



# A NEW WAY OF THINKING ABOUT TASTE

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In the department of architecture where I teach, aesthetic issues are important criteria for judging buildings and talent. Distinguishing good design from inferior design is part of what a student learns there. This keen sense of discrimination is commonly used to privilege one thing over another and so has some distant relation to power. Because my formal education is in sociology, I think about both the powerful and the powerless, taking pains to include the point of view of the masses, the ordinary, and even the vulnerable. How can anyone with this kind of education be interested in issues of artistic distinction, so associated with taste and connoisseurship? In graduate school an art teacher once asked me how I could be a sociology major since I was good at art. Of course this was flattering at one level, but it also made me frustrated that our culture assumes an either/or choice between clarity of thought (about anything including social life) and sensory beauty. I want both.

I see art as an important part of social life—not just as a way to create distinction, but also as a way to practice personal, social and cultural integration. In our homes we have an ongoing relationship with art. Indeed, for most of us our homes are the site of more everyday art activity than any other place. Accordingly, in this essay I will focus on the ordinary practice of decorating homes to show how artistic activity is a form of personal integration as much as a form of social differentiation. I define interior decoration broadly, not as a business, but rather as a widespread general cultural practice of decorating the interior of a room or house. (Therefore, I will use the term decorator to apply to both professionals and laymen.) While the practice is general, it is more structured than we commonly assume. Almost everyone assembles two different kinds of objects—the practical and symbolic—at home—by means of aesthetics. This view of decoration makes it important by establishing its artistic and social significance.

Many sociologists have recognized the importance of decoration through its connection with taste. (See bibliography.) Since the 18th century, taste has been recognized as a process

of discrimination, most recently highlighted by Pierre Bourdieu's seminal study *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Home decor is one of the major sites for the exercise of taste. Sociologists view taste as a way that people make distinctions between themselves and others and a way that people legitimize class differences. In common speech today the word taste is used much more simply, synonymous with the preference, as in "I have a taste for natural fabrics." The artistic, the everyday, and the sociological views of taste can provisionally find common ground in a definition of taste that refers to the ability to make distinctions, evaluate, and choose aesthetic qualities in all of the arts, including those of daily living.

I am proposing a new framework for thinking about taste that offers an inclusive understanding of artistic assembly in environmental design, including home décor. Graphically and conceptually, it looks something like this:

*Taste = (Pragmatics + Symbols)Integrated Aesthetically*

People have two classes of objects in their homes—the practical things necessary to live in our culture and the symbolic things that express who we are, from where we have come, and perhaps where we are going. People integrate these two sets of objects into compositions by means of aesthetic principles like symmetry and color coordination. Thus, taste in decorating involves the unification of two fairly discrete categories of objects—the pragmatic and the symbolic—by means of aesthetics.

The pragmatic consists of the objects needed in a culture in order to eat, sleep, dress—toasters, beds, chairs, lamps, ironing boards. The pragmatic basis of taste is important because it differentiates taste from "pure" art, thereby placing taste squarely within the domain of utility.

Symbolic objects represent some part of a person's identity, the sum total of the groups with whom he or she affiliates.<sup>1</sup> They communicate about relatives, activities, achievements, travel, education, and religion. They include photo-

graphs, audio equipment, sports trophies, souvenirs, awards, diplomas, and crucifixes, all of which express different aspects of a person's identity. (A few of these objects might be handmade, but most will be industrially manufactured commodities.)

Neither category—the symbolic nor the pragmatic—is fixed. What is defined as pragmatic varies culturally. Tables and chairs are pragmatic requirements for dwelling in western cultures, but became symbols of modernization and westernization in the floor-sitting parts of the world. Moreover, the pragmatic and symbolic can overlap. For example, pragmatic things can be elaborated and overlaid with symbolic meaning. Plastic forks have different meanings than stainless steel forks, which in turn have different meanings than sterling silver forks. The pattern in which they are decorated (or not) gives us additional information about their symbolic significance. Sometimes the bare pragmatic object can be used symbolically. For example, having the “right” colander may be symbolically important to a designer.

