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DESIGN DIARY

INTERNATIONAL



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DESIGN THAT LIVES,
BREATHES, AND
BELONGS TO YOU

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INTERNATIONAL

FOUNDER'S NOTE

Lori Morris has spent over thirty years building rooms that stop you before you have had time to form an opinion about them—layered, intensely personal interiors conceived from custom furniture, bespoke carpets, and a complete indifference to wherever the broader conversation happens to be going. The founder of the House of LMD is our cover this issue, and the conversation we had with her is one of the most honest and absorbing we have published. I hope you read it slowly.

This issue is, in many ways, about surfaces and what they carry. The culture essay examines seven of the world's most extraordinary ceilings—from the Pantheon to Grand Central—as statements of belief rather than structure. Heritage and Craft makes the case for the Persian carpet as portable architecture. The architecture of absence asks what remains when the solid matter is gone. Neha Jain of UDC Homes speaks about transforming a paint retail business into one of India's most ambitious wall covering brands. Rajesh Bhandari of A-Class Marble discusses five decades of sourcing the world's finest natural stone and why marble always wins the argument. Australian designer Adam Goodrum reflects on structural honesty, the Stitch Chair, and what patience has taught him about the work. The projects in this issue travel from California and London to Goa, Shanghai, and Osaka—each shaped by constraint into something it could not have been without it.



(Founder—Design Diary International)

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IN THE FRAME

KELLY WEARSTLER DEBUTS TIMBRA

a Piano Collaboration with **EDELWEISS**

Kelly Wearstler has made her first foray into piano design with Timbra, a collaboration with British atelier Edelweiss, a studio that has long produced custom pieces for her interiors projects.

Handcrafted in Cambridge, England, Timbra is constructed from layered birchwood veneer, its contours and curves drawn from the movement of sound waves. The exterior is sculpted and rimless, developed using a digital CAD model and produced with CNC machinery. Beneath the surface, the piano incorporates a patented welded steel frame and a Sitka spruce soundboard, ensuring that the acoustic performance holds up to the visual ambition of the piece.

The design positions the instrument as sculpture first, with the piano's functional identity becoming apparent only on closer inspection. Wearstler's sensorial approach to interiors, long defined by layered materiality and unexpected formal choices, translates directly into the object: Timbra does not look like a conventional piano from any angle.



Beyond its artistic presence, the piano meets Edelweiss' standards for sonic excellence, making it a serious instrument for players. It also includes self-playing technology for those who want the experience of live music at the touch of a button.



Adam Goodrum



Australian designer Adam Goodrum has built a practice around structural honesty, material intelligence, and a refusal to begin with trends. He speaks to Design Diary International on the Stitch Chair, the freedom of geographical distance, and what patience has taught him about design.

Adam Goodrum's studio in Sydney is where things get reduced. A piece begins as a concept, gets drawn, modelled, prototyped, and cut back until what remains is only what the object actually needs. He is interested, he has said, in objects that express how they are made, and it is a principle that runs through everything that leaves the studio, from the Stitch Chair produced by Cappellini to his work for Thonet and Artifort, furniture that looks simple until you understand it, at which point it becomes considerably more interesting. Design Diary International's Shweta put a series of questions to him over email, and what came back was as considered and as precisely worded as the objects themselves.

The relationship between structural clarity and visual softness in his work is something he has thought about carefully and describes without overcomplicating it. Structural clarity gives a piece integrity, he says, it allows you to understand the object's logic, but that logic is never meant to feel rigid or severe because softness comes through proportion, material choice, and subtle curvature, and the balance between the two is not something imposed from the outside but something that emerges through refinement, through removing what is unnecessary and adjusting what feels too heavy, through a process of reduction that continues until the piece has arrived at exactly itself. It is a description of design as a subtractive discipline, and it is a more accurate account of how enduring furniture gets made than the design industry tends to offer.

Australia has shaped his thinking in ways that are specific and worth taking seriously. The geographical isolation of the country encourages a pragmatism in how things are made, a resourcefulness born of distance from the supply chains and manufacturing cultures that European designers move through as a matter of course, and alongside that pragmatism sits a strong connection to landscape, light, openness, and material honesty that has shaped his preference for clarity and restraint without his having to consciously enforce it. Being removed from global design centers has also allowed him to develop a voice that is not overly trend-driven, and he names this directly, without false modesty, as a form of freedom, the freedom that comes from not being in the room where consensus is forming, from not having to either join it or visibly push against it, from simply working at a distance that makes the question of what is current feel considerably less urgent than the question of what is right.



Being slightly removed from global centres has allowed me to develop a voice that isn't overly trend-driven. There's freedom in that distance.





Collaboration is central to his practice in a way that is structural rather than incidental, and his account of how it actually works is more honest than the version designers usually offer in print. Rather than arriving at a manufacturer with a fixed idea, he tries first to understand what they do exceptionally well and build from there, and the best outcomes occur when there is mutual trust, when engineering and craftsmanship and design thinking push each other forward and the final piece is better than the initial concept because it has been tested and strengthened through genuine dialogue. That last part is the important one, the willingness to allow a manufacturer's knowledge and capability to improve the idea rather than treating the original concept as settled and the manufacturer as simply the means of its execution. It is a collaborative ethic that requires a particular kind of confidence, the kind that does not need to protect the first idea from contact with reality.

The Stitch Chair, produced by Cappellini and the piece most associated with his name internationally, is where that ethic produced its most visible result. It was an exploration of making construction visible, he explains, using stitching not as decoration but as structure, reducing a chair to its essential components and expressing them honestly, and it marked a moment where experimentation met commercial viability, a balance he describes as delicate and clearly means. Working with Cappellini gave him direct insight into Italian design culture, an experience he speaks of with evident respect, and the longevity of the piece, its continued relevance years after it was first produced, has been rewarding in the way that only work with genuine structural logic tends to be, because it does not depend on the moment it was made in to remain valid, does not need the year of its production to explain why it still exists.



Material, he is clear on this, is never applied at the end. It informs the idea from the beginning, carries both structural and emotional qualities that shape what a piece can be before a line has been drawn, and often a concept will emerge directly from understanding how a material behaves under tension or compression rather than from a resolved form that is then given a material to live in. He is interested in letting materials do what they naturally want to do rather than forcing them into something artificial, and this is less a philosophical position than a practical one, the recognition that a material working against its own nature is a material that will eventually make that fact known.



The Stitch Chair was an exploration of making construction visible, using stitching not as decoration, but as structure.





His understanding of design has shifted considerably since he first established his practice, and the change he identifies is temperamental rather than technical. Early on, he says, there is a desire to prove something, and over time he has grown more comfortable with restraint, more willing to let ideas develop slowly, more rigorous in what he removes. He is also more aware of longevity now, both environmentally and culturally, and the standard he applies to his own work has become one of simple justification, a piece should justify its existence, and if it cannot meet that requirement it should not be made. It is a demanding position and an unfashionable one in an industry that produces a considerable amount of furniture whose primary purpose is to be photographed, and Goodrum states it without apparent concern for how it lands.

What continues to interest him most is the intersection of utility and emotion, the challenge of creating something that performs beautifully but resonates on a quieter level as well, and the ongoing question of how construction can be simplified, how more can be achieved with fewer elements, how the next refinement can be found in work that already appears complete. There is always another way to refine, he says, and it reads less like ambition than orientation, the description of a mind that does not experience the completion of a piece as the end of a question but as the beginning of the next one, which is perhaps the most accurate description of what keeps a practice like his producing work of genuine consequence decade after decade.



Looking ahead, he is increasingly drawn to modularity and adaptability, to how furniture can evolve with people over time rather than being fixed at the moment of purchase, and to the further exploration of material innovation alongside traditional craftsmanship. The ambition, stated plainly, is to create work that feels both contemporary and enduring, with a clarity that allows it to age well, which is as precise and as honest a description of what he has been doing all along as anything else in this conversation, and the kind of ambition that does not require a trend to give it direction because it already has one of its own.

“Material is never applied at the end. It informs the idea from the beginning.”

THE BRAND EDIT

NEHA JAIN AND THE WALL THAT CHANGED EVERYTHING



FROM PAINT TO PATTERN



*She studied economics at Warwick, spent years reading spreadsheets in a multinational, and then walked into the décor industry and quietly remade it. **Neha Jain, co-founder of UDC Homes, speaks to Alisha of Design Diary International on transforming a paint retail business into one of India's most ambitious wall covering brands, and what it takes to design surfaces that outlast the moment they were made in.***

In 2014, a paint retail company that had spent a decade selling color to Indian homes did something that paint companies do not typically do. It started designing wall coverings. The person behind that decision was Neha Jain, 37, co-founder of UDC Homes, who had arrived at the business not from design school or an apprenticeship in someone else's atelier but from a career in financial analysis, armed with a degree in Economics and Finance from Warwick Business School and the particular kind of market vision that comes from being trained to see gaps before they become obvious to everyone else.

When Design Diary International reached out to Jain over email, what came back was a portrait of a founder who speaks about surfaces and spaces with the same precision she once brought to balance sheets, and whose answers reveal a design philosophy that is more architecturally rigorous, more technically serious, and more culturally considered than the wall covering category typically demands of itself.

The gap she saw in 2014 was specific. India had paint. India had access to international wall covering brands at a price point that excluded most of the market. What India did not have was premium, customized wall coverings designed with Indian sensibilities, built to Indian climate conditions, made in India. UDC Homes decided to make them, and in doing so transformed itself from a retail business into a design one, from a company that sold other people's surfaces into one that authored its own.



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There was a clear gap in the market for customized, premium wall coverings that matched both global standards and Indian design sensibilities.

-Neha Jain



The design philosophy that underpins all of this is more architecturally rigorous than the wall covering category tends to demand of itself. Jain talks about the wall the way a structural engineer talks about a load-bearing element, as the thing that sets proportion and scale and mood before any other decision in the room has been made, as the foundation from which everything else is read rather than the surface onto which everything else is projected. In many of our projects, she says, the wall sets the tone before furniture or décor is added, and that sequencing matters to her, the wall first and everything in conversation with it rather than the wall last and everything already decided. Wallpaper, in this account of its own function, is not ornament. It is architecture expressed through surface and detail and storytelling, and the distinction is not semantic, it is a design principle that runs through every stage of how UDC Homes develops its collections, from the first research conversation to the last quality check before a product goes to market.

That development process is longer and more considered than the finished product might suggest. A design moves through six to eight detailed stages before it reaches the market, from initial research into trends and architecture and culture and client preferences, through sketches and digital artworks and the careful refinement of scale and color palette and repeat patterns, into material selection and surface testing, through physical samples and prototypes and multiple rounds of quality checks and revisions, and only after final approvals and performance testing does anything move into production. It is a process shaped by the same analytical instinct Jain brought from her years in financial analysis, the insistence on testing and evidence and not proceeding until the thing actually works, carried into a creative context where that kind of rigor is less common than it ought to be and more necessary than the industry always acknowledges.



Performance in Indian conditions is a subject she addresses with technical specificity because it is a problem UDC Homes has genuinely solved rather than worked around. Humidity, temperature fluctuation, the adhesion demands of older wall constructions, the maintenance realities of everyday households across different Indian climates, all of these are variables built into material selection from the earliest stages of product development, not considerations added after the design is finished but part of the same conversation as the visual and the conceptual from the very beginning. A wall covering that fails in three years in an Indian summer is not a luxury product regardless of how beautiful it looks on a wall in a photograph, and the durability Jain describes is not a technical footnote appended to something more important, it is part of what the design is, inseparable from the surface itself and from the promise the brand makes to the client who invests in it.

The cultural dimension of UDC Homes' design language is where the brand's identity becomes most carefully constructed and most worth examining.

Jain navigates the relationship between Indian cultural reference and contemporary design with a precision that avoids both of the obvious failures available to her, the one where Indian motifs are applied to surfaces as illustration, costume rather than identity, and the one where cultural specificity is dissolved entirely in pursuit of an international legibility that ends up belonging nowhere in particular. Sometimes the inspiration is direct, she explains, a conscious reinterpretation of Indian heritage art forms or traditional architecture carried into a contemporary context, and sometimes it is more subtle, present in color palettes and rhythmic patterns and a quality of craftsmanship that feels rooted without announcing itself. Culture does not always need to be loud to be meaningful, she says, and whether the reference is bold or understated the aim is consistent, designs that carry a sense of identity and authenticity while feeling modern and globally relevant, surfaces that know where they come from without being defined entirely by it.



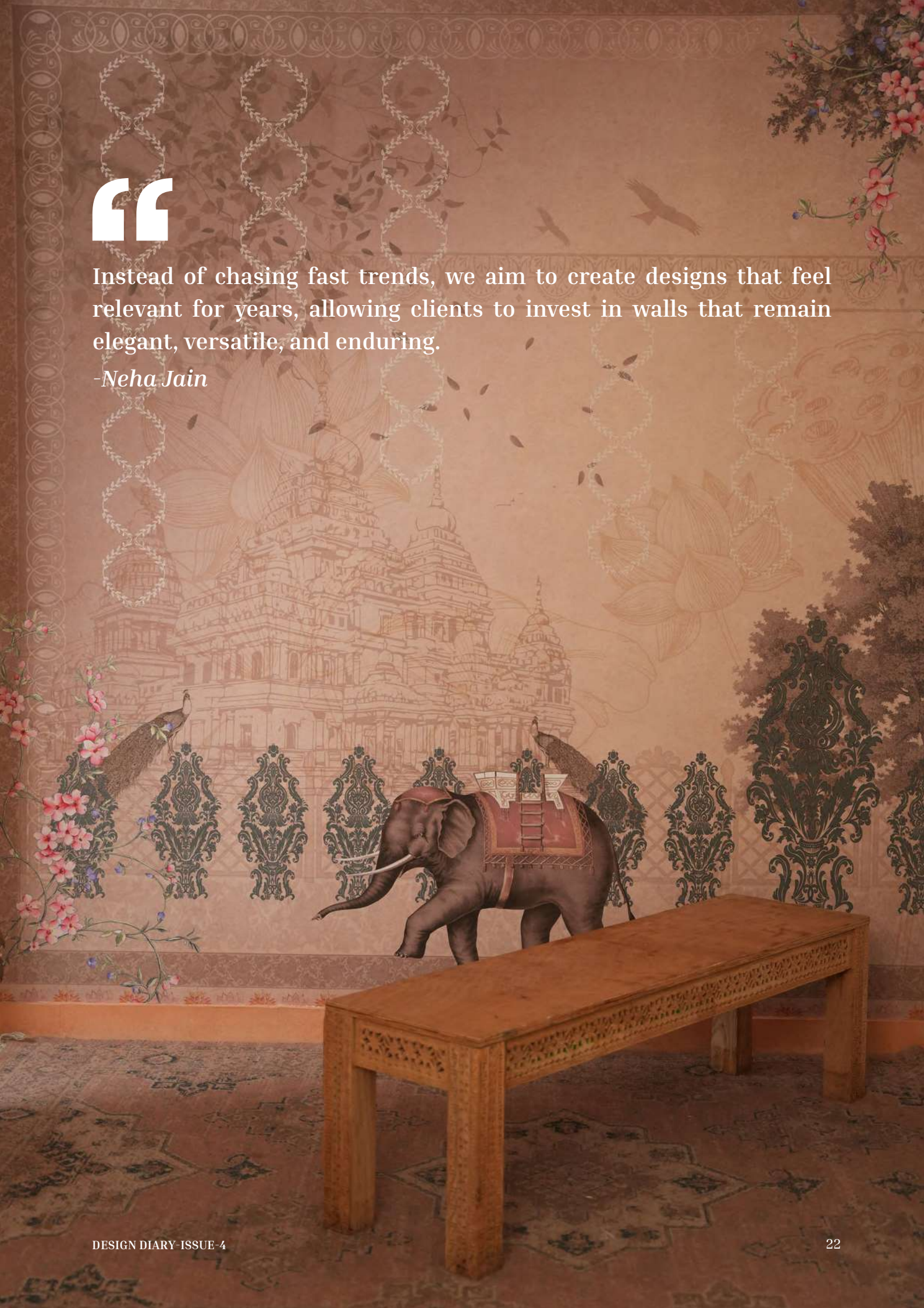
This balance has become more consequential as the brand has moved into international markets. Designing for global distribution creates its own gravitational pull toward the generic, toward the universally palatable, toward designs that have been smoothed of anything too specific or too rooted to travel easily across different markets and different tastes, and Jain is direct about that tension. Different markets have varied preferences and spatial styles, she says, and versatility and adaptability are necessary, but not at the cost of the character that makes a brand worth seeking out in the first place, the thing that gives it a reason to exist alongside everything else already available to a client in New York or Dubai or Delhi. The response at UDC Homes has been to anchor the work in universal themes, nature, texture, architecture, while weaving through them a design sensibility specific enough to be recognizable as theirs and theirs alone.

The Roman Imperial collection, which Jain identifies as the work that best represents the brand's design philosophy today, illustrates how these priorities resolve in practice. It draws from classical European art and structure, reinterpreted with a contemporary sensibility, and what makes it worth looking at closely is the balance it achieves between strong visual storytelling and refined material execution, between surfaces that are immediate and immersive in their impact and objects that are technically accomplished enough to justify the investment a client makes in them. Timeless is a word that gets used too casually in design, a hedge against the risk of committing to a point of view, but here it describes something more earned, a collection rooted deeply enough in form and proportion and craftsmanship that it does not need the moment it was made in to remain relevant, that will look as considered in ten years as it does today because it was never designed for today in particular.

