak beaming and thatched roofs, from an open log hearth or the scent of new-mown hay.

In contemporary interiors this quality may be found expressed in rich textures, fine woods and fabrics, skins and thick rugs, heavily upholstered chairs and diffused lighting and heating.

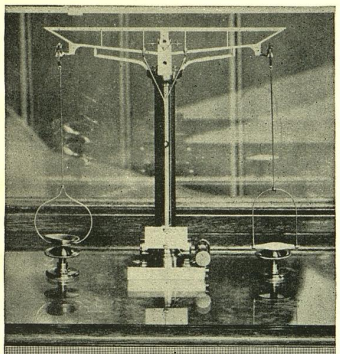
In the example given (*k*) the appeal is firstly to the senses.

We find here, too, that in an appeal to the senses competent handling produces pleasurable side-effects of functional simplicity and a modest æsthetic thrill.

Let us now assume that we are attempting a criticism of some particular scheme of design. Suppose it is a living-room, and suppose our first impression is of extreme mechanization. It may be that pressed steel furniture and unpadded seats are coupled with a tiled floor and oilcloth curtains. Here we should be in all probability repelled both through our æsthetic emotions and our senses. We could say that this design was bad, and speaking in terms of the qualification we have already established, we would say that the functional element is over-expressed at the expense of the æsthetic and the sensuous. Other possibilities can be visualized in which either beauty or comfort was given too free a rein. For instance, the interior might approach the realm of pure plastic composition, or sculpture, irrespective of its usefulness or comfort. Or it might be Sybaritically comfortable, and of elephantine proportions, at the expense of function and beauty.

In order, therefore, to be able to pronounce judgment on any given scheme, we must first have a clear idea in our heads as to what are the permissible and desirable proportions for these three qualities.

It is interesting to see at this stage whether, quite apart from the needs of particular problems, contemporary architecture is in itself an embodiment of these properties in some special order. A little retrospective thinking will surely suffice to establish the main distinguishing feature of modern architecture as the employment of new technical possibilities. "The machine for living in" is designed upon a basis of function-fulfilment. Beauty was originally thought to be found in the products of such designing. Sometimes it was of a rather one-sided sort, but more often it was not, and the theory of "functionalism" in architectural design has slowly come to be regarded by more sensitive designers as a dead end. Beauty in contemporary interiors starts off from a basis of function-fufilment, but it requires more than a genius for mechanism to evolve. It was this unfortunate red herring of "fitness for purpose" which necessarily delayed the



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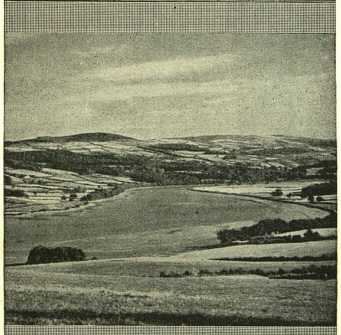

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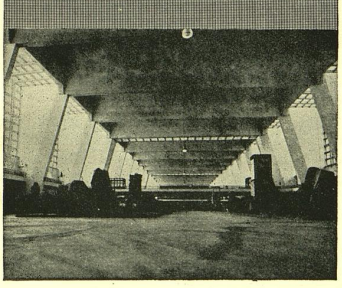


o

evolution of the contemporary æsthetic, so that one is still obliged to place beauty after use in our order of precedence. With regard to humanism, it is clear by intuition and experience that mechanism is in direct opposition to humanism, and it is a curious paradox that probably the only visible converse to humanism which may be found on earth has been evolved by humanity. This original insistence on mechanics has been the main barrier in the way of the provision of creature comforts in contemporary interiors. The trend is by no means dead, since pure machine forms are still very much "*en vogue*" for chairs, and the like, and we are all familiar with the misuse of steel furniture, chromium plate, colourlessness and angularity in interior design. Nevertheless, there is now developing a decided tendency to make use of a wider and richer range of furnishing materials. Apart from the question of materials, however, there are many new possibilities for increasing comfort along the lines of upholstery, heating, and diffused lighting.

We have thus tentatively established the order of sequence for these three elements in interior design of today as function, æsthetics, and humanism. An attempt at verification of this theorem by historical analogy may be of interest here.