Context is important in knowing if something is pragmatic or symbolic. For example, according to architectural historian Greg Castillo, utilitarian stoves and refrigerators installed in model homes in West Berlin became symbols of the benefits of American capitalism in the 1950s Cold War against communism. In other contexts they would be mere commodities, but here the people who displayed them and the audience who viewed them gave them symbolic meaning.<sup>2</sup> Conversely, television, once a symbol of forward-looking people, is now a pragmatic necessity that only the poorest of the poor cannot afford.

These two sets of objects—the pragmatic and the symbolic—are organized in relation to one another functionally and visually, following kinesthetic and aesthetic rules that may or may not be conscious to the homemaker. Empirically, I have observed that people want to make unified tableaux out of their disparate collections of objects. It is as if pragmatic and symbolic objects are added together and then ordered (perhaps multiplied or harmonized) by aesthetic rules. These rules or conventions govern, consciously or unconsciously, the arrangement of parts, details, form, color, etc., so as to produce a complete and visually harmonious unit. These rules vary by culture. For example, rich, deeply carved texture might be more important in one culture or time period than another, depending on sources of wood, climate, shadows, myths—the list is almost endless.

Could we speak of taste in sports, finance, military action,

or crime? Yes, possibly, but taste usually refers to the arts and aesthetics. The word *art* has a Latin root meaning to join or fit together and refers to creativeness, the human ability to make things. Our household compositions fit within this definition of art. The word *aesthetics* comes to us from ancient Greek, referring to our capacity to perceive, our sensitivity, hence our sensitivity to art and beauty, our taste. Domestic display also registers our sense of aesthetics. *Kinesthetic* has to do with our awareness of bodily movement, also implicitly involved in domestic compositions because we do not want things to be out of reach, fall on us, or be inconveniently situated. Together, objects along with the artistic and kinesthetic rules used to order them, help us communicate with one another—yes, but also with ourselves.

When we assemble our things and look at them ourselves we are psychologically integrating ourselves, not just showing off to others. I have come to see taste as much as a *process* about selection and assembly as it is a quality of objects, a talent in individuals, or a social status. I would like to explain how I have come to this conclusion.

First, why isn't taste in the object? Why aren't some objects more tasteful than others? In a consumer world what makes us distinctive is not so much the specific qualities of the things we have, but their constellation. We do not make most things by hand; we can buy them fairly readily, so their material significance is not great. Instead, their relationship takes on significance. To change a collection of objects into a composition requires connecting them. Anthropologist Ellen Dissanayake, in studying the practice of craft, has noted the importance of the relationship between things: “I was intrigued with how much depended on two things and their relationship. One rock or one piece of wood is something (*some thing*), but once a second rock or piece of wood, or some other second thing, is placed with it, there is an immediate implicit connection between them that requires consideration.” Thus, questions about objects being in good taste or bad taste lose significance. Connoisseurship, a way to distinguish one object from another or one creator from another, is often closely linked to discussions of taste but its significance fades in light of the importance of placement.

Second, is taste a quality in persons? I am not particularly interested in whether or not a person “has taste” or “has no taste.” Rather, I am interested in *how* a person assembles the many things in his or her immediate environment. Here taste is the activity and the outcome of assembling objects artistically. It is true that some people have more skill at assem-

bling these secular tableaux than others. This must be acknowledged, but not so much as good, bad, or poor taste. I prefer to see skill differences acknowledged as more or less developed.<sup>3</sup> Not all differences between people are differences in skill, but rather differences in what and how they want to communicate. People differ regarding how much interest they have in communicating in this way; some don't care about communicating about themselves through this medium.

Recently I asked graduate architecture students to make a composition of all the things that they had brought with them into the classroom. There I saw the disservice that comes from using the lens of “good” and “bad” taste. The major distinction between their compositions was in regard to how formal versus how associational they were.