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Instead of chasing fast trends, we aim to create designs that feel relevant for years, allowing clients to invest in walls that remain elegant, versatile, and enduring.

-Neha Jain



Manufacturing constraints, Jain notes, have often produced stronger design outcomes than the original unconstrained concept, and there is something revealing in this observation, something that sounds like the analyst underneath the designer, the person trained early to understand that limitations are data rather than obstacles, that a constraint in texture or color layering or scale is pressure that forces simplification and experimentation the original idea might never have found on its own. The closeness of design and production teams at UDC Homes, the insistence that these are not separate processes but a single conversation running from concept through to manufacture, reflects the same instinct, that what works in reality is the only measure that ultimately matters and that the people who know what works in reality should be in the room from the very beginning, not consulted at the end when the design is already fixed and the only available response to a problem is compromise.

The future she describes for the industry is one of greater immersion, greater intelligence, and greater material sophistication, where digital precision and handcrafted finishes combine rather than compete, where sustainable substrates and performance-driven surfaces that respond to light and climate become the baseline rather than the premium option, and where personalization plays an increasingly central role as clients come to understand their walls as expressions of identity rather than categories of finish to be selected from a sample book. Through all of it, she insists, craftsmanship remains essential, not as nostalgia or counterweight to technology but as the thing that keeps a surface connected to the room it is meant to serve, that prevents innovation from becoming merely clever and ensures the wall continues to be, above all, felt by the person standing in front of it.

To young designers entering the surface design space she offers advice that reads, in retrospect, like a precise description of the discipline she has applied to herself across twelve years of building this brand. Understand architecture before patterns, she says. Study materials and techniques as deeply as you study design. Do not chase trends. Build from concept and proportion and storytelling. Learn from production teams because they will teach you what works in reality. Stay curious. It is the counsel of someone who came to this field from outside its usual entry points, who had to learn its logic rather than inherit it, and who has spent twelve years applying to it the same rigor she once applied to financial markets, with results that the Indian wall covering industry had not seen before and that the global market, from New York to Dubai, is only now beginning to encounter.

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Great surface design comes from observation, experimentation, and a genuine passion for detail.

-Neha Jain

MATERIAL INTELLIGENCE



Ricola Herb Centre, Herzog and de Meuron with rammed earth specialist Martin Rauch, Laufen, Switzerland, 2014. Walls compressed from local earth, their surface bearing the striations of successive layers — each a record of the construction process and a thermal instrument within the building's environmental strategy.

THE NEW MATERIAL PALETTE

The materials shaping architecture today are no longer being chosen only for how they look or how easily they replicate at scale. They are being reconsidered for what they cost the planet, and that reconsideration is producing some of the most serious building being done anywhere in the world right now.

For most of the twentieth century, the dominant materials of construction were chosen for their predictability. Concrete, steel, and sealed glass performed consistently regardless of where they were used. They could be specified from a catalogue and delivered to a site without reference to local climate, geology, or craft tradition, and they produced buildings that looked and felt broadly similar whether they were built in Mumbai, Manchester, or Minneapolis. This was understood as progress. The detachment of architecture from place was, for several decades, one of modernism's proudest achievements. What is becoming clear, across a growing body of practice and a deepening crisis of environmental consequence, is that this detachment carried a cost the industry is only now beginning to fully account for.

Rammed earth is part of the response, though calling it a revival misrepresents what is actually happening. The material never disappeared from building practice in the regions where it was always the logical choice: the earthen architecture of the Sahel, the pisé traditions of southern France and northern Africa, the compressed earth construction of rural India. Its reappearance in serious contemporary architectural practice is less a nostalgic gesture than a recognition of performance qualities that no synthetic material has yet matched at equivalent environmental cost. The thermal mass of a rammed earth wall is exceptional. It absorbs heat during the day and releases it slowly through the night, reducing the energy demand of a building's mechanical systems over its entire operational life. Martin Rauch, the Austrian specialist whose firm Lehm Ton Erde has done more than any other single practice to advance the technical possibilities of contemporary rammed earth construction, collaborated with Herzog and de Meuron on the Ricola Herb Centre in Laufen, Switzerland, completed in 2014, producing walls of compressed local earth whose surface quality and structural performance together made the argument that rammed earth was not a material of limitation but of genuine architectural ambition. The Chapel of Reconciliation in Berlin, completed in 2000 by architects Reitermann and Sassenroth on the former death strip of the Berlin Wall, makes a different but equally serious case: a rammed earth cylinder whose material carries the specific weight of the ground from which it was made, in a place where the ground itself is the whole subject.

The limitations of rammed earth are real and should not be softened for the sake of the argument. It is slower to construct than conventional masonry, dependent on skilled labor that is increasingly difficult to source outside specialist practices, and its performance in high-rainfall climates requires careful detailing that raises both cost and complexity. These are not trivial objections in an industry whose economics are calibrated around speed and repeatability. But they are objections about the system surrounding the material rather than about the material itself, and the distinction matters because it locates the problem where it actually sits: not in rammed earth's performance, but in construction culture's reluctance to reorganize itself around materials whose demands differ from those it has normalized.



The detachment of architecture from place was, for several decades, one of modernism's proudest achievements. What is becoming clear is that this detachment carried a cost the industry is only now beginning to account for.



Hy-Fi Tower, The Living (David Benjamin), MoMA PS1 courtyard, New York, 2014. Approximately 10,000 mycelium and corn stalk bricks grown on site and composted in their entirety at the close of the summer programme. The most architecturally serious public demonstration of mycelium's spatial potential to date.



Lime plaster operates within a similar tension between material logic and construction habit. The widespread adoption of cement-based renders across the twentieth century solved one problem, namely speed and uniformity of application, while creating another that went largely unexamined for decades. Cement seals walls. It prevents the movement of moisture vapor through the building fabric, trapping humidity within the structure and creating the conditions for condensation, mold, and the progressive deterioration of the materials behind the finish. Lime allows walls to breathe, regulating moisture through the wall's cross-section and producing an interior environment whose air quality is measurably better than that of a sealed cement-rendered space. The surface itself behaves differently over time: where cement cracks and stains in ways that are difficult to repair without complete removal, lime develops a patina, carbonating slowly as it cures and producing a surface that deepens and enriches rather than simply deteriorating. John Pawson, whose use of lime plaster across projects including the Novy Dvur Monastery in the Czech Republic, completed in 2004, established it as a surface capable of spiritual as well as sensory refinement, understood long before the sustainability conversation caught up that lime is not a substitute for cement but a categorically different proposition about what a wall should do and how it should age.

The more speculative end of the new material palette is occupied by mycelium, the root structure of fungi, which has attracted serious architectural attention since Ecovative Design, the American biomaterials company founded by Eben Bayer and Gavin McIntyre in 2007, demonstrated that mycelium grown on agricultural waste could be formed into structural blocks with compressive strength comparable to conventional insulation materials, produced with a fraction of the embodied energy. The most architecturally visible demonstration of mycelium's potential was the Hy-Fi tower, erected at MoMA PS1 in New York in 2014 by the architectural practice The Living, led by David Benjamin, who grew approximately ten thousand mycelium and corn stalk bricks on site and assembled them into a structure that stood for the duration of the summer programme before being composted entirely at its close. The project was honest about being an experiment, testing at architectural scale a material whose durability, structural range, and performance under sustained environmental stress remained unresolved. Those questions remain substantially unresolved today, which is not a reason to dismiss the material but a reason to describe its current status accurately: a serious research direction whose translation into standard construction practice is a question of years rather than months, and possibly of decades.

Recycled composites sit in a different position within this conversation: less speculative than mycelium, more immediately deployable than rammed earth, and carrying a particular honesty about what they are doing and what they are not. Interface, the American flooring company that committed in 1994 to eliminating its negative environmental impact by 2020 under the Mission Zero programme initiated by founder Ray Anderson, has over three decades developed flooring systems incorporating recycled fishing nets, reclaimed carpet tiles, and post-consumer waste into products whose performance matches or exceeds conventionally manufactured equivalents. The argument for recycled composites is straightforward and should not be overstated. They manage the waste that the construction industry produces rather than reducing the rate at which that waste is generated. They operate within the existing system of material consumption rather than proposing an alternative to it. This is a meaningful contribution but not a transformation, and the distinction between the two is one that the broader sustainability discourse in architecture has not always been careful to maintain.



What connects rammed earth, lime plaster, mycelium, and recycled composites is not a shared aesthetic or a unified theoretical position but a shared shift in the criteria by which materials are being evaluated. Carbon is no longer an abstraction managed in annual reports. It is a number that clients, regulators, and a growing number of architects are insisting on knowing before a material specification is finalized. The question of where a material comes from, what was consumed to produce it, and what happens to it at the end of a building's life is moving from the margins of the design brief toward its center. This shift is uneven across the industry, far more advanced in practices working at the scale of the individual house or small institution than in those working at the scale of urban development, where the economics of speed and replication continue to exert a pressure that no amount of environmental conviction has yet fully overcome. But the direction of the shift is clear, and the buildings being produced at its leading edge are, by any serious measure, among the most architecturally interesting work being done in the world right now. Not because they are made from unusual materials, but because the discipline those materials demand has produced an architecture more specific, more considered, and more honestly connected to the conditions of the place and time it was built in than the glass and concrete default it is beginning, slowly and unevenly, to replace.



MINIMALISM IS GETTING BORING

Restraint was once a discipline. It is now, far too often, an absence of decision. And the difference between those two things is the difference between a great room and a showroom.



There is a particular kind of interior that has become so familiar it no longer registers as a choice. You have been inside it many times, possibly without quite noticing, because that is precisely its quality: it does not ask to be noticed. The walls are white or a shade of white that has been given a name suggesting earth or mist or something harvested. The floor is pale timber or large-format stone tile in a colour that does not commit. The furniture is low, its lines clean, its upholstery a variation on the same narrow range of tones that the walls and floors have already established. There are no books visible, no accumulated objects, no evidence of particular taste or specific passion or accumulated life. The kitchen has no handles. The storage has no visible presence. Everything that might reveal who lives here has been resolved, resolved being the word the design world uses when it means hidden. The room is, by every current measure of the professionally desirable interior, very good. It is also, if we are being honest with ourselves, completely interchangeable with ten thousand other rooms being photographed this month for ten thousand other Instagram accounts and design publications and property listings across the world. We have arrived, somehow, at the condition in which the most ambitious design aspiration a client can bring to a project is a room that looks like it could belong to anyone.

This is worth examining carefully, because minimalism was not always this. When Mies van der Rohe designed the Barcelona Pavilion in 1929, the radicalism of the project lay not in the absence of ornament but in the precision of the decision-making behind every element that remained. The cruciform column was not a simple column from which decoration had been removed. It was a specific object, proportioned and positioned with an exactness that made the space around it legible in a way that no conventionally detailed column could achieve. The marble planes that divided the interior were not blank surfaces. They were selected for their specific veining, their colour, the particular quality of their surfaces, so that the material itself carried the visual complexity that the overall compositional restraint withheld. Mies understood something that the current culture of minimalism has largely lost: that restraint is a technique of concentration, not elimination. You remove everything that is not necessary so that what remains carries full weight. The discipline is in knowing what is necessary. The difficulty is in making that determination honestly, for a specific space and a specific life, rather than defaulting to what has become aesthetically safe.

The shift from minimalism as a philosophical position to minimalism as a stylistic template happened gradually and is difficult to date precisely, but its acceleration is clearly visible in the decade following the widespread adoption of platforms like Instagram and Pinterest as primary reference tools for the brief-writing process. The consequences of this shift are architectural as well as aesthetic. When clients arrive at a project with a folder of saved images that all share the same spatial vocabulary, the designer's role changes from the development of a specific response to a specific set of conditions into the faithful execution of a pre-existing image. The room is designed backward from its photograph. And a room designed backward from its photograph is a room in which every decision has been made in service of legibility at a glance, which is to say in service of the very opposite of what the best domestic interiors have always offered: the quality of revealing more the longer you spend time inside them.

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We have arrived at the condition in which the most ambitious design aspiration a client can bring to a project is a room that looks like it could belong to anyone.

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There is a psychological dimension to this that the design world has been reluctant to discuss directly. Maximalism requires commitment. It requires the willingness to accumulate and display objects that reveal specific passions, specific histories, specific personalities, and in doing so it exposes the person who made those choices to a form of judgement that the neutral room entirely avoids. A beige room with concealed storage and handle-free cabinetry does not tell you anything about the person who lives in it. That is not an accident. The rise of the neutral interior has coincided precisely with a cultural moment in which the performance of taste has never been more public or more consequential, and the safest form of taste, in a world where everything is photographed and shared and evaluated, is the taste that offers no target. Minimalism, in its current dominant form, is not a design philosophy. It is risk management. It is the spatial equivalent of declining to have an opinion.

The architects and designers who understand this are not, by and large, the ones currently dominating the conversation. Lori Morris, whose work is examined at length elsewhere in this issue, has spent thirty years building rooms of such layered specificity and accumulated personality that they remain genuinely difficult to categorise, which is precisely why they are so resistant to imitation. Renzo Mongiardino, the Milanese designer whose theatrical interiors for clients including the Rothschilds and Lee Radziwill treated the domestic room as a complete narrative world, made spaces that told you everything about the life being lived inside them within the first thirty seconds of standing in them. The apartments that Jean-Michel Frank designed in Paris in the 1920s and 1930s were spare without being empty, stripped of historical ornament without being stripped of material intelligence, the walls upholstered in vellum and parchment, the furniture designed with a sculptural exactness that required the room around it to be equally precise. These are all, in their different ways, minimal interiors. What distinguishes them from the current template is that the discipline behind them is evident, the decision-making is specific, and the resulting rooms carry the unmistakable character of a point of view.

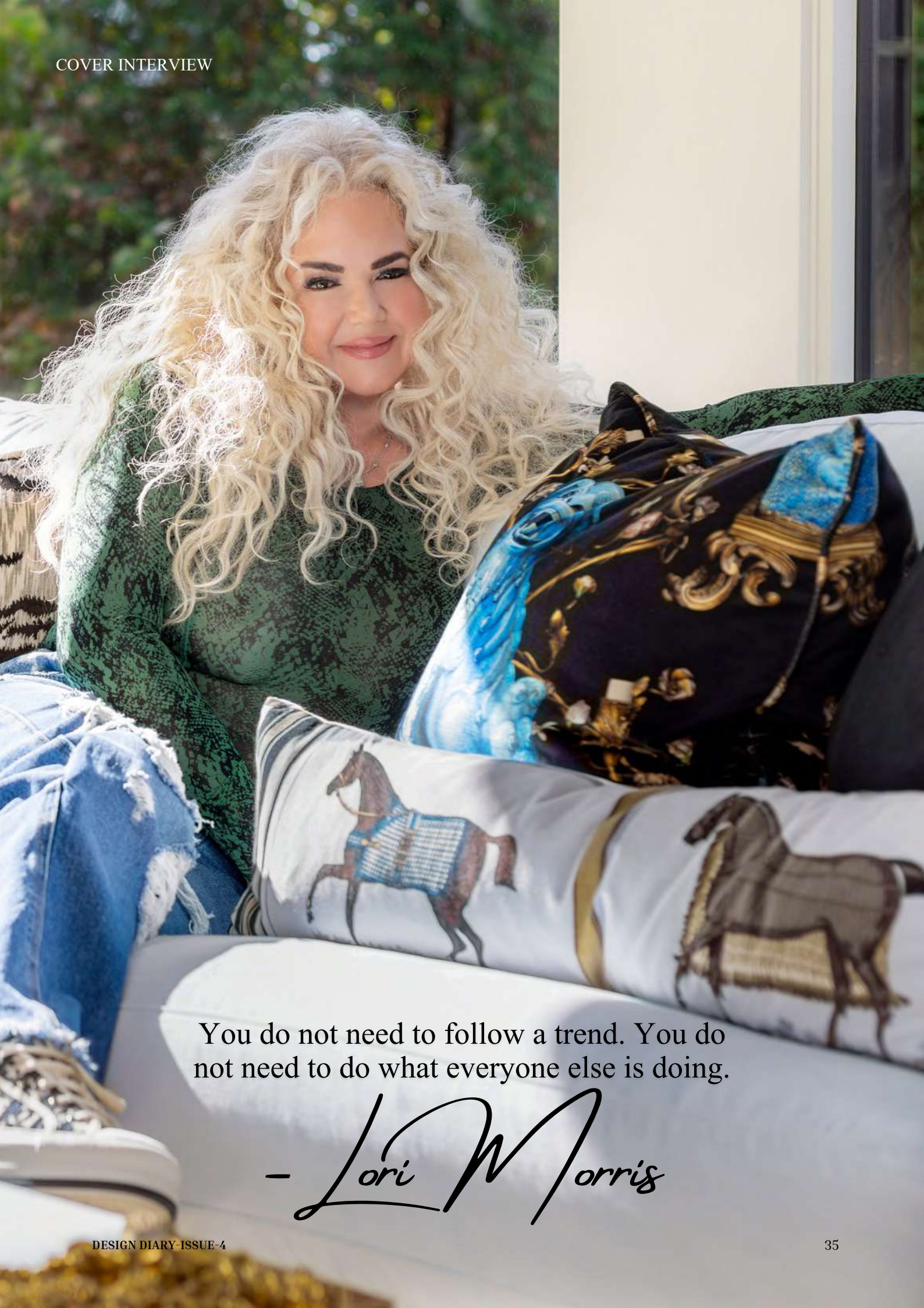
The question for the design industry is whether this represents a temporary plateau in the development of a still-vital aesthetic position, or whether it signals something more significant: the exhaustion of an idea that has been stretched well beyond the discipline and intelligence that originally animated it. The evidence suggests the latter. A design movement that began as a rigorous response to the visual excess of a particular historical moment has become, through repetition and commercial adoption and the flattening effect of social media reference culture, the new visual excess. The rooms that would have seemed radical in their restraint thirty years ago are now indistinguishable from the developer finish of a new-build apartment in any major city in the world. That is not the sign of a living idea. It is the sign of an idea that has completed its journey from the studio to the showroom to the commodity catalogue, which is the journey that all design movements eventually complete. The question that follows is always the same: what comes next. That question, at this particular moment in the history of interior design, feels genuinely open in a way it has not felt for some time. Which is, if nothing else, a reason to be interested.