The table reproduced on p. 228 involves of necessity a certain psychological correspondence with our three architectural elements, and just as this must find a place historically, so it may be observed in a different capacity in the present.

Suppose two critics give two different opinions of a certain interior. One may say it is bad because too "cold" in feeling, another may say it is good because it is functionally perfect. The scheme is the same, but the impressions are different. It is therefore reasonable to suppose that the two critics approached the problem with different expectations, or different requirements. One was interested in finding comfort, the other in finding utility. This, then, is another limitation on the usefulness and possibilities of criticism, that different critics have different requirements from interiors; it is also perhaps the most thorny problem of criticism, since to begin with most people don't know what they really do want and, secondly, they dislike confessing to any limitation in taste. If only criticism would begin by a disinterested opinion of the critic, we might be able to attach some significance to it. As it is criticism is largely subjective, and while giving a very good description of the likes and dislikes of the critic in question, fails utterly to place a particular job on the scale of good or bad architecture.

This ubiquitous but seldom recognized limitation must apply equally to architects and clients, with the result that misunderstandings often arise simply through a lack of investigation or knowledge of the real requirements. As this limitation, however, is practically irremediable, one must accept the odd fact that there is not simply "modern" architecture, but as many styles of modern architecture as there are classes of architects. In the same way clients must vary in their interests and tastes just as they vary in their vocation. This variety of requirements is seen clearly typified in the scientist (*l*) (intellectual), the nature lover (*m*) (emotional), and the gourmet (*n*) (sensuous).

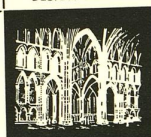
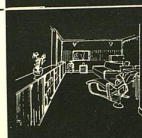
The above attempted reductions of criticism to its fundamentals both simplifies and complicates the problem. It simplifies it in demonstrating that the modern interior results simply form a new combination of three permanent architectural elements and that it is produced by a reaction of that combination of elements on contemporary conditions. But it complicates criticism in that it requires from the critic an investigation of his own premises, research into the ideal elemental combination of the problem, and a comparison of the actual job with this inducted ideal. In deducing these bases for criticism I have had to clarify my own ideas on the nature of modern design, and I hope others may find some echo of probability in them.

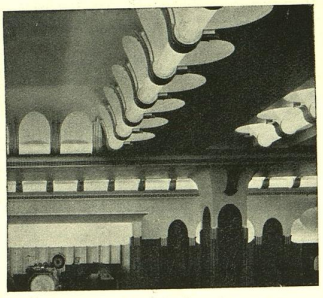
I had intended to omit any emphasis on the naturalness of this new style of design, but I am afraid this is a case in which I am myself guilty of too subjective an approach, or have too blind a confidence in the open-mindedness of the reactionary public. By its "naturalness" I mean its inevitability, as opposed to the "passing phase" attitude so often and so scornfully adopted by its more conservative opponents. The historical table (overleaf) is perhaps of some use in this connexion, since it does to a certain extent emphasize the way in which a particular style of architecture is fundamentally a reflection of the ideology and general interest of its period.

The architectural vernacular of any period is an expression in plastic terms of the general outlook of that period, and there is little doubt that the general outlook today is technical. We must therefore expect the expression of this quality in any true contemporary style. It is to be found in the "modern" style.

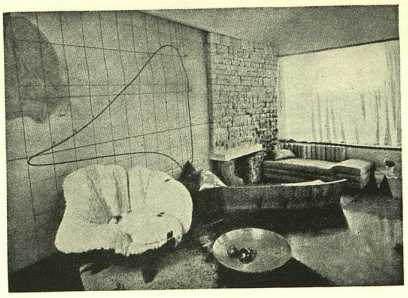
When I first saw a sensitive modern interior in the flat of a wealthy friend, I was thrilled in a very strange way. It was breath-taking in its impact on my sensibilities. I had seen nothing like it before; it was new, but to me it was not only new, it was almost a prophecy. These unfamiliar forms and textures seemed at once astonishing and absolutely right. I wanted to know more of this new type of designing, about its background, about who was working on these lines, and so on. At the same time, although I found this designing so surprising, it seemed somehow immediately to fill a pigeon-hole in my mind which contemporary conditions and my interest in them had created. I feel sure that most other modern architects share this persistent and, curiously enough, somewhat romantic conviction of the rightness of modern architecture. It is the energy afforded by this connexion of modern architecture with its backbone of our period, that accounts for its steady upward curve both in the universality and in the quality of its manifestations.