Admittedly, I was personally more attracted to some of the compositions than others and I would say that some were more sophisticated than others, but this exercise taught me something else. I was forced to take a more psychoanalytic point of view. The differences related more to what each student was trying to communicate—slice of student life, painterly still life, form for form's sake, mystery—than to my or anyone else's idea of “good” or “bad” taste. And some were more skilled at expressing their intentions than others.

My new framework applies to people at all levels of design skill. The differences are in the number of dimensions that people use to create aesthetic unity (color, texture, shape, size, pattern), the principles of composition (primarily symmetrical versus asymmetrical) and the scale at which they attempt to create such order.<sup>4</sup> In the student exercise there were marked differences in the scale of their compositions; some used a chair seat, some used the whole chair, others used a part of the wall or floor in relation to a chair.

I have learned that domestic compositions follow a developmental sequence. I first realized this after I spent a week studying how residents decorated their apartments in a housing project for the elderly in New Jersey in the 1970s. All of the units were either one-bedroom studios or one-bedroom units. Because they were identical, the only way that they could be individualized was through their decoration. The management made some suggestions as to whom I should interview in the building. The first on the list was Miss Hayworth, whom they called “the best housekeeper” in the building. To me that phrase suggested that I would see a very neat, clean place. Instead, I discovered the best “decorator,” or perhaps even the best “interior designer.” Today we might



Blue is the theme of this bedroom including paint, bedspreads, alarm clock, and tissue box cover.

say that she was the Martha Stewart of Jersey Manor. Widely acknowledged as the best in the building, she had an influence on her neighbors, especially her immediate neighbor and friend Mrs. Cuff. On the basis of observing, photographing and interviewing these two and another twenty residents I developed a hypothesis which I have since confirmed in many other homes through advertisements, newspapers, movies, decorator magazines, and of course through direct observation.

Generally, we put things together that look alike. And, first, most people use color to make things match or contrast. For example, the bedroom might be all blue—the paint on the walls, the pattern of the bedspreads, the tray on the dresser, even the alarm clock. Now that even bathrooms are decorated (since about 1960) all of the items—towels, shower curtain, the cover of the tissue dispenser, even the plate for the light switch—might be the same shade of fuchsia. One resident used the orange-yellow rug that came with the unit to establish a palette of orange.

In addition to color, the more sophisticated use pattern and texture. Bas-relief metalwork might be paired with a plant having a similar leaf pattern. A paper lampshade with a pattern that includes quarter inch white dots is placed near a small ivory bas-relief representation of the Last Supper because the size of the heads is the same as the dots.

The most sophisticated relate things by shape. Those with training or feeling for sculpture might collect circles, squares, or triangles together into a composition of different colors. A slightly more sophisticated move might be to assemble things of *different* shape and color but of comparable size and definition. A round shape might be composed with a square, triangle, or rectangle of roughly equivalent size.<sup>5</sup>

Regarding scale, some have the psychological or economic capacity to organize the entire wall, not just the dresser top or segment above it, and others can integrate the entire room. Beyond this scale professionals usually take over; relatively few people attempt to create visual order between rooms (the realm of architects), and fewer between inside and outside (architects and landscape architects), and yet fewer between buildings (urban designers), or cities and regions (city and regional planners). Yet the basic impulse to order practical and expressive things artistically remains in professional circles.

Reactions to those who violate the expectation that in our homes practical and symbolic things will be combined artistically help demonstrate how strong this norm is. In the New Jersey housing project of over three hundred units for the elderly, only two people were described negatively by others; one was “not a good housekeeper” and the other was “dirty.” They proved to be the exception that proves the rule. In this case, the exception that exposed the workings of this way of thinking about taste. Miss Brevit was a retired nurse who decided to learn about plants and set them up all over her apartment. She went so far as to remove the doors from her clothes closet to create more shelf space for potted plants. She was unusual for several reasons: she had been a professional, she was one of only two people who took a subscription to the *New York Times*, and she had books. But her real eccentricity for the other residents was that she had very few symbolic objects and that she did not organize her things into a visual tableau. She was described as “not a good housekeeper” because her environment was primarily pragmatic.