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Minimalism, in its current dominant form, is not a design philosophy. It is risk management. It is the spatial equivalent of declining to have an opinion.

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You do not need to follow a trend. You do not need to do what everyone else is doing.

- Lori Morris

Lori Morris wrote this in an email, in response to a question about the long minimalist years, the decades when the design world had collectively decided that restraint was the only intelligent position and richness was something you either apologized for or quietly dressed down, and what is remarkable about the line is not its content but its temperature, because it is completely room temperature, no heat in it, no score to settle, just a person stating something so settled within herself that the argument ended a long time ago and what remains is simply how she works, how she has always worked, and how she intends to keep working regardless of where the broader conversation decides to go next.

Morris is the founder of the House of LMD, a Toronto-based practice that has spent more than three decades building interiors of a kind that ask a great deal of the people who walk into them, rooms that are layered and specific and emotionally loaded, rooms that carry within them the particular personality of whoever lives there, built from custom furniture designed to the exact proportion of each space, carpets conceived for a precise atmosphere, seating scaled to an architecture that nothing in any showroom could ever answer to, and the cumulative effect of all of it, when it works, which it does, is that you feel something before you have had time to understand what you are looking at, which is not an accident, it is the whole point, it is the destination toward which every single decision in a Morris interior has been aimed from the very beginning.

Shweta of Design Diary International put a series of questions to Morris over email and what came back was not the careful managed language of someone protecting a brand but something considerably more interesting, the voice of a woman who has never once looked sideways to check what the rest of the room is doing, who decided early that originality was not a strategy but a position, a moral one almost, and who has spent every year since simply following through on that with increasing confidence and increasing scale and what she describes, without any apparent vanity, as getting better with age.



A photograph of a sophisticated interior space. A large, arched window is framed by heavy, dark blue curtains. The window looks out onto a tropical landscape with palm trees and a building with a terracotta roof. In the foreground, a blue velvet sofa is adorned with several pillows, including one with a bold black and white pattern and another with a blue and gold floral design. A dark blue lamp with a gold Greek key pattern on its shade sits on a polished, cylindrical side table. The room's architecture features ornate blue columns and moldings.

There is a question that gets asked of interior designers with some regularity, about whether a space should evolve endlessly or remain as a record of a particular moment, and it is a reasonable question in the abstract but it does not quite apply to what Morris builds, because a Morris interior is not trying to be timeless in the way that word is usually meant, neutral and quietly inoffensive and safe for whoever might come next, it is trying to be specific, trying to be this person and this life and this particular way of moving through a home, and specificity by its nature does not date the way fashionable things date, it simply becomes more itself over time, more settled, more complete, more exactly what it always was.

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When you walk into a room, you should feel something. The space should say something to you, because if it does not, you simply walk right past it.



She is direct about this when the subject comes up, about the relationship between a space and the person who inhabits it, about the way a room should carry a story that you feel the moment you cross the threshold, and she uses the word story not in the vague mood-board sense it has been flattened to mean in recent years but in the precise sense of a narrative with a logic and an emotional destination, something that begins with a client and their personality and their daily life and their private dream of how a home might make them feel, and ends with a room that could not belong to anyone else, that is so particular and so complete in its expression of one life that putting anyone else inside it would feel like a category error.

Every design should carry a sense of surprise and personality, she writes, and when you walk into a room you should feel something, the space should say something to you, because if it does not you simply walk right past it, and the way she phrases that, the walking right past it, suggests a failure so basic and so total that it renders everything else about the room beside the point, the materials and the scale and the craftsmanship all meaningless if the emotional charge is absent, which tells you something important about how Morris understands her own work, not as decoration applied to a surface that was already resolved but as the creation of an atmosphere that is itself the architecture, the feeling and the space inseparable from each other, built together from the beginning and arriving together at the end.

A well designed space, she adds, feels seamless and cohesive to the eye, and when everything works together in harmony the beauty is understood almost instinctively, it lands before the brain has had time to process the individual components, and that instinctive recognition is for her the signal that the design has done what it was supposed to do, has arrived at the destination it was always heading toward, which is not admiration exactly but something more immediate and more bodily than that, something closer to the feeling of being held by a space that was built entirely around you.

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I usually see the finished product before it is even started. That vision becomes the starting point. Then our team works back from there.





When the conversation turns to process, to where a project actually begins, what comes back is a description that sounds less like a design methodology and more like a form of inner sight, the finished room arriving in her mind whole and complete before a sketch has been made or a material chosen or a single conversation with a contractor has taken place, and she is matter of fact about this in a way that makes it sound entirely ordinary, which perhaps for her it is. If you are building a house from scratch, she explains, the process begins with the architecture, but the concept is always client driven, and before anything else she needs to understand what style they love, what they want the home to feel like, how large the house will be, how large the family is, how they live day to day, because gathering that knowledge and understanding those details is the foundation of the story she is going to tell through the design, and once that foundation is laid the project begins with a sketch of what she sees in her head, because she usually sees the finished product before it has even started, and everything that follows is a matter of working back from that vision, her team building out the full design package from a concept that already exists complete somewhere ahead of them.

It is worth sitting with that image for a moment, of a designer working backwards from a complete interior that exists first only in the mind, because it goes a long way toward explaining why her spaces feel the way they do, resolved and inevitable and specific in a way that has nothing to do with trends and everything to do with a singular point of view held consistently and without apology over a very long time, a point of view that does not need the external world to confirm it because it was never waiting for that confirmation to begin with, never needed the culture to arrive at the same conclusion before it felt justified in proceeding.



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Luxury is the feeling of enchantment, refinement, comfort, and serenity that a space creates when everything comes together perfect.



She talks about furniture the way an architect talks about load-bearing structure, not as objects placed within a space to make it feel inhabited but as extensions of the architecture itself, pieces that could not exist anywhere else because they were conceived for this room and this room only, scaled to its exact proportion, weighted to its exact atmosphere, colored and textured to complete a vision that was already whole before the first measurement was taken. In many of the homes we design, she writes, the rooms are quite significant in size, and you simply cannot walk into a store and find a piece of furniture that fits the scale or proportion or feeling we are trying to achieve, and so they design the pieces themselves, the seating areas and the coffee tables and the carpets and a great many other elements, all custom made, all resolved down to the exact colour and texture and scale that the room requires, and this is not a luxury in the sense of an added extra but a necessity, because the final vision exists first in her head and that vision is not something you can buy off the floor of a store, it has to be designed and developed and brought into existence so that it fits seamlessly into the architecture and the atmosphere of the home, so that it could not be anywhere else and nothing else could be there instead.

There is something almost obsessive in this level of specificity and Morris does not shy away from it, because the obsession is the work, the refusal to approximate is the whole philosophy, and a room in which even one element has been settled for rather than conceived is a room in which the vision has been compromised, and compromising the vision is not something she appears to have any particular talent for.



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Rather than following trends, we create our own, and we have always stayed true to that direction.





She wants clients to be overwhelmed when they walk through the door of a finished home for the first time, overwhelmed in the best sense of that word, that particular and unrepeatable sensation of a dream being returned to you more complete than you had imagined it, and after all the time and energy and investment they have put into creating their home, she writes, the goal is for them to feel that it was all worth it and that the result is even better than they imagined, and the emotional connection that produces is what makes her happiest, because the feeling a room gives you is ultimately what the space expresses through its design and its architecture, and that feeling was the point before any of the materials were chosen or any of the furniture was designed or any of the sketches were made, it was always the point, it will always be the point, it is the only point that matters when the work is finally standing in front of you asking to be felt.

She wants them to hug you forever, she writes at one point, not just to impress on first encounter but to keep working on you, to welcome you back every time you come through the door, which is perhaps the most honest and most demanding definition of what a home should do that you will find anywhere in contemporary design culture, and it is a definition that makes most of what passes for luxury residential design look like it has been aiming at the wrong target entirely.

The conversation around maximalism has been loud in recent years, the design press welcoming it back with considerable enthusiasm, treating its return as a cultural moment worth marking, and Morris receives all of this with the equanimity of someone watching a party form around a place she has been standing quietly for thirty years, because she did not leave, this has always been the style, and the broader culture catching up to it does not change anything about how she works or what she makes or why she makes it. No, it does not feel different, she writes, because we never left that approach, this has always been our design style, and rather than following trends we create our own and have always stayed true to that direction, and there is something almost clarifying about the plainness of that statement, the refusal to perform excitement about a vindication she never needed, because for Morris the validation was never the point and the absence of it was never a problem, she was going to make these rooms regardless, has always been going to make these rooms, and the world is welcome to catch up or not as it sees fit.

She is frank about the fact that clients today are more engaged with their homes than they have ever been, more specific about how they want to live and how they want their spaces to make them feel, less concerned with whether a room follows certain expectations or traditional rules and more focused on whether the space will actually support them and their family in the way they need it to, and she brings to that conversation a confidence she describes as something she carries into the room with her, a confidence that gives clients confidence, that creates the conditions in which genuine creativity becomes possible because the fear of getting it wrong has been quietly removed from the equation before anyone has sat down. When a client comes to the House of LMD, she writes, they are usually ready for something original, they are open to creativity and individuality, and her role is to guide them through that process and help bring their vision to life in a way that feels authentic and truly personal, which sounds simple enough until you consider what it actually requires, which is the ability to hear what a person wants their life to feel like and then build the physical environment that produces exactly that feeling, custom and complete and entirely specific to them, down to the last piece of furniture and the last square yard of carpet.

There is a version of a long career in which the early instincts calcify into habit, the vision narrows, the work becomes a more refined version of itself but also a smaller one, and Morris describes something that sounds like the precise opposite of that, a career in which the confidence to execute has been catching up steadily to the scale of what she could already see, closing the gap between the finished room in her head and the finished room in the world, so that the work now is bolder and more adventurous and more complete than it has ever been, not because the vision has changed but because the ability to deliver on it has grown deeper and surer and more capable of going all the way. My style has evolved in the sense that I have simply become better with age, she writes, the originality and creativity have always been there, the artistic approach, the no rules attitude, the rebellious sense of luxury that I like to create, all of that has always been part of the work, what has really changed is the level of confidence in what I can achieve, and earlier in her career she could see the vision in her head but was sometimes still working out exactly how to bring it together, and today that confidence is much stronger, the ideas more expressive, the execution more complete, the homes larger and more ambitious, the clients more confident, the expectations on every side considerably greater and met with considerably greater ease.



She is better, she says, and she says it the way someone reports an observation rather than makes a claim, the way a person says something they have simply noticed to be true about themselves after a long time of paying close attention, and it lands not as arrogance but as something more interesting than that, as evidence of a career that has rewarded consistency not with comfort but with greater capacity, greater range, greater ability to deliver on a vision that was always this large and always this certain of its own direction, a vision that never needed the industry to validate it and never waited for the culture to arrive before it proceeded.

When the conversation turns to legacy, to what she hopes future generations will understand when they encounter the work, Morris returns as she does throughout this exchange to the idea of intention, to the full artistry of every element brought together like pieces of a puzzle, each one placed with care and deliberateness toward the completion of a whole that is more than the sum of its decisions, and she is clear that even though the work may appear very complex it is all very intentional, nothing arbitrary, nothing decorative in the shallow sense, everything aimed at something specific and everything arriving there. She wants to be remembered as an innovative and creative and artistic designer who set her own trends and created a distinct point of view that was always true to herself, who built a style so recognizable and so complete that you can identify it immediately, walk into a room and know without being told whose work you are standing inside, and given what the past three decades have actually produced that is not an ambition, it is already a fact, the rooms are already that recognizable, the point of view already that distinct, the voice already that clear and consistent and entirely its own.

The style is something very original, she writes, something that had not been seen before, and I would like to be remembered as an original innovator in design because that is truly what I have always set out to do, and reading it back you realize that this is not a statement about the future at all, it is a description of what has already happened, of a career built entirely on that premise and delivered on entirely, and the only question that remains is what comes next, which knowing Morris is probably already finished and complete somewhere in her head, fully formed, waiting patiently for the rest of the world to arrive.

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The work has become bolder, more adventurous, and more refined over time. Everyone wants to see what we can create, and we are here to deliver.

BLUEPRINT

Portside

A CALIFORNIAN RETREAT ON THE PACIFIC OCEAN



Project: Portside

Location: La Jolla, California, USA

Architect, Interior Designer and Landscape: Daniel Joseph Chenin

Architect of Record: H&S International

Design Team: Juan Salvo, Eric Weeks, Elena Armendariz, Esther Chung, Adrienne Marrero

Main Contractor: Hill Construction

Consultants MEP: Positive Energy

Lighting Design: Daniel Joseph Chenin

Photography: Tim Hirschmann, courtesy of Daniel Joseph Chenin

Portside is a residential project in La Jolla, California, completed in 2025 by architect and interior designer Daniel Joseph Chenin. The original building, a 1950s structure sitting directly on the Pacific coastline, could not be demolished and entirely rebuilt due to restrictions imposed by the California Coastal Commission. The house was instead stripped back to its essential structure and reimagined entirely from within, working within the original volumetric footprint. The constraint shaped the project fundamentally: every decision about space, light and material had to work harder within fixed boundaries.



The exterior reads as a considered composition of contrasting materials. Dark vertical timber cladding covers the street-facing facade, while large format travertine stone panels wrap the side and courtyard-facing walls. A copper roof sits above, its patina shifting against the sky. A stone Buddha sculpture on a plinth marks the entrance, and the approach through a reeded glass door opens into a through-passage that frames the Pacific directly ahead before a single interior space has been entered.

The central courtyard is the organizational hinge of the plan. Walled in travertine on three sides with full-height glazed sliding doors on the fourth opening into the living spaces, it contains a cloud-pruned pine tree as its primary element, surrounded by gravel planting and low drought-tolerant groundcover. The courtyard brings morning light deep into the interior and provides the plan with a quiet, contained outdoor room at its core. From the primary bathroom, a picture window frames the courtyard directly, placing the tree in view from the bath.



The living room occupies the primary ocean-facing position. Corner glazing on two sides places the Pacific on full display, with black-framed floor-to-ceiling windows bringing in the horizon at the same level as the seating. The ceiling is clad in oak panels laid in a geometric pattern, slightly sloped in profile, a reference to the hull of a ship that becomes readable when you look at how the timber planes meet at the perimeter. Furniture is kept low and unassertive: a large cream sofa, dark leather armchairs, a glass-topped oval coffee table. Two landscape-format paintings in warm earth tones hang on the wall adjacent to the windows, their palette pulled from the sand and coastal scrub visible outside. A secondary sitting room works in a quieter register with a white boucle sofa, a round wood and brass coffee table, and a large-scale abstract painting on the rear wall in greens, burgundy and gold. The courtyard pine is visible through the glazed door at the end of this room, tying the two ends of the house together through a single repeated view.



The kitchen and dining zone is where the nautical references become most explicit. The kitchen island is a long onyx form with a stone top and a wood-paneled lower section, its ends rounded and its profile low. Bar stools in dark timber with upholstered seats line one side. The circular porthole window punched through the dividing wall between the kitchen and the breakfast nook is the most direct reference in the house to its coastal setting, framing a disc of ocean and sky like a painting that changes with the weather. The breakfast nook itself is a curved built-in banquette in cream with a round table on a dark tapered base, placed directly against full-height glazing to the ocean. The kitchen cooking wall uses oak cabinetry with a stone backsplash and a metal range hood that reads as a clean, functional object rather than a decorative one.



The primary bedroom sits at the far end of the house on the ocean side. Oak paneling runs floor to ceiling across the walls and ceiling, wrapping the room in a consistent warm material. An upholstered headboard in vertical channel detail spans the full width of the bed wall, framed by matching bedside tables and lamps. Full-height glazed doors open directly to the ocean terrace, where a planted boundary of euphorbia and coastal vegetation sits between the terrace edge and the beach below. A sculptural bronze ceiling fixture with organic blade-like arms spreads above the bed. The passage from the bedroom through to the dressing room and bathroom moves through a marble-floored corridor where the material changes from warm oak to cool stone, with the dressing room to one side featuring floor-to-ceiling oak and glass cabinets with polished metal hardware, and two upholstered ottomans on the floor below.