A word here on the question of the misuse of the modern idiom by designers who do not sense this essential adjustment with contemporary life, but who employ this idiom either because it is their client's wish, or because it is smart, or because it suggests originality and "imagination." This misunderstanding of the nature of modern architecture results in the habitual employment of characteristic idioms in situations where they are not properly called for by the functional requirements. The association of strong emotional stimulus with the new and exciting forms of modern architecture leads by a

PERIOD	GENERAL OUTLOOK	DESIGN PLANS TO	TYPICAL DESIGN FORMS	REMARKS
GOTHIC	Religious—emotional	the aesthetic emotions		Great beauty with a special emotional appeal
TUDOR	Sensuous	the senses		Creature comforts in the grand manner. A ponderous grace
GEORGIAN	Rational	the intellect and the senses		Comprehensible forms. Elegance. Plastic vocabulary draws on a former intellectual period. Classic
VICTORIAN	Prosperity	the senses		The suppression of comfort alone cannot nationalize the new gasolier. The old chrysalis of new technics
PRESENT-DAY	Technical	the intellect		The new technics have sloughed off the stifling chrysalis of ill-adaptation. Economy of materials. Elegance
TOMORROW	? Romantic	? The intellect, emotions and senses	?	? Lyricism growing from a basis of sound technics



p



q

very simple but misguided psychological process to the belief that emotional "kick" is the chief characteristic of modern design (instead of being only an original sensation which changes with usage into proper appreciation), and thus to the use of other "exciting" design media such as "jazz" colour-schemes, acute-angled shapes, the excessive use of chromium plate, and so on (*p*). One may probably say with full justification that this stylization of modern designing is the greatest stumbling-block in the road of its advancement. It is, too, deplorably widespread in positions where it can diffuse most misunderstanding; *vide* Maison Lyons or the average cinema.

In conclusion I would add the following few notes which, though apposite to the subject, are in certain senses extraneous to the construction of the main article.

First, the question of scale: A rather different approach has necessarily to be adopted when considering large scale interiors, since most often the dominant design motif will in such cases be found to lie in the architectural frame of the whole. Such buildings include factories, hangars, and the like (*o*), though cinemas and theatres, in which fibrous plaster plays such a ubiquitous and usually unfortunate rôle are in a sense exceptions to this qualification of scale, and embody certain applied forms of interior decoration.

Secondly, a general question: the particular importance of interior design to the modern movement.

Such cultural movements as that of the present most usually proceed from small beginnings. In this case, i.e. of new design, from the poster, the magazine, modern domestic equipment, interiors, flats, private houses, and so on to larger-scale work. The reason for this progression is easy to see. Modern design is a new thing to many people, and to build a house in what is for them an unknown architectural style is a considerable adventure. Considerable, not only because of its shock to convention, but because of its financial implication. But anyone may buy *Harper's Bazaar*, or a hand-microphone, and it is but a short step from this to experimenting with a modern chair or rug, and later employing an architect to design a complete modern interior.

Interiors are, therefore, apart from their own intrinsic purposes, which are of primary importance, of great service as a stepping-stone to larger-scale work, and to its general appreciation.

Finally: the future of interior design. In the historical table I have made the tentative suggestion that coming design forms would reflect a more romantic trend in outlook. I am aware that to optimistic young men of any age the future is always romantic, but I do believe that probabilities support this expectation. I think it can be maintained on fairly sound evidence that social ideologies proceed by reaction. Just as the sensuousness of Tudor times was a reaction from the religious mysteries of the Gothic, so I think, in a modest parallel with Nietsche, that the chaos of commerce and technics of the last century will give rise to the dancing star of romanticism in the near future.

I think this trend is already to be seen in the work of a few of the more sensitive modern architects, such as the room (*q*) by M. Brukalska, a Polish architect. But modern architects must not be too easily satisfied, for what architects meant once upon a time may be gauged from this construction.