Mr. Wheeler was not literally “dirty.” Rather, he had no conventionally sentimental objects and made no artistic compositions. He was a history buff, interested in local civil engineering. He had boxes full of photographs of tunnels, bridges, and other civic works. He had files full of newspaper clippings and documents. He told me that he had much more when he lived in a house, but had to get rid of a lot of it in order to move in here. He didn’t mind living amongst his own files. He violated the unwritten codes about how one should display one’s stuff. He was virtually all pragmatic.

These two examples clarified for me how the pragmatic and symbolic have become discrete categories of thought in people’s minds. In these two cases the neighbors were not conscious of their mental structures, and so they used other terms like “dirty” and “poor housekeeper” when the symbolic category was ignored or collapsed into one with pragmatic.

Designers, too, sometimes violate this shared cultural process; for some modernist designers, having the right pragmatic objects—the right toaster, the right juicer—may be all the symbolism they allow themselves. Laymen may perceive such strict minimalist environments as “bare” or “cold,” but all that has happened is that the two categories have been collapsed into one. Some people have so many sentimental objects in their place that it is hard to move around or make a meal; here the symbolic has dominated the pragmatic. These extreme cases help expose the structure of thought that we routinely bring to bear upon the process of organizing our homes.



Mr. Wheeler lived solely pragmatically so that his entire studio functioned as a giant filing cabinet.

The point of view I am developing here is that everybody decorates and so everyone composes, which is a form of psychological integration. In decorating, people create dioramas in which they actually live. The size of the composition and the way practical things are combined with symbolic ones tell us more about the person than a simple statement that they have good or bad taste. Similarly, there are no objects that are intrinsically in “good” or “bad” taste. For example, toilet lid covers, whether they are hand crocheted or industrially produced, are not “bad taste” despite what my colleagues in architecture might think. The fact that someone chooses to soften the clank of the lid on the tank and at the same time include the pragmatic toilet in an overall decorative scheme means that they are quite serious about the aesthetics of everyday living, and that their taste behavior is highly activated. For all these reasons I have concluded that taste is not particularly meaningful as a property of persons or objects.

#### ADVANTAGES OF THIS WAY OF THINKING ABOUT TASTE

This set of ideas for thinking about interior decoration can be used to analyze how people decorate in different cultures, different classes, different genders, different age groups, and different ethnic groups and subcultures, even as it allows for and acknowledges individual variations. That is to say, we do not have to use different ideas about how people make things or decorate if we shift focus from the United States to Polynesia, from the rich to the poor, men to women, young to old, from one immigrant group to another. Because each of the elements of this framework is defined generally but analytically, we can locate each of these groups and persons at different points along the same conceptual dimensions.<sup>6</sup> Even though our identities are rooted in group memberships, individuals can and do express themselves visually by assembling their stuff in unique compositions. And as they change, so too do the arrangements of their stuff.

This way of thinking about taste as a special kind of composition is simple enough to apply to all scales of environmental design. It encompasses both the things inside of a room or building, the building itself, and the things outside of it. We could use the same set of ideas to talk about products, interiors, architecture, urban design, and landscape architecture. Differences between an object and a neighborhood would be recognized as different points along a continuum, rather than being used to create separate theories, disciplines, and standards of excellence for each shift in scale.

Another strength of this framework for thinking about taste is that it situates both amateurs and design professionals along a continuum. This means that we don't have to assume a sharp difference between the user and a designer or, in sociologist Herbert Gans's terms, between the audience and the creator. Bluntly, this means that the tastemaker and the most aesthetically undeveloped person share something. If everyone participates in this activity, professionals do not have to feel alienated from their audiences. They can communicate directly with nonprofessionals about this important aspect of living. Conversely, by understanding that what professionals work at for a living is an elaboration of what they themselves are doing when they do something as simple as set the table, the layperson can feel affinity with the artist, craftsperson, and designer.