The primary bathroom is the most materially intensive space in the house. Arabescato marble runs across the floor, walls and ceiling in continuous slabs, the veining matched across surfaces. The double vanity is a custom piece: a pale lacquered cabinet on a polished metal frame with a dark stone top, flanked by full-height mirror panels set between marble piers. Sculptural metal wall sconces in a branch-like form are mounted directly onto the marble. The soaking tub is set into the marble floor beneath the picture window looking onto the courtyard, with the pine tree directly in view.



The powder room is the house's most individually composed space. An onyx-effect warm pink stone wraps the walls, and a deep green marble basin is set into a recessed niche. Above it, a steel porthole-shaped mirror in a thick rounded frame contains a painted interior depicting a school of fish moving through water, referencing the underwater world visible just offshore. Two ceramic flower-form pendant lights hang above. The combination of the green basin, the warm stone, the porthole form and the painted fish interior gives the room a specific and considered character distinct from the rest of the house.



The ocean-facing terrace runs the full width of the living spaces. A low parapet wall topped with planted euphorbia forms the boundary, with an outdoor dining table and folding director's chairs in dark timber positioned to face the beach and the La Jolla coastline stretching south. The terrace is photographed at sunset, the sky behind the headland turning amber and the surfers still in the water below.



BLUEPRINT

London Solar House

HIGH-DENSITY LIVING WITHIN A
COMPACT FOOTPRINT

Location: Primrose Hill, London, UK

Client: Private

Gross Floor Area: 210 m²

Design: Archi-Tectonics

Principal Designer: Winka Dubbeldam

Design Team: Justin Korhammer, Max Boerman, Wouter van der Heuvel, Mattia Gola, Santiago Herrera

Architect of Record: Anthony Boulanger, AY Architects

General Contractor: Philiam

Structural: AKTII

MEP: WSP London

Lighting: Lana Lenar

Photography: Nick Kane, courtesy of Archi-Tectonics

In Primrose Hill, London, New York-based firm Architectonics has transformed a historic brick townhouse into a contemporary residence for a family of four, doubling the original building's floor area to 210 sq. mtr. within an existing and constrained urban plot. The project addresses a condition common across European cities: how to expand a protected historic structure without betraying the character of its street or its own material history.

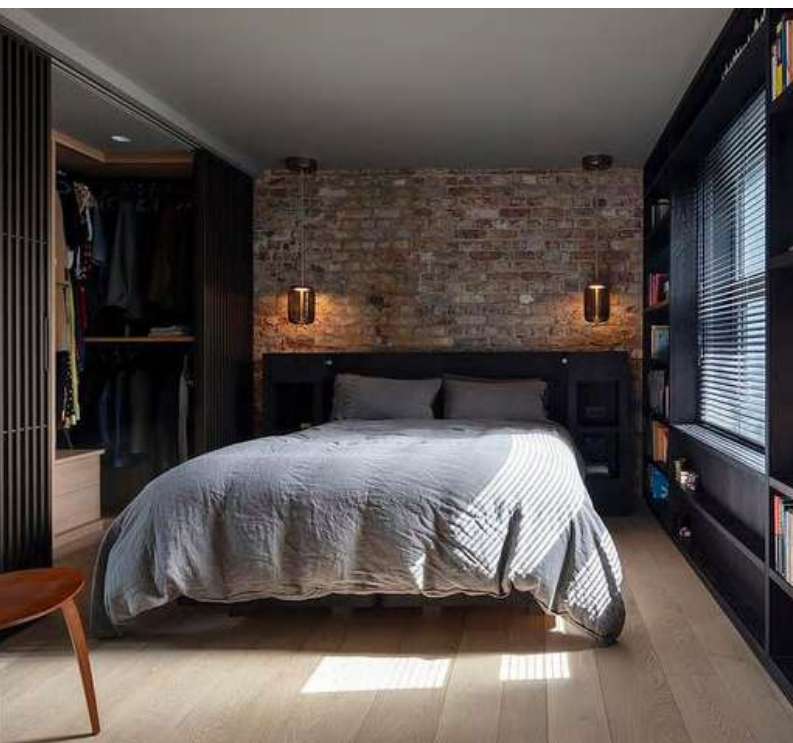


The street facade reads as two distinct architectural moments placed in deliberate dialogue. The lower portion retains the original London stock brick, its pale grey-brown surface and irregular coursing unchanged. Above it, a new zinc-clad upper volume projects forward over the brick base on the rear elevation, its standing seam panels and sharp geometric profile making no attempt to replicate the material below. A large black-framed glazed box cantilevers from the upper addition over the car parking area, bringing the kitchen and dining level into full contact with the garden side of the site. Viewed from above, the zinc roof is faceted and angular, its panels running in different directions across the addition and the original roofline, and integrated solar panels are visible across its surface. The aerial photograph confirms what the street-level views suggest: this is a building with two clearly legible architectural identities occupying the same volume.

The staircase is the project's most significant interior element and the one that communicates most directly what Archi-Tectonics was working toward spatially. It is a custom-built winding steel form finished in white, with no visible structural supports and no conventional balustrade. The geometry is entirely fluid: the parapet wall curves outward at the base, the treads spiral upward in oak, and the surrounding plaster ceiling surface folds and peels away from the stair volume in a continuous organic form that was developed using parametric tools. Looking up through the stairwell from below, the ceiling planes wrap around the void in a series of curved overlapping surfaces that change in apparent depth and shadow as you move through the space. Looking down from above, the stair reads as a tightly wound spiral of pale oak treads contained within the white sculptural form. The glass globe pendant lights hang in a vertical cluster through the full height of the stairwell, their transparent forms catching the natural light that enters through a skylight aperture above.



The living room sits at mid-level in the section, double-height on the window side and opening directly to the staircase on the other. The floor is pale ash throughout this level, and the windows are full-height black steel-framed glazing looking out to the rear garden and the brick of the neighboring terrace beyond. A slender black linear fireplace is set into the wall adjacent to the stair. Black charred-wood panels cover the wall behind the staircase, providing a dark vertical backdrop against which the white stair reads with particular clarity. A large-format figurative painting hangs on the adjacent wall. The ceiling planes above the living room are angular and faceted, following the geometry of the new zinc addition above, and a clerestory window above the upper landing allows light to enter the section at high level and wash down across the folded ceiling surfaces. A wood-slab coffee table with organic edges and a dark green velvet armchair introduce material warmth into the otherwise predominantly white and pale ash interior of this level.



The primary bedroom occupies the original brick portion of the house at the rear. The exposed original brick wall behind the bed is left raw and unfinished, its warm irregular surface providing the room's primary textural element. A full-height dark shelving unit runs the length of the side wall, housing books and objects in open and closed sections, the dark stained timber of the joinery contrasting with the pale ash floor and white ceiling. Two cylindrical glass pendant lights hang as bedside lights on either side of the bed. A slatted dark panel conceals the dressing room behind, which is accessed through a full-height opening. The room is compact but organized so that the storage wall and the brick wall do the architectural work, leaving the floor plan clear.

The primary bathroom works entirely in dark materials. A matte black freestanding tub sits in the foreground, its form rounded and minimal. Behind it, the shower zone is lined in a textured stone-effect tile in warm grey-brown tones, set vertically in the recess and lit from above by a cove of warm amber light that runs the full width of the space. A black ceiling-mounted rain head and black-finish controls complete the shower. The vanity area uses a dark solid stone double basin with integrated countertop, black wall-mounted taps, and a full-width mirror cabinet above. The overall palette is dark, consistent and controlled throughout.





The powder room takes a very different approach. Set within a recessed niche, the back wall is covered entirely in small-scale gold mosaic tiles that catch and reflect the cove light above, creating a warm, almost incandescent surface. A circular black-framed mirror is mounted against the mosaic. Below it, a cylindrical brushed brass basin sits on a dark floating vanity with a thin profile, with black wall-mounted taps. The combination of the gold mosaic, the brass basin and the dark surround gives the powder room a material intensity that sits in deliberate contrast to the restraint of the spaces around it.

The roof terrace carved into the zinc addition is visible in the aerial view as a recessed outdoor space set back behind a low parapet, with planting visible and the surrounding Primrose Hill rooftops and greenery beyond.

London Solar House demonstrates what a constrained urban plot can produce when the limitations of a historic structure are treated as the starting conditions for a new architectural proposition rather than obstacles to be minimized. The brick base, the zinc addition, the sculptural stair and the contrasting material registers of the interior rooms each operate within the same building while occupying clearly different architectural territory.



BLUEPRINT

A Goan Villa

WHERE ARCHITECTURE, CLIMATE AND
LANDSCAPE COEXIST

Location: Goa, India

Area: 4,000 sq ft per villa

Typology: Residential

Design Firm: UNIIFY

Principal Designers: Ar. Ashish Batra and Kavita A. Batra

Collaborators: Jaipur Rugs, Dialogues by Nirmals, White Teak, Tisva,

Decowood by Greenlam, Elysium, Schüco, Nexion, Kohler, Gessi

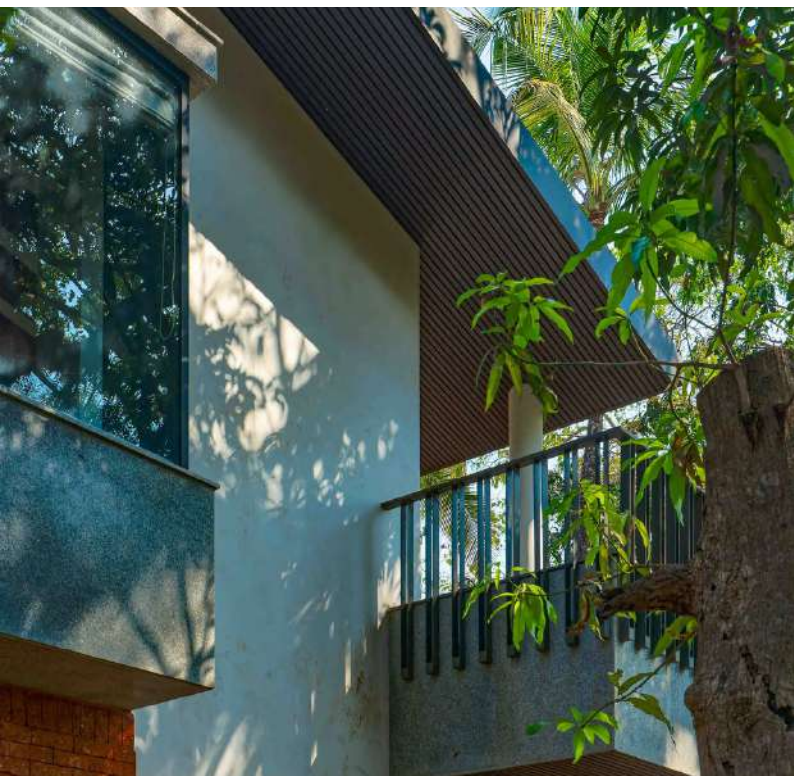
Photography: Ranjan Sharma, Lightzone

In Goa, UNIIFY, led by principal designers Ar. Ashish Batra and Kavita A. Batra, has completed a series of 4,000-square-foot villas where the site itself was the first design decision. Before the layout was fixed or the massing studied, the existing trees on the plot were mapped and retained. The architectural plan was adjusted around this mature vegetation rather than the other way around, allowing the built form to sit within the landscape rather than beside it.

The exterior makes the design position clear from the approach. The front facade is dominated by laterite stone cladding in deep red-orange, laid in a herringbone pattern that gives the surface a directional texture while referencing a material deeply embedded in Goa's architectural history. Laterite here is not used structurally but as a contemporary cladding detailed with precise joints and clean edges, connecting the villas to regional craft traditions while reading as entirely current. The entry door is set into this laterite face, flanked by grey stone plinth elements and framed by tropical planting at ground level. A double-height laterite wall along the road-facing edge creates a protective threshold between the street and the private domain of the villa, while the architecture beyond it opens toward the landscape.

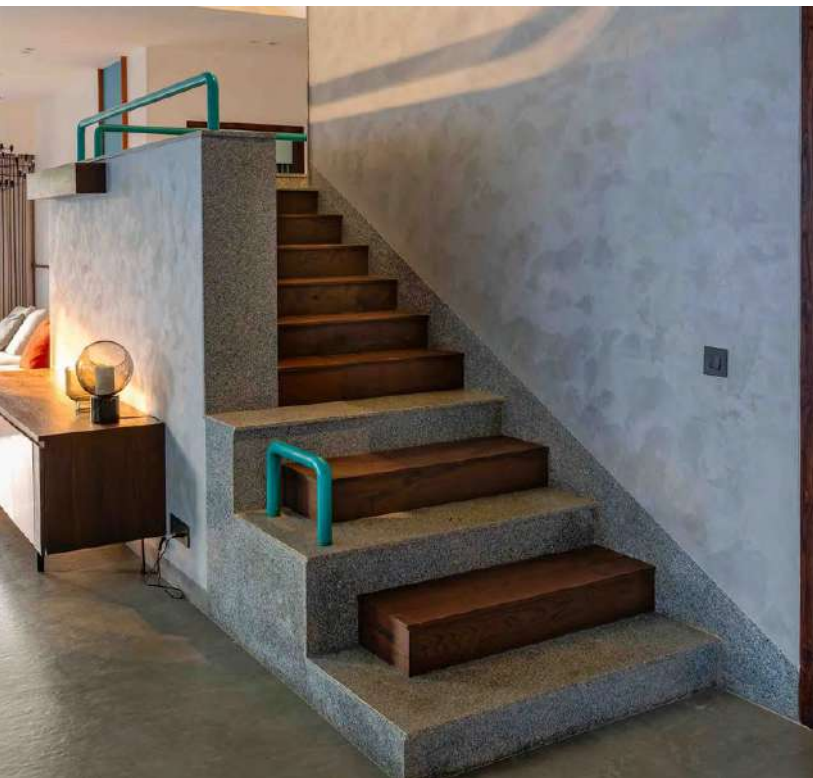


The upper storey steps back from the laterite base, rendered in white plaster with a grey stone band at floor level and a dark timber-slatted soffit under the projecting roof overhang. A rounded balcony with dark metal vertical railings extends from the upper level, its curved profile sitting in contrast to the more rectilinear geometry of the facade below. The roofline is pitched and finished with dark timber cladding on the underside of the eaves, a detail that runs consistently around the upper perimeter and gives the villas a defined horizontal line against the sky. Mature trees grow around and through the building mass, their canopy casting shadow across the white render and the laterite face throughout the day.



The pool runs along the full length of the rear facade, contained between the glazed living frontage and a dense planting boundary of palms, banana trees and tropical groundcover. A waterfall element on the end wall feeds into the pool, and a timber deck with rope-weave chairs sits at the near end. The pool deck is finished in grey stone consistent with the plinth material used on the exterior, and the covered overhang above the glazing provides shade to the interior while allowing the pool and vegetation to remain fully visible from within. The density of the planting around the pool boundary is such that the villa reads as embedded within greenery on all sides rather than placed within a cleared site.

