

Design massacre

I cringe when I see bunches of lilies balanced awkwardly in a row of tall glass vases. The Four Seasons Hotel is guilty of this. They give ikebana a bad name. But this is only the beginning of what passes as "chic" design. There are umpteen other monstrous examples. Just notice all the fitted furniture in a typical hotel room. The "TV cabinet" is the most offensive. It is horribly bourgeois to think that a television set would look better hidden.

Equally excruciating is the absence of any proper light with which to read, making me believe that hotel designers must be the most illiterate people in the world. If there is an armchair, you can bet your life that there will not be a reading lamp next to it. The bathroom is equally bad: the ubiquitous lighting from the ceiling is the least flattering for a naked body, unless you are Elle Macpherson or Cristiano Ronaldo. For women, particularly those with face-lifts, bright ceiling lights (hardly ever dimmable) cast ghastly shadows and are a kiss of death in front of the mirror. Ditto for those of us who are not unfamiliar with flab.

Don't hotel owners and hoteliers realise that luxury invariably means feeling comfortable? But they seem to go out of their way to allow so-called "designers" to make hotel rooms as uncomfortable as possible.

Maybe I am old-fashioned, but when I stay in a hotel I want to feel that I am staying somewhere more beautiful and more comfortable than my own home. I adore such places as the Villa Feltrinelli at Lake Garda – not surprisingly as it was restored to splendour by one of the greatest hoteliers of our generation, Bob Burns. The point is that "designers" nowadays seem to be oblivious to charm, or elegance, or style, which are best achieved in an understated manner. They go out of their way to intrude with their pathetic trespassing egos.

Take a look at the Connaught. The moment you go through the entrance, you step on to a rectangle of sunken carpet, which is most irregular. When you look ahead at the stupendous staircase, you are distracted by its carpet, which was obviously designed with "a hint of modern chic", except that it jars the whole reception. When you look left into what used to be a perfectly charming sitting room, you will notice a deformed chandelier; and then looking through the new verandah, a ceiling of strange material and pattern.

I have so far talked only about hotels, but the malaise of modern design massacre applies equally well to restaurants and homes. The main problem is that designers do not pay enough attention to functionality. Those who work in restaurants will always tell you how they find designs at odds with their job execution. Doorways that are not wide enough for trays; too many lights behind the bar making all the bottles hot and not enough space to wash up and turn over glasses; chairs that are heavy and awkward to move; lighting too dim for reading menus; fixed seating that flies in the face of flexibility; lack of surfaces at service stations – the list goes on. Again and again, we see the anxiety of the modern designer wishing to shine through "dramatic design", so that when you arrive in a restaurant, you really are not expected to be thinking about eating. Rather, you are lured or tortured into saying: "Wow, what a stunning designer!"

At home, I don't really understand the use of a designer, if only because the word "home" ex hypothesi implies "one's own". So why ask others? More absurd is to use "super designers", who must inevitably impose their own style. The use of a designer in one's own home must spring from a sense of insecurity or sheer laziness – or even worse, the idea that if one is rich enough it is a necessary luxury to employ a professional designer.

The fuss that usually arises from the use of a famous name often makes me laugh. Squads of acolytes, some classic female Sloane Rangers, and often aspiring gays shuffling around with "mood" boards with swatches and samples of stones and carpets, all beautifully matching, this colour "picking up" that one, and this material "blending in sumptuously" with that – all sounding like an erudite curator from a contemporary gallery, with the same incomprehensible jargon to boot.

The main offence is that once you use designers, very little is spontaneous. Yet spontaneity is what usually creates a good atmosphere. Being contrived is the worst curse of designers, in my opinion. I can always smell a contrived rat. For instance, shelves supporting books by the metre, none of which will ever be read by the owner. Or paintings "bespoken" for each area. I can just hear the designer in a gallery smugly announcing that they are looking for a painting for a specific spot. That's not how we actually buy paintings. We buy them because we like them, and we don't really think about where they should "go"!

Of course, there are many who don't have the time to do up their homes. To those who reckon they do not have an "eye" let me say: they would, if they tried, have more eyes than a pro! The important rule I have always followed at home is that you should have books that you enjoy (paperback, hard back, battered, unfashionable – it doesn't matter), comfortable chairs and good reading light. These are my Holy Trinity. Then follow paintings, a decent desk, good sisal floor coverings and the best audio system you can afford.

The relationship between inside and outside is important, too, which is why you should always pay attention to windows. If you have a marvellous view, do not leave it plain glass believing that it affords you the best outlook. It is imperative to separate the outside view from the inside and so you should always have a latticed window or venetian blinds. It's not an accident that the French window is latticed.

I could go on but, personally, I wouldn't dream of entrusting the decoration of any of my homes to any designers, except possibly Anouska Hempel or Jacques Garcia because they exude taste. Short of them, I leaf through books and magazines by the skipload and tear out pages I like. Then I go looking around shops. Remember the vital distinction between looking at and looking for furniture. Always the former, never the latter. It's what I call the Wittgenstein approach, for he said, inter alia, "Don't ask me what a game is; I'll tell you when I see one". Ergo, look out for what you want and you will find it. Just as if you might start off by not knowing what present to buy, when you see it, you know it.

If you are in London, look at the windows at Guinevere, and go inside this Aladdin's cave for further inspiration. Other great shops are Carlton Davidson (nowhere else would you find more pairs of lights); Jean Brown (with lots of idiosyncrasies); Soane (Belgravia chic) and Lamberty (masculine stylishness); and Valerie Wade (anything in glass); and Pierre Frey, whose Isabelle could have been Napoleon's aide-de-camp. Most of all, there is a lot of good value and amusing stuff at the interiors sales at Christies Kensington. The other day I bought a "vampire-killing set", which I have put next to my bed – just in case I wake up to a surprise.

Having said all this, I must confess that I have been asked to be a designer, and have indeed designed for others. I was very flattered to be asked by Terence Con-ran to design a suite at his new Boundary Hotel. Last year, I went mad and helped a friend do up four penthouses in Beijing with a total budget of \$10 million.

So you might well ask how I could justify this when I have criticised the outside designer. I suppose my defence is that I am an amateur and not a professional. I also suspect that each of us is a bit of a hypocrite. After all, we can't all be Thomas More now, can we?

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