Practically speaking, this means that citizens might appreciate (and hire) art, craft, and design professionals more than they do now. I do not want laypeople to be intimidated, nor

to use professionals as status symbols, but rather to appreciate them for working thoughtfully and full-time to develop and refine this shared impulse to intertwine two categories of objects in a pleasing way. Laymen can learn from these professionals and benefit from their services, even as the most culturally responsive professionals are learning from popular practices. This elemental way of thinking about taste can expand the exchange of ideas about how to develop, enhance, simplify, or elaborate the artistic tableaux in which we live our lives.

Another power of this framework is that it does not require two different sets of considerations for male or female practitioners. In *As Long As Its Pink: Gender Politics of Taste*, Penny Sparke has argued that historically taste referred primarily to women's aesthetic activity within the home, and that male culture claimed the term "design" as a way to differentiate itself from the traditional female concern with "taste" in interior decoration. This perspective recognizes differences in ability and training, but makes much of the observation that the impulse to make order is shared by most people.

This simple but comprehensive (one definition of elegant) view allows us to reconsider a whole series of dichotomies as related qualities. For example, this framework allows us to consider both useful and expressive aspects, in other words both the pragmatic and the symbolic. Further, it allows us to acknowledge both the formal and the associational aspects of these works, that is to consider both form and meaning, sometimes referred to as syntax and semantics. It allows us to consider both structure and surface, both the process and its outcome, both making and display, both activity and result.<sup>7</sup>

This is a general set of ideas for explaining how the values implicit in the term "taste" operate in the world, potentially liberating for the insecure consumer, and especially useful for educators and professionals in planning and environmental design, architecture, art, fashion, sociology, education, and cultural studies. Most writing on taste either debunks it or celebrates it. This is a step toward learning how it works, so that as individuals or as professionals we can use its codes knowingly.

#### TASTE MOVES BETWEEN MATERIAL AND NONMATERIAL CULTURE

One issue remains: that of rank and class. The sociological contribution to writing about taste sees it as a form of showing off—called conspicuous consumption by Thorstein Veblen and distinction by Bourdieu—a form of rank, legitimizing

class differences. In contrast, I have observed that the basic formula for artistic display is surprisingly similar for all socioeconomic classes. In the United States at least, the working class, middle class, upper middle-class, celebrities, and even artists, designers, craftspersons, and collectors follow similar rules despite differences in money, power, and education.

In discussing aesthetic cultural systems, sociologist Paul DiMaggio has made a distinction between material and non-material culture, and sociologist David Gartman has observed that material culture (for example, cars and washing machines) has become a basis for equalizing social differences, while nonmaterial culture like music has become a basis for sustaining social differences. The qualifications that these sociologists have introduced in order to modify Bourdieu's strict view that all matters of taste are matters of rank can be applied to my way of thinking about taste. Pragmatic things are material and since we all need the same basic things in our Western living rooms we could say that of all the things we possess they provide the most commonality among people; despite cost differences they make us more like one another than anything else. The symbolic things introduce less equality, representing differences in education, travel, religion, etc. The aesthetic principles by which we order our pragmatic and symbolic things are nonmaterial, and they may introduce even more inequality, although design idealists, like me, see this as a way to transcend inequality.<sup>8</sup>

My addition to this evolving set of ideas is to suggest that taste slides back and forth between material and nonmaterial culture. Put another way, taste is a transitional category between the two.<sup>9</sup> Recall that taste is about placement. The mental structures used to place the objects are nonmaterial, but the objects themselves are clearly material. This makes taste, at least in the context of interior decoration, an arena in which social differences are both maintained *and* transcended. Cognitive styles of arranging objects, which the design writer Leonard Koren calls "rhetorics," are the nonmaterial part of culture, but they are inextricably fused with its material base, the objects.

Taste is a slippery concept that can be used either to transcend class differences or to confirm them. A Ming vase and a beer bottle are both material and both signify different social ranks, but in composition they could be related by form—they may have the same silhouette—which would seem to transcend class signification. However, the sculptural sophistication of looking for and seeing common shapes elevates the decorator, bringing back in the vertical element of rank.



A pragmatic road when lined with a double row of trees can express taste. The same principles of composition apply to landscape as to interiors.