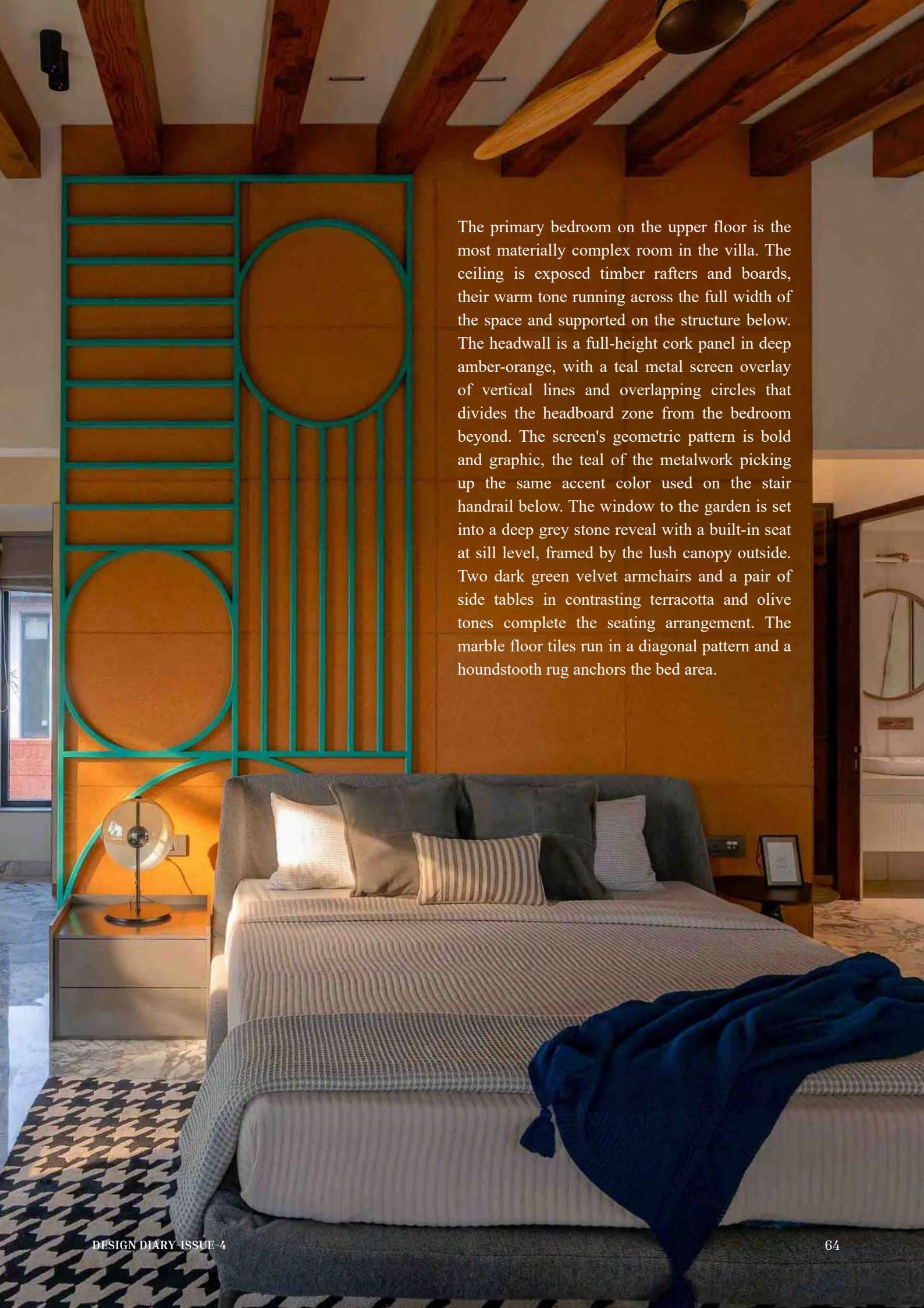




Inside, the ground floor is organized as a continuous open plan with the staircase acting as the spatial anchor. The staircase has granite-clad cheeks and solid timber treads, with a teal powder-coated steel handrail that runs from a small U-shaped handle at the base to a full-length rail at the upper landing. Above the stair, a curved skylight aperture in the ceiling brings natural light down the full height of the stair volume, and the surrounding wall is finished in a cloud-effect grey textured plaster that shifts in tone as the light from above moves across it through the day. The teal of the stair handrail is the most direct statement of the color strategy that runs through the house: used as a precise compositional accent within an otherwise restrained material palette.

The dining area sits adjacent to the staircase, opening directly to the pool through full-height glazed sliding doors on the garden side. A long black dining table with orange leather armchairs seats eight, with a cluster of pendant lights in black and white hanging above it. On the wall above the dining zone, a horizontal run of dark timber battens frames the transition between the dining and living areas and acts as a visual screen rather than a partition, allowing the two zones to read as connected while giving each its own spatial definition. The living room beyond is furnished with a large sectional sofa in warm grey, a black circular coffee table, and a barrel-shaped grey armchair. A blue-painted wall panel with a vertical timber frame and a framed artwork serves as the room's focal point on the left wall, the blue a deliberate accent within the cream and neutral ground of the rest of the space. Full-height grey curtains run the width of the rear glazing, and the pool and vegetation are visible through the glass beyond.





The primary bedroom on the upper floor is the most materially complex room in the villa. The ceiling is exposed timber rafters and boards, their warm tone running across the full width of the space and supported on the structure below. The headwall is a full-height cork panel in deep amber-orange, with a teal metal screen overlay of vertical lines and overlapping circles that divides the headboard zone from the bedroom beyond. The screen's geometric pattern is bold and graphic, the teal of the metalwork picking up the same accent color used on the stair handrail below. The window to the garden is set into a deep grey stone reveal with a built-in seat at sill level, framed by the lush canopy outside. Two dark green velvet armchairs and a pair of side tables in contrasting terracotta and olive tones complete the seating arrangement. The marble floor tiles run in a diagonal pattern and a houndstooth rug anchors the bed area.

A second bedroom takes a quieter approach. Dark teal floor tiles run continuously across the floor, and the wardrobe wall uses ribbed glass sliding panels in a dark frame alongside a built-in timber-framed reading nook with open shelving above and a padded bench below, accented with blue cushions. A pink bed linen introduces warmth alongside a dark knit throw, and the window to the side elevation brings in diffused natural light through the greenery outside. The ceiling here is flat and white, in contrast to the rafter ceiling of the primary bedroom, giving this room a contained and quieter character.



The balcony on the upper level projects from the white rendered face of the villa, its curved grey stone parapet and dark metal vertical railing sitting directly within the tree canopy. Looking out from the balcony, the mature trees are immediately present: their branches at the same level as the first floor, their trunks visible below against the laterite base. The timber soffit of the roof overhang runs above the balcony, its dark slatted surface absorbing the sky rather than reflecting it.

Throughout, the color strategy is consistent and controlled. Teal appears on stair handrails, metal screens and balcony railings. Blue surfaces and accent objects appear in the living room, bedrooms and stair wall. These are not decorative flourishes but architectural elements used in color, functioning as compositional markers within an otherwise restrained palette of laterite, grey stone, white plaster and timber.



BLUEPRINT

Aster, Shanghai

ROOMOO DESIGN STUDIO BUILDS A RESTAURANT
AROUND THE GEOMETRY OF A FLOWER

Project Name: Aster

Location: No. 208, 150, Yongyuan Road, Jing'an District, Shanghai

Project Date: 2025

Interior Design: RooMoo Design Studio

Lead Designers: Tao Zhang, Ray Zhang, Marine Bois

Design Team: Gino Wang

Construction: Shanghai Suji Decoration Engineering Co., Ltd.

Lighting Consultant: Shanghai Baizi Lighting Engineering Design Co., Ltd.

Manufacturer: Hafele

Furniture: Shanghai YiZhu Decorating Engineering Co., Ltd.

Client: Shanghai Rise Pie Catering Co., Ltd.

Photography: Wen Studio

Award: Winner, Interior Design Restaurant — Fine Dining

Aster is a fine dining restaurant in Shanghai's Jing'an District designed by RooMoo Design Studio for chef Joshua Paris, whose nineteen-year culinary career has taken him through New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Australia, and China, including formative years at UV with Paul Pairet and alongside Richard Ekkebus at 58° Grill in Mandarin Oriental Shanghai. The restaurant takes its name from the aster flower, whose Latin root also means "star," and the design takes that double reference—botanical and celestial—as its organizing principle from the plan outward to the ceiling and through to the private dining spaces at the upper level.



Paris's culinary philosophy is built around a single discipline: always ask why, and refine every element until it cannot be improved further. That same uncompromising approach is visible in how RooMoo has approached the design. Nothing in the space reads as arbitrary. Every material choice, every lighting decision, and every spatial transition connects back to the same botanical and astronomical framework that gives the restaurant its name and its identity.

The spatial logic is drawn directly from the flower's natural structure: a central disc surrounded by radiating petals, repeated and layered outward. At Aster, this structure becomes a three-part concentric plan that organizes the entire ground floor. The circular cocktail bar occupies the center of the room. Around it, a wraparound dining ring faces the open kitchen, placing guests within direct sight and arm's reach of preparation, plating, and service. The outermost ring is circulation, enabling a continuous 360-degree service radius and keeping the floor plan in constant movement without ever disrupting the dining experience. The front and back of the house operate as a single visible stage rather than as separate domains, and the seating arrangement means that the culinary process is part of the guest experience from the moment they sit down rather than something that happens out of sight.



The bar itself, visible in the images as a long curved form with white upholstered stools running along its outer face, is finished at hand level in a hand-modelled clay surface that RooMoo describes as evoking stratified rock. The texture is evident in the photographs: rough, irregular, and tactile against the warm timber of the bar top and the herringbone oak floor that radiates outward from the bar's base like roots extending through soil. A soft halo of light runs along the bar's perimeter at floor level, creating a luminous ring that reinforces the concentric geometry of the plan and connects visually to the overhead installation above. The bar functions simultaneously as the room's social hub and its production deck, and the design makes no attempt to separate these two roles. The openness is the point.



The dominant visual element of the space is the ceiling installation suspended above the bar across the double-height volume. Thirty-nine modular brass frames spiral gently outward from a central point, each holding a single translucent violet petal made from recycled xuan paper. The scale of the installation is considerable: in the wide-angle photographs it fills the full height of the double-volume above the bar, its outer frames extending toward the glazed facade and the exposed concrete structure of the building beyond. Viewed from across the room, it reads as a single large violet nebula suspended in the air, its petals overlapping and shifting as light catches their edges and moves through the translucent material. Viewed from directly beneath, as the close-up images reveal, the individual brass frames and the delicate fiber texture of the xuan paper become legible, and the construction logic behind the effect becomes clear. The material quality of the petals is visible at this scale: semi-translucent, with the natural fibers of the paper showing through, subtle tonal variation across each panel, and the edges illuminated by carefully directed light that traces their form without flattening it. At the center of the installation, a circular floral motif concentrated in the brass framework places the botanical reference at the highest and most central point of the composition, making the aster form readable even from below. The system is designed for longevity and sustainability: petals can be re-dyed as they age, and frames can be reused, making the installation adaptable over time without requiring full replacement.

Aster opened in 2025 and was awarded Winner in
Interior Design Restaurant—Fine Dining.



The floor throughout the main dining area is herringbone oak, transitioning to stone within the bar zone, and every edge where a surface meets the body—bar counter, seating, table—has been rounded and softened in timber or stone so that the physical contact with the space is consistently comfortable. The herringbone pattern of the floor radiates outward from the bar in a way that reads as an extension of the floral geometry into the ground plane, connecting the ceiling installation and the floor surface through the same organizational logic. The exposed concrete ceiling of the building is left visible above and around the installation, its raw industrial quality providing a deliberate counterpoint to the warmth and craft of the interior below and allowing the violet and brass of the ceiling piece to read with clarity against the neutral grey of the structure.

Along the window line, layered pendant lights continue the floral motif, each aligned with structural beams and varying subtly in height and form. Their decorative glow sits above the dining tables, while precise downlights below ensure that each table is properly illuminated for the food and the service without relying on the ambient warmth of the decorative layer.

A side corridor rises past the open kitchen to the mezzanine VIP lounge, which is finished in walnut and velvet and where the room's geometry shifts subtly off-axis, creating a more contained and private atmosphere distinct from the openness of the ground floor. A mirrored antique bronze canopy expands the perception of the lower ceiling height, etched with abstract floral motifs that are positioned to align precisely with the lighting, creating what RooMoo describes as a quiet, elevated sky within the mezzanine volume. The linear art-glass windows of this level are referenced in the soft halo of light at the bar below, connecting the two levels through the same lighting language.

In the private dining room at the upper level, a stardust installation suspends smoky violet petals in loose constellations above the dining table. Set against a dark textile backdrop that draws the eye to the food and the conversation rather than the architecture, the space completes the celestial half of the restaurant's name. Stone and timber give way here entirely to velvet and woven fabric so that every surface the body comes into contact with is soft, warm, and quiet. The transition from the open stage of the ground floor to the intimacy of the private dining room is the full range of the restaurant's spatial offer: public and performative at one end, enclosed and concentrated at the other.

THE IMPORT EDIT



A-Class Marble has been importing stone into India for more than fifty years, which means it has been doing this longer than most of the architects and designers who specify its material have been alive, longer than the premium residential market that now consumes it in such quantity even existed in its current form, long enough that the company's institutional memory of the global stone trade, of which quarries produce what and under what conditions and with what consistency, is itself a kind of asset that does not appear on any balance sheet but shapes every decision the business makes. Rajesh Bhandari, its Director, speaks about stone with the precision of someone who has never needed to make it sound more interesting than it is, because the material, in his telling, is already interesting enough, unpredictable enough, technically demanding enough, and beautiful enough to sustain a career of fifty years without once requiring embellishment. **Design Diary International's Shweta** put a series of questions to him over email, and what came back was a conversation about process and material and the particular discipline required to operate at volume without surrendering the standards that make volume worth anything at all.

The company is based in New Delhi and today offers more than 550 varieties of marble, stone, granite, and architectural surfaces sourced from quarries and suppliers across more than forty countries, a number that places it among the most comprehensively stocked natural stone operations in the country and arguably the most significant importer of exclusive marble in India by any reasonable measure. But the scale, as Bhandari tells it, was never the objective. The early decisions that defined A-Class Marble were not decisions about how large to grow but about what kind of company to be, and they focused on building systems rather than accumulating volume, on creating clear grading protocols and disciplined sourcing and consistent processing standards and quality checks so that growth, when it came, would be supported by process rather than by intuition alone. Those choices shaped the values the company still operates by today, consistency above everything else, and a commitment to delivering stone that performs as reliably on a large hospitality project as it does in the most considered private residence.



A-Class Marble has spent more than five decades sourcing the world's finest natural stone for India's most demanding spaces. Its Director Rajesh Bhandari speaks to Design Diary International on quarries in Africa, the technology remaking stone processing, and why marble, in the end, always wins the argument.

Operating from Kishangarh, globally recognized as one of the world's most significant marble hubs, has shaped that approach in ways worth understanding carefully. Access to material in that ecosystem is vast, Bhandari notes, but true differentiation in such an environment is earned rather than inherited, and the constant comparison and high expectations of operating at the centre of a global stone conversation have pushed A-Class Marble to refine how it sources internationally, processes with precision, and inspects every slab with a rigor that the abundance of the Kishangarh market makes easy to let slip. Being surrounded by stone does not make you good at stone, and Bhandari has built a company that understands the difference between proximity to the material and genuine mastery of it.

The most significant development in A-Class Marble's recent history is one that shifts its identity from importer to something considerably more invested in the origin of what it sells. The company now owns and operates its own quarries in Tanzania and Zambia, a fact Bhandari mentions with the quiet confidence of someone describing the outcome of a long and deliberate strategy rather than a fortunate discovery, though the discovery element was real enough. Charting unexplored territory in Africa, as he puts it, and finding there the raw material for three new exclusive white marble varieties that respond to evolving global design demands, was an experience that combined the methodical and the genuinely unexpected in the way that the stone business, at its best, always does. Direct quarry ownership changes the nature of A-Class Marble's relationship with its supply chain in fundamental ways, allowing the company to uphold stringent standards of ethical extraction, maintain full control over quality from the point at which the stone leaves the earth rather than the point at which it arrives in Delhi, and expand its portfolio with material that no other importer in India can offer because no other importer in India owns the ground it comes from.

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Sustainability becomes credible only when it is embedded in routine operations rather than treated as a separate narrative.

-Rajesh Bhandari



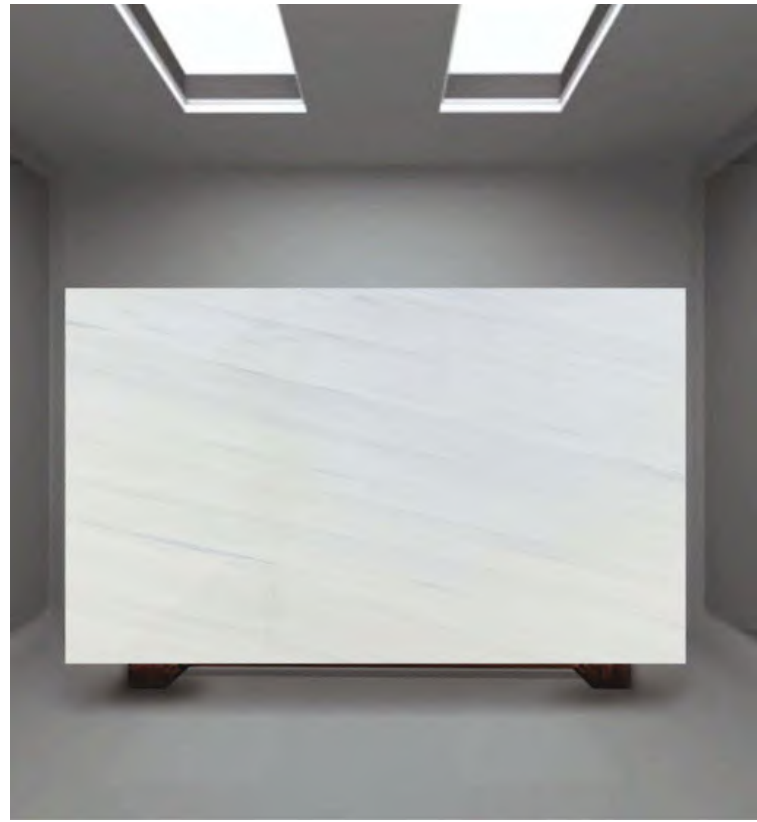


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Growth had to be supported by process, not intuition alone.
-Rajesh Bhandari

That ownership also changes the nature of the company's sustainability commitments, moving them from policy to practice in a way that Bhandari is careful to distinguish. Responsible stone processing, in practical terms, is about how decisions are made every day on the factory floor, he says, not about how they are described in a document prepared for a different audience. It involves reducing waste where possible, using energy and water more judiciously, ensuring that each block is utilized thoughtfully rather than partially processed and abandoned. Sustainability becomes credible, in his account of it, only when it is embedded in routine operations rather than treated as a narrative sitting alongside the real business, and the standard he applies to that word is considerably more demanding than the industry average.

The technology that enables A-Class Marble to meet those standards on the processing side has changed significantly in recent years, and it is here that Bhandari becomes most technically specific and most clearly engaged, talking about stone cutting with the fluency of someone who has thought carefully about what precision actually costs and what it actually produces. The introduction of the Innovire, a wire-saw machine using diamond-coated wire to cut stone with an accuracy that conventional gangsaw systems cannot approach, has had the most meaningful impact on what the company can produce and how. The machine places significantly less stress on the stone during cutting, resulting in smoother surfaces, thinner and more accurate cuts, and meaningfully reduced material loss, and its AI-enabled monitoring and data-driven cutting logic optimize each block based on the stone's own characteristics rather than applying a standardized approach to material that is by nature anything but standardized. For a company working with premium natural stone, where each block is irreplaceable and the margin for waste is both financially and ethically significant, the ability to cut more accurately and lose less is not an operational refinement. It is a statement of values expressed through machinery.



Alongside the Innovire, A-Class Marble has developed StrenInn, a proprietary processing technology whose name compresses the words strength and innovation into a single term and whose purpose is to ensure that marble retains its durability, finish, and lustre even after years of daily use in demanding conditions. The technology addresses directly the questions that increasingly sophisticated clients are now bringing to the material selection stage, questions about how stone will age, how it will perform under the specific pressures of Indian climates, how it will look in ten years rather than in the first month after installation. That clients are asking these questions at all reflects a maturity in how marble is understood and specified in India today that Bhandari welcomes without reservation, because informed decisions, in his experience, lead to better outcomes for everyone involved, the client, the designer, the supplier, and the material itself.



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In such contexts, marble becomes part of the architecture rather than a superficial layer.

-Rajesh Bhandari

The change in how designers engage with stone over the past decade is one he has observed closely and describes with the measured satisfaction of someone whose own position has been quietly vindicated by a broader shift in taste and intelligence. There is greater attention now to how a stone will age, how it reacts to light, how it supports a spatial narrative rather than competing with it, and specifications have become more nuanced as a result, with designers seeking materials that integrate into architecture rather than announce themselves as its point. As luxury interiors move toward restraint, marble is finding what Bhandari calls a more architectural role, its presence increasingly subtle, contributing to atmosphere and depth rather than ornamentation, with softer finishes and calmer patterns and a quality of presence that quietly anchors a space rather than filling it with noise. It is a direction that suits the material's deepest strengths, and it is a direction that suits A-Class Marble's position in the market precisely.

The projects the company associates itself with most closely reflect that sensibility, homes and hospitality spaces and cultural projects where material selection is driven by intent rather than excess, where longevity and spatial clarity are valued above the immediate impact of an overtly expensive surface, where marble becomes part of the architecture rather than a layer applied to it. That preference is not merely aesthetic, it is also a description of the client relationship that produces the best work and the most enduring associations, because the designer or developer who understands stone well enough to use it with that kind of restraint is the one who will return, who will bring the next project and the one after that, who will treat the supplier as a collaborator in the fullest sense of the word rather than a vendor to be managed.

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Working with marble remains a dialogue between control and acceptance, and that balance is what keeps the industry endlessly engaging.

-Rajesh Bhandari

Looking forward, Bhandari sees the Indian luxury materials market moving toward greater discernment, a growing preference for materials that feel authentic and age with dignity, a shift that will favor suppliers who prioritize substance and long-term value over the appeal of surfaces that look spectacular in a photograph and reveal their limitations over time. It is a forecast that positions A-Class Marble well, which may be why he delivers it without visible satisfaction, as though it is simply the direction things are moving and the company's job is to be ready rather than to take credit for having anticipated it.

What continues to excite him personally, after everything, is the unpredictability of the material itself, the fact that no matter how advanced the processes become and how refined the technology grows, each block of stone carries its own character and its own challenges, demands its own conversation between the cutter and the material, resists the assumption that the previous block tells you anything definitive about the next one. We experienced firsthand the excitement of discovering new marble as we charted unexplored territory in Africa, he says, and there is in that sentence a quality of genuine wonder that fifty years in a single industry has not diminished, which is perhaps the most instructive thing about Rajesh Bhandari and about A-Class Marble both, that the discipline and the systems and the technology and the rigor are all in service of something that remains, at its core, a dialogue between control and acceptance, between what can be engineered and what must simply be encountered, between the precision of a diamond wire and the irreducible individuality of something that formed over millions of years in conditions no factory will ever replicate.



BUILT ENVIRONMENT



Resting Pavilion, Osaka Expo 2025:
MIDW Turns Excavation Into
Architecture



Project: Resting Pavilion, Osaka Expo 2025

Location: Yumeshima, Osaka, Japan

Area: 248 m²

Architects: MIDW

Structure: Jun Yanagimuro Structure Design, Toshiaki Kimura

Furniture: Studio arche

Year: 2025

Photography: Benjamin Hosking

Yumeshima, the artificial island hosting Expo 2025 in Osaka, sits on reclaimed land with inherently weak ground conditions. Any construction on the site required the removal of a volume of soil equivalent to the weight of the proposed building before work could begin. For most projects, such an undertaking would be an inconvenient prerequisite to be resolved and forgotten. For MIDW, it became the design.

The entire site was excavated into a sequence of alternating hollows and mounds, an operation that simultaneously fulfilled the soil removal requirement and generated a rhythmic, undulating topography across the ground plane. The excavated terrain was then used directly as formwork: a roof was cast using the contoured earth surface as its mold, lifted, rotated ninety degrees on the plan, and placed back onto the ground. The result is a continuous cave-like void between the undulating ground surface and the raised roof above it, a spatial condition that reads from the images as simultaneously open and sheltered, structural and geological.



The images make the formal quality of this operation legible in a way that a description alone cannot. Looking across the pavilion from ground level, the roof is a large-format mesh structure, its triangulated grid curving and dipping in a fluid form that bears the imprint of the terrain from which it was cast. The mesh reads as light and almost transparent against the sky, its grid casting a patterned shadow across the pale ground surface below. A single tapered concrete or steel column supports the structure at one point, its pyramidal form making the most direct structural statement in an otherwise deliberately ambiguous composition. The ground itself rolls in soft waves beneath the roof, with a low curved bench set into one of the hollows, and the tree canopy of the adjacent landscape is visible through and above the mesh on all sides.

Wisteria has been planted on the mounds, climbing upward over the rising roof surface and beginning to establish itself across the mesh grid. As the plants grow, they cast shade on the ground below while building a new ecosystem within and around the structure. The relationship between the planted vegetation and the built mesh is visible in the images: green growth is already threading through the steel grid at the upper edges, blurring the boundary between the constructed and the natural.

MIDW has framed the project with a specific long-term intention. If the pavilion is retained after the Expo rather than demolished, the structure would gradually become overgrown, the wisteria and adjacent forest eventually absorbing the built form into the landscape. The pavilion's current state, visible in these photographs, is an early point in what the architects envision as a longer process of transformation, from temporary installation toward something closer to ruin and rewilding.

The project is a direct response to the specific conditions of its site: the weak ground, the soil removal requirement, the reclaimed island context, and the temporary nature of the Expo program. Each of these constraints is addressed by the same operation: excavating the terrain, which generates the topography, produces the formwork, creates the spatial experience, and sets the conditions for the vegetation that will define the structure's future. It is a project where the problem and the solution are the same act.



COLLECTIBLE

The Lepli chair by Kensaku Oshiro for Poltrona Frau expands a collection that has always understood furniture and fashion as closer disciplines than either typically admits. Drawing from the female silhouette, Oshiro brings the cinched waist, the top-stitched seam, and the soufflé pin-tuck into the vocabulary of upholstered seating—a barrel-shaped monobloc base that tapers at the seat and is marked by a decorative leather band at the narrowing, giving the piece the quiet confidence of something tailored rather than simply made. The new chair adds a padded inclined backrest that wraps the seat with the same considered restraint, completing a formal argument the collection has been building since its first stool. Available in Pelle Frau leather or woven fabric, with the option to combine both across the seat and backrest and offered in fixed, swivel, or wheeled base versions—this is a piece that wears its references openly without being reduced to them.

Poltrona Frau • Est. 1912 • Tolentino, Italy





COLLECTIBLE

The Andaman Credenza by Orange Tree works through a formal idea that is simple enough to state in a single gesture and disciplined enough to carry an entire piece: the U and its inversion, repeated across the front face in rattan cane webbing panels framed by acacia wood, with slender black powder-coated steel cylinders drawing the eye downward to a base that is as considered as the storage it supports. The combination of natural rattan, warm acacia, and matte black metal is one that could easily tip toward the decorative, but the Andaman holds its composure—the proportions are restrained, the finish relationships are honest, and the overall effect is of a piece that has thought carefully about what it wants to say and said it without elaboration.

Orange Tree





COLLECTIBLE

The Paipaï Loveseat by Ligne Roset begins with the most economical of design propositions — a single sheet of paper folded into a closed form — and arrives at something that feels genuinely inevitable rather than merely clever. The folds that crease the foam are not decorative incidents but structural logic, shaping the armrests and defining the silhouette in one continuous move so that the identity of the piece and the comfort it offers are products of the same decision rather than separate considerations. Named for the Pai-Pai fan with its characteristic rounded outline, the Paipaï carries that reference lightly—what you register first is the cocoon quality of a high-backed seat that wraps without enclosing, inviting without insisting. The use of high-performance foams beneath that deceptively simple exterior is the kind of detail that reveals itself only in the sitting, which is where all the serious work of a loveseat is ultimately done.

Ligne Roset





COLLECTIBLE

The Shibari armchair by Visionnaire is built around a single structural idea that earns its elegance honestly—the tubular metal frame curves continuously from the front leg through to the backrest so that what supports the body and what encloses it are one uninterrupted form rather than two separate decisions joined at a seam. Stretch fabric follows this geometry without resistance, and the high-density polyurethane padding beneath offers a softness that the taut exterior does not immediately suggest. The seat, supported on elastic webbing, carries the same quiet intelligence—a piece that reveals how much thought went into it gradually, long after the first glance.

Visionnaire





COLLECTIBLE

The Lillypond side table by Joachim Tantau is the kind of object that asks you to slow down before you have decided to. The top, created by Aline Marion using Florentine Pietra Dura—a method of cutting and fitting pieces of semi-precious stones into designs that only a few skilled artisans have done since the sixteenth century and even fewer do today—rests on a maple base with careful measurements of 52 by 32 by 42 centimeters, a size typical for a side table but feels much more significant. Originally commissioned for an English country house, it is a piece that does not need to raise its voice in a room—the surface does everything, quietly, for anyone who gets close enough to understand what they are looking at.

Joachim Tantau



CULTURE

THE ARCHITECTURE OF ABSENCE

Ruins, voids, and what remains — on the long tradition of building spaces whose meaning lies not in what they contain, but in what they refuse to.



J.M. Gandy, "Bank of England as a Ruin," c.1830. Watercolor on paper. Sir John Soane's Museum, London. Commissioned by Soane himself — one of architecture's most unsettling acts of self-examination.

Sometime around 1830, Joseph Michael Gandy produced a watercolor that his employer had commissioned and that must have given even the client pause. It showed the Bank of England — Sir John Soane's great neoclassical complex in the heart of the City of London, a building still under construction at the time and the work to which Soane had devoted the better part of his career — as a ruin. Columns stood without ceilings. Walls were eaten to their cores. Sky poured through where vaulted rooms had once been planned. Gandy was not recording a catastrophe. He was imagining one, at the express request of the man whose building it was. And what makes the image so arresting, more than a century and a half later, is the sense you get that Soane was not indulging some morbid fantasy but rather clarifying something about the nature of his own enterprise, as if the ruin revealed what the intact building could only suggest: that architecture, in the end, is not about matter but about space, not about the wall but about what the wall frames, and that this truth sometimes becomes visible only when the matter is gone.

The architecture of absence is not a movement with a manifesto or a school with a founding text. It is something more persistent than that, a recurring recognition across cultures and centuries that the void can be as intentional as the solid, that the space defined by loss can be shaped and honoured and made habitable in ways that the conventional instruments of building cannot quite achieve. It runs from the refined spatial philosophy of Heian-period Japan to the burned-out concrete of a German field chapel completed in 2007, and it has produced some of the most morally serious spaces built in the modern world.



Tokonoma alcove and chigaidana shelving, traditional Japanese shoin-zukuri interior. A single hanging scroll, one ikebana arrangement, two ceramic chargers — and the rest given over entirely to wall, timber, and tatami. This is *ma* (間) made habitable: the charged quiet of the interval as a spatial value in itself.

To understand what absence means as a spatial condition, it helps to begin with a culture that theorized it most carefully. The Japanese concept of *ma* (間) resists clean translation because English has no equivalent category: it means something between interval, pause, and gap, and it refers not to emptiness in the sense of vacancy but to the charged quality of the space between things, the silence between sounds that makes music rather than noise, the threshold between rooms that is as spatially deliberate as either room it connects. In Japanese architectural tradition, *ma* is not the absence of design but its highest expression, and the buildings that embody it most fully — the Katsura Imperial Villa in Kyoto, built across the seventeenth century through the patronage of Prince Toshihito and his son Toshitada, is the most celebrated — are organized around the interval as much as around the object. The *engawa*, the transitional veranda between interior and garden at Katsura, is not a circulation space in the Western sense; it is a destination in itself, a room made of threshold. The *tokonoma* alcove in a traditional *shoin* interior is designed to hold very little, often a single hanging scroll and a flower arrangement, because its function is not display but the creation of a charged quiet around whatever it contains. In 1978, the architect Arata Isozaki curated an exhibition titled *MA: Space/Time in Japan* at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris that introduced this thinking formally to a Western architectural audience, and the response suggested that the concept had always been felt, if never quite articulated, by designers working in traditions that never had a word for it.



Genbaku Dome (Atomic Bomb Dome), Hiroshima, Japan. Preserved ruin of the Hiroshima Prefectural Industrial Promotion Hall, designed by Jan Letzel, completed 1915. UNESCO World Heritage Site, 1996. Maintained in the condition left by the blast of August 6, 1945.

The West came to its own understanding of the void by a different and considerably more violent route. On the morning of 6 August 1945, a single weapon released over Hiroshima destroyed or reduced to ash nearly everything within a radius of roughly two kilometres from its point of detonation. The Hiroshima Prefectural Industrial Promotion Hall, a modest domed commercial building designed by the Czech architect Jan Letzel and completed in 1915, survived the blast largely because it stood almost directly beneath the explosion and the pressure wave washed around its frame rather than through it. What remained was a skeleton of iron and masonry, its dome intact but hollow, its floors gone, its windows blown out to empty frames. The decision made in the years following the war — not to restore the building, not to demolish it, but to preserve its ruin in precisely the condition the bomb had left it — was among the most architecturally consequential decisions of the twentieth century, even though it was not, in any conventional sense, an architectural decision at all. The Genbaku Dome, as it is now known, was inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1996. It is one of the most architecturally ordinary buildings on that list and one of the most important, and the gap between those two facts is itself an argument about what architecture can and cannot do. Its power derives entirely from what it is not: intact, useful, and purposeful. It exists to be a wound that does not heal, and its preservation is an act of collective memory expressed through the refusal to build.



Jewish Museum Berlin, Daniel Libeskind, 1999. Exterior zinc cladding with the characteristic slashed window openings.

What Hiroshima established, and what subsequent memorial architecture has had to reckon with, is the question of whether a building can be adequate to the experience it commemorates, or whether adequacy sometimes demands the refusal of architecture's normal ambitions. This is the tension at the centre of Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin, completed in 1999, which remains the most sophisticated built response to that question. The museum is organised around six concrete voids that cut through the full height of the building at irregular intervals, unheated, unlit, and inaccessible — they cannot be entered, only glimpsed through glass screens as you move through the galleries. Libeskind described them as the spaces that cannot be filled because what was destroyed cannot be restored, and the permanent collection surrounding them is arranged so that you come to understand the gaps in the narrative as central to the narrative itself. The Holocaust Tower, one of the six voids and the only one accessible to visitors, is a tall shaft of raw concrete, slightly out of plumb on all four walls so that no surface is square to any other, lit only by a single narrow slit near the ceiling thirty metres above. It is unheated in Berlin's winters. Nothing has been done to make it comfortable or communicative. It is a space designed to do one thing: to produce in the body of the person standing in it some fragment of the experience of a condition that language cannot adequately describe. One enters and understands, in the bones rather than the mind that one is inside an absence.



A building can be adequate to what it commemorates, or it can be beautiful. These are not always the same ambition.



Holocaust Tower (interior void). Unheated concrete shaft, accessible from the permanent collection galleries — one of six voids structuring the museum's spatial argument.