The active, process-oriented conception of taste that I have described here suggests that we play with the relationship between our changing cognitive distinctions and the universal material plane that unites us all. Thereby, difference and similarity, distinction and wholeness are acknowledged simultaneously. The exercise of taste in the realm of interior decoration is a kind of alchemy.

Let me expand on this particular kind of transformation. The aesthetic operations that unify pragmatic and symbolic objects do not so much fuse the two as much as they temporarily relate them. These operations allow us to reconfigure objects. Very different compositions can be created with identical objects. These secular tableaux remind me of what I have heard about the late 19th century *tableau vivant*. People dressed in costumes copied from famous paintings, often of antiquity, then acted out and held poses of the figures in the paintings. They could be unfrozen, reconfigured, and frozen again. So, too, our things can be reorganized for greater convenience, greater drama, new color schemes, in response to new ideas about what is convenient, and the like. Ah, but how little we take advantage of this ability to change—except when goaded by fashion. We get lazy and let things remain as they have been, but fashion prompts us to reconfigure our

stuff. Psychically, fashion helps keep us flexible. As Tom Wolfe has said, fashion allows us to conform (to group standards) and change by the same token.

Our compositions, as expressions of our wholeness, change as we pass through life. Personally we change and we express those changes through various media including the environments in which we live. The common practice of decorating, arranging our things, may help us integrate our various and multiple identities. Our identities will differ by class, but people in all classes assemble and thereby integrate their identities. Decorating may help us consolidate and integrate who we are as much as it helps us recognize and legitimate social differences.<sup>10</sup> This means that decorating is a *cultural* practice as much as a class-based practice that reflects differences in social structure. This view admits that both our previous and our current selves differ from our fellows. We express interpersonal differences and *at the same time* we express our current sense of wholeness through the choices we make in clothes, jewelry, and home decoration. A composition can be a universe unto itself. For some time during creation or deep appreciation of another person's arrangement, it is not part of a social hierarchy. In this way decoration both expresses and transcends social differences.

#### NOTES

1. This dimension most closely corresponds to the moral codes by which some elites identify one another according to sociologist Michelle Lamont.
2. In the late 20th century buying commercial stoves for residential kitchens became a symbolic statement more than a pragmatic accommodation to an increase in cooking skill. In fact, those who cook regularly often feel smug that those who have the commercial stoves seldom use them.
3. Accordingly, I am even willing to conceptualize taste "scores," some people scoring higher than others. But they would be scoring higher or lower at an *activity* rather than as human beings.
4. Theoretically, each assembly created by a person could be given a score so that levels of skill could be acknowledged, objectified, measured. Even so, the final score would not be as interesting as the scores in the different parts of the equation. Two people could end up with the same score but have very different profiles in terms of the kinds of pragmatic objects, the kinds of symbols, and how skillfully they were composed.
5. At the scale of landscape an example is architect Benard Tschumi's design for Parc La Villette in Paris.
6. Important questions about this way of thinking about taste, decoration, and craft remain. For example, how early do children learn to manipulate these several components of taste? How are gender differences developed? Where do we get our ideas as adults?

7. For those interested in the debates about mass culture and those interested in society and economy, this perspective also allows us to consider decoration as both production and consumption, important because residents produce interior arrangements even if they buy (and in that sense consume) their component parts.

8. My grandmother, a professional interior designer, told me that it didn't matter how poor one was, if one had to sit on orange crates and shop at the five and dime and thrift stores, one could still put things together well. But her brand of democracy presumes an educated eye—not necessarily formally educated, but an eye raised to think that beauty matters. There may also be innate, not class-based, differences between people in regard to how much information they take in through the senses.

9. Curiously, while this fusion or continuum seems important, we in our culture do not want to blur the distinction between pragmatic and symbolic. That is to say, maintaining the difference between pragmatic and symbolic categories is important even as the two categories are harmonized artistically, and even as doing so creates and expresses a continuum between material and nonmaterial categories.

10. In sociological terms decoration performs an "integrative" function, not just one of "pattern maintenance."

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