There is a quieter tradition within all of this, less monumental in its ambitions and perhaps more durable in its effects, and it finds its purest expression in the work of the Venetian architect Carlo Scarpa, whose Brion Cemetery in San Vito d'Altivole, near Treviso, occupied the last nine years of his life and in which he is himself buried. The commission came from Onorina Brion, the widow of the industrialist Giuseppe Brion, and Scarpa began work on it in 1969, returning obsessively to its details until his death in 1978. The cemetery is an extension of the existing municipal cemetery but feels like a different order of place: a landscape of water channels and grass mounds and carefully calibrated thresholds in which movement is never directed so much as invited, slowed to a pace at which the weight of the place can be registered. Two concrete circles intersect on a grass mound, framing a view of open sky. A pavilion sits at the water's edge where two sarcophagi lean gently toward one another beneath a concrete arch. Scarpa understood that grief has a geometry, not the geometry of the monument, which is upright and declarative and addressed to the world, but the geometry of the approach, the pause, the moment just before speech, and his spaces hold the visitor in that moment rather than pushing them through it. The voids at Brion are full, in the way that Zosima in *The Brothers Karamazov* means full when he says the earth is soaked with the tears of joy of those who mourn: they are full of water and air and the sound of gravel and the particular quality of north Italian light in autumn, and they make room for feeling without prescribing what the feeling should be.



Brion Cemetery, Carlo Scarpa, San Vito d'Altivole, Treviso, Italy, 1969–1978. The arcosolio sheltering the sarcophagi of Giuseppe and Onorina Brion. Scarpa is buried at the site, at his own request, in a corner he designed himself.

Peter Zumthor's Bruder Klaus Field Chapel in Wachendorf, in the Eifel region of western Germany, completed in 2007, approaches the problem of the void from a direction that is entirely its own. The chapel was commissioned by local farming families, the Scheidtweilers, as a votive offering to the fifteenth-century Swiss hermit saint Nikolaus von Flüe. Zumthor constructed a concrete shell around a tipi-like frame of 112 young tree trunks, then burned the wood from the inside over three weeks, creating a charred interior cavity open to the sky through a single oculus at the top, its floor cast in poured lead. The result is an interior that was made by consuming something: the form of the trees remains faintly legible in the rippled surface of the concrete walls, and what you stand in is the impression, the spatial memory, of something that no longer exists. Rain enters through the oculus and collects on the lead floor. The smoke-darkened walls absorb rather than reflect whatever light arrives. Zumthor, who has spent his career pursuing an architecture of material honesty and sensory precision, produced here a space whose entire character derives from an act of destruction, a burning away that left behind not emptiness but a particular and unrepeatable kind of fullness.



Bruder Klaus Field Chapel, Peter Zumthor, Wachendorf, Eifel, Germany, 2007. Interior looking toward the oculus. The cavity was formed by burning 112 tree trunks from within the completed concrete shell over three weeks. Floor: cast lead. Photography by © Samuel Ludwig via google.

In New York, at the site of the World Trade Center, the memorial titled Reflecting Absence, designed by Michael Arad with landscape architect Peter Walker and opened on the tenth anniversary of September 11, 2001, makes the plainest possible gesture: two vast pools in the footprints of the towers, water falling thirty feet to secondary pools below, the names of the nearly three thousand killed inscribed in bronze at the rim of each. There is no building to read, no spatial sequence to navigate, no architecture asking to be admired. There is a hole in the city where something was, and water falling where floors once held people. The title is not poetic so much as precisely descriptive, and the restraint it announces — the decision to reflect rather than to replace, to acknowledge rather than to resolve — is perhaps the most honest position that architecture has taken in response to catastrophe in the past quarter century, because it accepts, without flinching, that there are things building cannot repair.



9/11 Memorial "Reflecting Absence," Michael Arad and Peter Walker, New York, 2011. South Pool, with name parapets in cast bronze. The pools occupy the precise footprints of the North and South Towers of the World Trade Center.

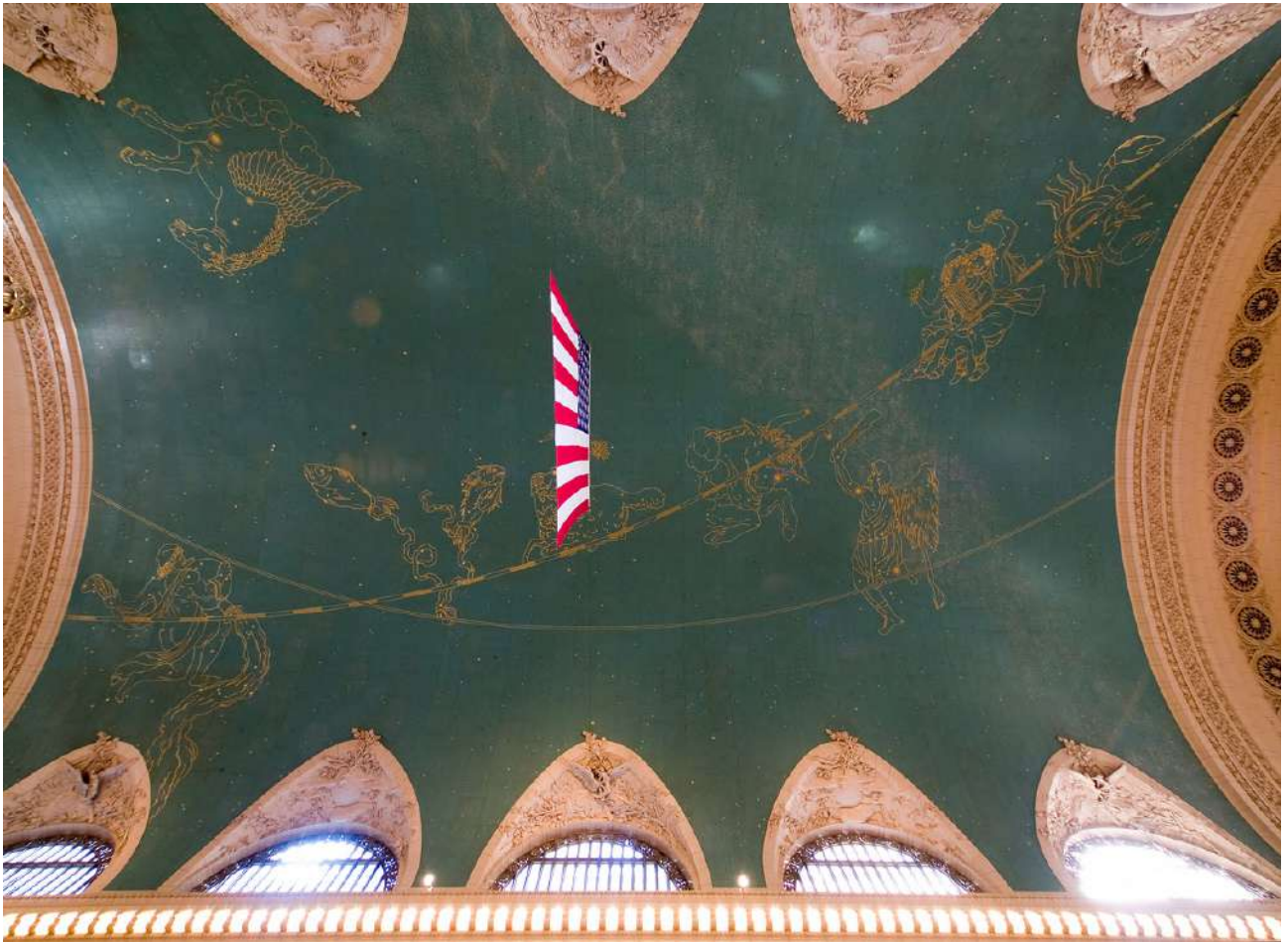
What connects Soane's imagined ruin, the preserved shell of Hiroshima, Libeskind's concrete voids, Scarpa's meditative thresholds, Zumthor's burned interior, and the pools of Lower Manhattan is not a shared aesthetic — these works look nothing like one another and emerged from entirely different cultural and historical conditions. What they share is a conviction that the vacancy left by loss is itself a spatial condition, one that can be shaped and held and given form without being resolved, and that this shaping is among the most serious things that architecture can do. The tradition that runs through them is not one of despair but of a particular and hard-won kind of honesty: the recognition that building, at its highest ambition, is not about filling space but about attending to it, and that attention to absence is not a lesser architecture but, in certain circumstances, the only adequate one.

Soane kept Gandy's watercolour. He hung it in his house in Lincoln's Inn Fields, which is now a museum, and where it remains. He understood what the painting was saying, which is that the spaces he had spent his life making were not really about the stone at all, and that the most truthful image of his achievement was one in which the stone was gone. There are not many architects who could face that understanding and find it clarifying rather than devastating. Soane could, and the buildings he made suggest that he was right to.

THE GRAMMAR OF ARCHITECTURE

THE SURFACE *NOBODY SEES*

And Everything It Has Always Been Saying



Main Concourse ceiling, Grand Central Terminal, New York, 1913; restored 1996–1998. A Mediterranean blue-green vault sown with gold-leaf constellations of the winter zodiac, 37 metres above a floor through which 45 million people pass each year. The sky depicted here is mirror-reversed — painted as it appears from outside the celestial sphere, looking in.

The floor holds the body... the wall defines the room....

But it is the ceiling that carries the building's most unguarded statement about what it believes and who it imagines is beneath it. Every other surface must negotiate with use — it must be walked on, leaned against, opened, closed, furnished against, worn down by the daily friction of occupation. The ceiling alone is exempt from all of that. It asks nothing of the body except the one thing the body is least inclined to give it: attention. And in the long history of building, the cultures that have understood this — that the surface overhead is the surface most free to carry serious ideas precisely because it carries none of the body's weight — have produced the architecture that endures longest in the mind after the body has left the building.

This is why the ceiling has historically been the surface on which civilizations placed their cosmologies. Not decoration as an afterthought applied to a completed room, but ideology given a spatial address. The Roman dome opened to the sky because Roman spatial philosophy required a legible connection between human interior and celestial order. The Nasrid muqarnas vault dissolved stone into a geometry of infinite subdivision because Islamic architectural thinking considered the representation of the infinite a form of devotion, not ornament. The Gothic painted vault turned the interior of a stone enclosure into a sky because medieval theology required the worshipper to feel, in the body rather than the mind that they were already partway into heaven. In each case the ceiling was the room's argument — the surface through which the building said the thing it most needed to say, trusting that at some point, in some unguarded moment, the person beneath it would look up.

What follows brings together seven ceilings drawn from eight centuries, five continents, and as many distinct traditions of building — Roman concrete engineering, Nasrid plasterwork, Fatimid woodcarving, Safavid tilework, Gothic stone vaulting, Dravidian rock excavation, and Beaux-Arts civic grandeur. They share almost nothing in material, technique, or cultural context. What they share is the conviction that the space above a person's head is worth getting right, and that getting it right is among the most demanding things architecture can ask of itself. To stand beneath any one of them is to understand that you are not looking at a ceiling. You are looking at what a particular civilization, at a particular moment in its history, chose to say when it had all the tools of building at its command and one surface left to address.

THE PANTHEON DOME

Rome, Italy · 118–128 AD · Commissioned under Emperor Hadrian



Interior of the Pantheon dome, Rome, 118–128 AD. Five concentric rings of 28 coffered recesses stepping toward the 8.7-metre oculus — the building's sole source of natural light and its central cosmological gesture. The disc of direct sunlight that the oculus casts onto the interior walls and floor shifts position continuously across the course of each day.

Dome Span: 43.3 metres Oculus Diameter: 8.7 metres MATERIAL: Unreinforced Roman concrete

The Pantheon's dome remains, after nearly nineteen centuries, the largest unreinforced concrete dome in the world, and its survival is not merely a matter of structural luck. It is the product of an engineering intelligence that understood concrete as a composite material whose performance could be calibrated through the careful gradation of aggregate — heavy volcanic tufa and brick near the base of the dome, progressively lighter pumice and scoria as the structure rises toward the crown — so that the mass decreases as it ascends, reducing the tensile stresses that would otherwise fracture an undifferentiated shell. The dome spans 43.3 metres. The distance from the floor to the apex of the oculus equals that figure precisely, meaning that a perfect sphere would fit within the interior volume, touching the pavement and the rim of the oculus simultaneously. This is not a structural coincidence. It is a cosmological proposition, the enclosure of ideal geometric form within a built room, and it is expressed with greatest force at the ceiling.

The coffered interior surface descends in five rings of twenty-eight recesses, stepping inward and upward toward the oculus in a progression whose perspectival geometry makes the dome read considerably deeper than it is. The coffers are structural as well as spatial — they reduce the mass of the shell substantially without compromising its integrity, and they were originally gilded, the gold recalling the conventional surface of the night sky in Roman decorative tradition. At the centre, the oculus is open to weather: rain enters and drains through a slightly convex floor; wind crosses the interior; a circle of direct sunlight traces a slow arc across the walls and pavement over the course of each day, animating a surface that would otherwise be fixed. Hadrian did not build a roof with a hole in it. He built a sky through which the actual sky was intermittently visible, and the entire ceiling is organized around that distinction as around a theological argument from which everything else follows.

SALA DE LAS DOS HERMANAS, ALHAMBRA

Granada, Spain · c.1354–1391 · Nasrid Dynasty under Muhammad V



Muqarnas stalactite vault, Sala de las Dos Hermanas, Palace of the Lions, Alhambra, Granada, c.1380. Approximately 5,000 individual carved plaster cells arranged across 16 radiating arms, transitioning the square plan of the hall into a circular, skylit crown. The poet Ibn Zamrak's verses, inscribed in the frieze below, describe the vault as the heavens in motion.

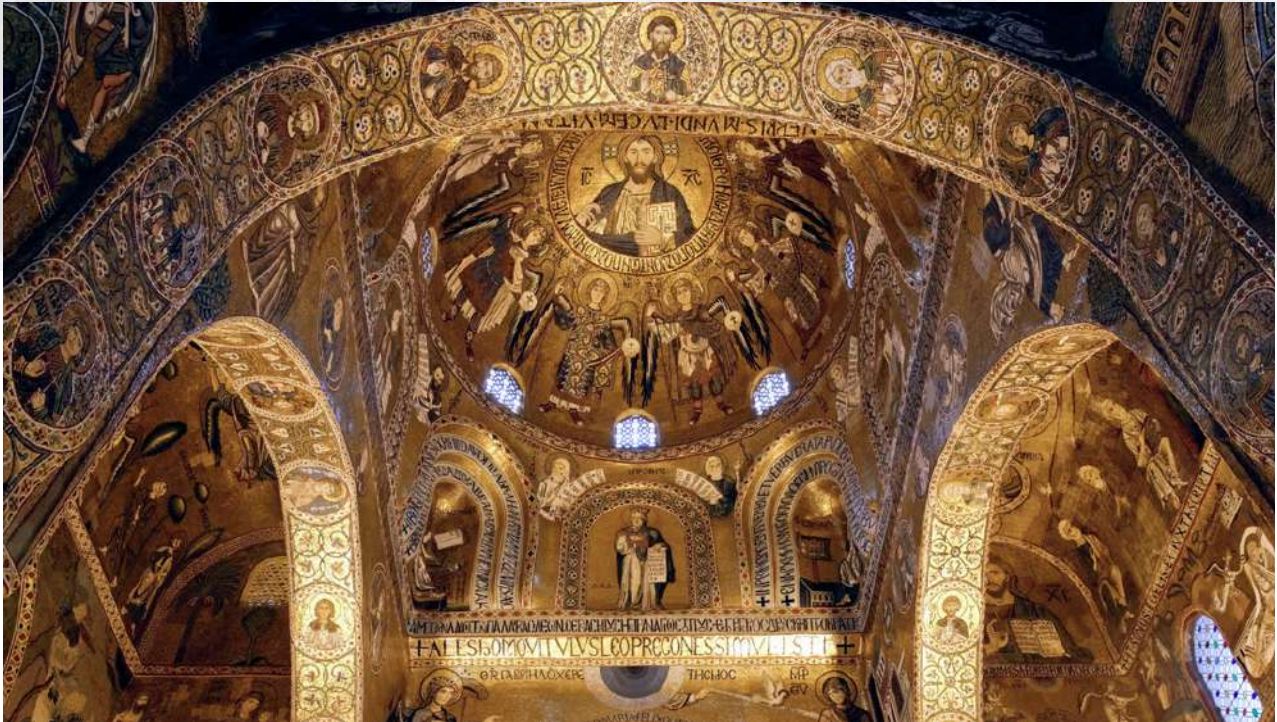
Cells (approx.)~5,000 plaster units Radiating Arms: 16 Material:Carved and polychromed plaster

The muqarnas vault of the Sala de las Dos Hermanas in the Alhambra's Palace of the Lions is the most complex plaster ceiling produced within the Nasrid tradition, and it is worth being precise about what that complexity means structurally before considering what it means philosophically. The vault is composed of approximately five thousand individual plaster cells arranged within a system of sixteen radiating arms that emerge from the square plan of the hall at its base and resolve, through successive tiers of diminishing cells, into a small octagonal lantern ringed with windows at the crown. What appears, from below, to be a surface in a state of exuberant dissolution is a precisely engineered transitional structure: the geometric solution to the problem of converting a square room into a circular, skylit vault without a conventional pendentive or squinch. Each tier of cells corbels slightly inward from the one below, the whole assembly operating as a three-dimensional canopy that is structurally self-stabilizing through the interlocking geometry of its components.

The painted surfaces — blue, red, gold, and white in the original polychromy — were not applied to a completed form but were integral to the plaster work as it was laid, so that carving and coloring were a single operation rather than sequential stages. The poet Ibn Zamrak, court poet to Muhammad V and a figure whose verses are inscribed in the dado frieze running around the hall below the vault, wrote that the ceiling was like the heavens in rotation, and the description is less literary than architectural: at the crown, light enters from sixteen directions simultaneously through the lantern windows, animating a geometry that does not resolve into stillness but continues to multiply the further the eye travels from the centre. This is the precise spatial ambition of the muqarnas tradition — not the creation of a fixed image overhead but of a surface that the eye cannot fully possess, that withholds its resolution, and in doing so makes the act of looking a perpetually renewed experience.

NAVE CEILING, CAPPELLA PALATINA

Palermo, Sicily · Consecrated 1143 · Roger II of Sicily



Painted wooden muqarnas ceiling, nave, Cappella Palatina, Palazzo dei Normanni, Palermo, consecrated 1143. The largest surviving Fatimid-style wooden muqarnas ceiling outside Egypt, executed in a pictorial programme derived from the Fatimid courtly tradition — hunting scenes, musicians, animals, and human figures — with inscriptions in Arabic Kufic script, above walls lined with Byzantine gold mosaics. Three traditions, one ceiling, one Norman Christian king.

Tradition: Fatimid Islamic woodwork Script: Arabic Kufic inscriptions Context: Norman-Arab-Byzantine court

There is no other ceiling in the world quite like the one above the nave of the Cappella Palatina in Palermo, and the reason for this has as much to do with the political culture of Norman Sicily as with any architectural ambition in the conventional sense. Roger II, who commissioned the chapel in the early twelfth century and consecrated it in 1143, ruled a kingdom in which Islamic, Byzantine, and Latin Christian traditions coexisted in a proximity that was, for its historical moment, extraordinary. His court at Palermo was trilingual — Arabic, Greek, and Latin were all administrative languages — and his palace complex was staffed by craftsmen, scholars, and administrators drawn from across the Mediterranean world. The Cappella Palatina is the spatial expression of that court, and its ceiling is the single most concentrated demonstration of what such a culture could produce when it chose to direct its full resources at one surface.

The ceiling is a muqarnas structure executed in painted wood, a Fatimid form translated into timber almost certainly by craftsmen brought from or trained in the tradition of Fatimid Egypt, and it is the largest surviving example of that form in wood outside Egypt itself. It covers the full nave above walls lined with Byzantine gold mosaics depicting Christ Pantocrator and scenes from the New Testament and the lives of Saints Peter and Paul. The painted programme on the wooden cells belongs entirely to a different tradition: Fatimid courtly imagery of the kind found on Egyptian painted wood of the eleventh century, including hunting scenes, men at banquet, musicians playing the oud and flute, peacocks, falconers, a menagerie of real and fantastical animals, and figures in the dress of the Islamic courtly world. The inscriptions are in Arabic Kufic. There is no Christian iconography anywhere in the ceiling — in the private chapel of a Norman Christian king who had himself depicted in Byzantine mosaic as a king crowned by Christ on the walls of the church of Santa Maria dell'Ammiraglio, a few hundred metres away. This is not syncretism as a philosophical position but as a practice of power, the architecture of a ruler who understood that beauty drawn from multiple traditions was a more potent declaration of sovereignty than beauty drawn from one.

INTERIOR DOME, SHEIKH LOTFOLLAH MOSQUE

Isfahan, Iran · 1603–1619 · Shah Abbas I, Safavid Dynasty



Interior of the dome, Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque, Isfahan, 1603–1619. A spiral arabesque of cut-tile mosaic in turquoise, cream, black, and gold radiating from a central sunburst medallion — a surface engineered to read differently in morning and afternoon light through the precise calibration of glaze chemistry and tile geometry. The mosque has no minaret and no courtyard; it was built as the private place of worship of Shah Abbas I's royal household, accessed by a bent corridor from the royal palace.

Construction: 1603–1619 Technique: Cut-tile mosaic (معرق kāshi) Access: Via qibla-correcting bent corridor

The Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque has no minaret and no courtyard, and for an architect this absence is not a detail but the key to the entire building. It was built as the private mosque of Shah Abbas I's royal household, connected directly to the Ali Qapu palace on the western edge of the Naqsh-e Jahan Square in Isfahan by a corridor that bends at an angle calibrated to correct the orientation of the prayer space toward Mecca without that correction being legible from the public square outside. The mosque presents a composed and symmetrical face to the most formally planned civic space in Safavid Iran while its interior is governed entirely by the demands of devotion and the experience of the single domed room at its centre. That room's ceiling is the most technically accomplished tile surface produced within the Safavid tradition.

The interior dome is tiled using the cut-tile mosaic technique known in Persian as mo'arraḡ kāshi, in which each tile is cut to a precise shape and assembled into the overall pattern rather than painted after firing, so that the color runs through the body of the tile and does not depend on a glaze surface that might wear or fade. The pattern begins at the crown with a golden sunburst medallion and spirals outward and downward through an arabesque of turquoise, white, black, and cream tiles, the arms of the spiral expanding as they descend toward the drum windows, filling the entire dome interior with a continuous geometric field that has no seam and no interruption anywhere across its surface. The dome's glaze chemistry was calibrated so that the turquoise tiles, which face slightly toward the single window in the drum, catch morning light and make the dome read as a cool, luminous field, while in the afternoon the same surface shifts toward the cream and pale gold of the ground tiles, producing an entirely different spatial temperature in a room that has not changed. This is not an accidental optical effect. The architects and tilemakers of the Safavid court understood that a fixed surface could be made to produce a kinetic experience through the engineering of reflectance and light angle, and the Sheikh Lotfollah dome is the most refined built demonstration of that understanding anywhere in the Islamic architectural world.

UPPER CHAPEL VAULT, SAINTE-CHAPELLE

Paris, France · Consecrated 26 April 1248 · Louis IX of France



Painted ribbed vault, upper chapel, Sainte-Chapelle, Île de la Cité, Paris, consecrated 26 April 1248. A deep ultramarine field sown with gold fleur-de-lis stars, carried on gilded ribs that reduce the structural stonework to the minimum required to hold the vault above approximately 600 square metres of stained glass across fifteen windows depicting 1,113 individual scenes. The ceiling and the windows function as a single theological instrument.

Consecrated: 26 April 1248 Glazing: ~600 m² stained glass Scenes depicted: 1,113 across 15 windows

Sainte-Chapelle was built to contain a relic, and this purpose is inseparable from the character of every surface within it, including the ceiling. Louis IX had acquired what was presented as Christ's Crown of Thorns from Baldwin II of Constantinople in 1239, paying 135,000 livres — a sum representing roughly three times the annual revenue of the French crown — and the chapel he built to receive it was conceived not as a church in any conventional liturgical sense but as a reliquary scaled to the dimensions of a building. The logic of the reliquary is the logic of the vessel: the object it contains must register as more precious than the container around it, and everything the container does must be in service of that revelation. At Sainte-Chapelle, this means that the stone has been reduced to the absolute structural minimum — slender columns, externally expressed flying buttresses, walls dissolved almost entirely into glass — so that the interior is less a room than a lantern, a space constituted by colored light rather than by enclosing surfaces of any material weight.

The ribbed vault of the upper chapel is painted a deep ultramarine and sown with gold fleur-de-lis stars against a field of gold, the ribs themselves gilded so that the structural system reads as ornament rather than engineering. When the fifteen windows are struck by direct sun, the interior fills with a shifting field of colored light — red, blue, purple, gold — that moves across the vault surface and animates the painted field in a way that no static decorative programme could achieve independently. The ceiling and the windows are not two surfaces but a single instrument: the vault's deep blue ground provides the dark field against which the colored light transmitted through 1,113 individual scenes registers with maximum intensity, and the windows provide the coloured light without which the vault would simply be a ceiling. Sainte-Chapelle understood something about the ceiling that most ambitious buildings never articulate so clearly: that its quality is not intrinsic but relational, that a ceiling is always in conversation with the surfaces and conditions around it, and that the most compelling ceiling is not the most elaborate one but the one most precisely calibrated to the room it completes.

MANDAPA CEILING, KAILASA TEMPLE, ELLORA

Maharashtra, India · c.756–773 AD · Rashtrakuta Dynasty under Krishna I



Carved basalt ceiling, mandapa assembly hall, Kailasa Temple, Ellora Cave 16, Maharashtra, c.756–773 AD. Every surface seen here was once interior to a solid cliff face. The entire Kailasa complex — temple tower, mandapa, subsidiary shrines, courtyard, flanking elephants, and narrative relief galleries — was created by removing an estimated 200,000 tonnes of basalt from a single volcanic rock mass, working downward from the summit. The ceiling was not built. It was disclosed.

Method: Top-down rock excavation Material: Single basalt cliff, monolithic Rock Removed: Estimated ~200,000 tonnes

The Kailasa Temple at Ellora is the only ceiling in this survey that was never constructed. It was uncovered. The entire complex — the main shikhara tower, the mandapa assembly hall, the subsidiary shrines dedicated to the river goddesses and to Nandi, the courtyard flanked by life-sized stone elephants, and the galleries of narrative relief carving that line the surrounding rock walls — was created during the reign of the Rashtrakuta king Krishna I, approximately 756 to 773 AD, not by assembling material but by removing it, working from the top surface of a basalt cliff face downward and inward so that what emerged was a freestanding temple complex continuous with the rock from which it was taken at every point, with no joints, no mortar, and no structural division between the ceiling of the mandapa and the rock above it. There is no other building anywhere of comparable scale that was made by subtraction alone.

The mandapa ceiling, continuous with this same undivided basalt, is organized around large lotus medallions in shallow relief, the petals layered in concentric rings whose geometric precision is the more remarkable for having been achieved in a material that permits no revision once cut. Unlike every other ceiling in this survey, it could not be planned at a distance from the surface and then applied — it had to be conceived and executed simultaneously, each chisel stroke permanent in a way that no other ceiling-making process demands. The Kailasa complex's most dramatic surfaces are the relief carvings on the surrounding walls, which depict scenes from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata with a sculptural energy and narrative density that have no parallel in the ancient world. But the ceiling of the mandapa asks, more quietly and more insistently than any of those scenes, the question that the whole temple poses to anyone who thinks seriously about what building is: what is the relationship between making something and finding it? Every other ceiling discussed in these pages was constructed from materials brought to a site and assembled into a surface overhead. This one was always there. The builders' task, across the better part of two decades, was simply to see it clearly enough to let it out.

MAIN CONCOURSE CEILING, GRAND CENTRAL TERMINAL

New York, USA · Opened 2 February 1913 · Reed & Stem with Warren & Wetmore



Celestial ceiling, Main Concourse, Grand Central Terminal, New York, 1913; restored 1996–1998. A Mediterranean blue-green vault with gold-leaf constellations of the winter zodiac — Orion, Taurus, Aquarius, Gemini, and Canis Major among them — 37 metres above the concourse floor. The constellations are rendered in mirror image, depicted as they appear from outside the celestial sphere looking inward, a convention derived from medieval manuscript astronomical tradition.

Ceiling Height; ~37 metres Annual Footfall: ~45 million Restored: 1996–1998

Grand Central Terminal opened on 2 February 1913 as the product of a collaboration between the firms Reed & Stem, who were responsible for the engineering and circulation logic of the building, and Warren & Wetmore, who developed its Beaux-Arts architecture, and the Main Concourse that resulted is among the great civic interiors of the twentieth century anywhere in the world. Its scale — 37 metres from the concourse floor to the vault above, the room itself approximately 76 metres long — is deployed not to impress through intimidation, which is what civic scale most commonly does, but to dignify, to give the daily act of moving through a city the spatial quality of something that deserves to be done with a measure of attention. Forty-five million people pass through it each year, making it one of the most heavily used buildings on earth, and the ceiling they pass beneath is, in its way, the most democratically ambitious surface in this survey: a medieval sky, produced within a Beaux-Arts vocabulary, installed over a commuter railroad terminal, available without charge to anyone who needs to catch a train.

The constellations are painted in mirror image, reversed left to right from the way they appear when observed from the earth's surface, and this detail has attracted more interpretive attention than almost any other element of the building. The most historically grounded explanation holds that the painters worked from a medieval manuscript source that depicted the heavens as a sphere surrounding the earth and showed the constellations as they would appear to a figure outside that sphere looking inward — a convention of ancient astronomical illustration derived from the armillary sphere and the celestial globe, in which the sky is modelled as a surface seen from outside rather than from within. Whether or not this was the painters' conscious intention, the effect is of a sky that is simultaneously familiar and subtly wrong: close enough to the observed sky to be read as sky, different enough to register as something other than nature reproduced.

The vault was obscured for decades under layers of grime from coal smoke and tobacco, restored between 1996 and 1998 at a cost of approximately 12 million dollars, and the restoration revealed that what had been read for generations as a dark and oppressive surface was in fact a luminous field of extraordinary refinement. Grand Central's ceiling does what the best ceilings in this survey all do, though in entirely different materials and for an entirely different population: it reminds the people beneath it, in a language they may not consciously register but that the body understands, that the space they are moving through is worth more than the journey they are making.



The ceiling is the surface that architecture asks the least of us to notice, and the one it has used most insistently, across every culture and century, to say what it most needed to say.



HERITAGE & CRAFT

THE ARCHITECTURE

YOU COULD *Roll Up*

The Persian carpet was not a floor covering. It was a portable room — a complete spatial and cosmological world that a culture carried with it, unfolded, inhabited, and rolled away again. Understanding it as furniture misses everything that matters about it.



The Ardabil Carpet, attributed to master weaver Maqsud of Kashan, completed 1539–1540. Wool pile on silk foundation, approximately 10.5 by 5.3 metres. Victoria and Albert Museum, London (Museum No. 272-1893). One of a pair — its companion is held by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. At 34,558,400 knots, it is among the most technically complex textiles ever produced. The central medallion and its pendant lamp are the most studied single motif in the history of carpet design.

The oldest carpet in existence was found not in Persia but in a frozen burial mound in the Altai Mountains of Siberia, where permafrost had preserved it for more than two thousand years. The Pazyryk carpet, excavated in 1949 by the Soviet archaeologist Sergei Rudenko from a Scythian tomb dated to the fifth or fourth century BC, is a pile-woven textile of considerable sophistication — its border contains a procession of horsemen and deer executed in a technique that required the weaver to understand, intuitively or by training, the relationship between knot density, pile direction, and the visual resolution of a figurative image at a distance. It is now in the Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg, and it is a reminder that the carpet, before it became the supreme decorative achievement of the Islamic world, was already a fully developed technology of the nomadic steppe: a portable surface that defined, wherever it was unrolled, the spatial boundaries of a civilized interior in the absence of any permanent walls.

This is the understanding from which everything in the history of Persian carpet-making flows. The carpet did not begin as a luxury object. It began as a solution to a spatial problem that permanent architecture could not address — how a culture that moved seasonally across vast distances could carry with it not merely shelter but the idea of an interior, a defined and bounded human space that declared, wherever it was placed, that the ground beneath it was no longer simply ground but room. The borders of a carpet are not decorative frames. They are walls. The field within them is not a patterned surface. It is a floor, a ceiling, a complete enclosure collapsed into two dimensions and made portable. When a nomadic household unrolled a carpet inside a tent, the tent did not become more comfortable. It became, in a precise and deliberate sense, architecture.



The medallion and its pendant mosque lamp — the lamp referenced in the carpet's own inscription, drawn from a verse by the 14th-century Persian poet Hafiz



The borders of a carpet are not decorative frames. They are walls. The field within them is not a patterned surface. It is a room.



The transition from this nomadic utility to the high art of the Safavid court workshops represents one of the great leaps in the history of the decorative arts, and it happened with remarkable speed. When Shah Ismail I established the Safavid dynasty in 1501, the Persian carpet was already a sophisticated textile tradition with regional schools — Tabriz in the northwest, Kashan in the central plateau, Herat in the east, each with distinct structural and ornamental conventions. What the Safavid court did, particularly under Shah Abbas I, who moved the imperial capital to Isfahan in 1598 and established royal carpet manufactories there, was to bring the carpet under the direct governance of court painters and designers, so that the geometric intelligence of the nomadic tradition was fused with the pictorial and calligraphic sophistication of the Persian miniature. The result, across the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, was a body of work that has never been equaled in the history of textile production: carpets of such structural complexity, chromatic range, and cosmological ambition that they remain, five centuries later, the standard against which every subsequent carpet tradition measures itself.



Weaver at a vertical loom, traditional Persian carpet workshop. The asymmetric Persian knot (Senneh knot) is tied individually around each pair of warp threads across the full width of the carpet, row by row. A single weaver working at high speed produces approximately 8,000 to 12,000 knots per day. At 34 million knots, the Ardabil Carpet represents, at that rate, more than eight years of continuous weaving by a single pair of hands — in practice, it was almost certainly worked by a team of weavers working simultaneously across the loom's width under the direction of a master.

The most celebrated single object in this tradition is the Ardabil Carpet, completed in 1539 to 1540 and attributed by its own inscription to the master weaver Maqsd of Kashan. It measures approximately 10.5 by 5.3 metres and contains, by careful modern count, 34,558,400 individual knots tied into a silk foundation at a density of roughly 340 knots per square inch — a figure that gives some indication of the scale of the undertaking, though the number alone cannot convey what that density makes possible. At 340 knots per square inch, the pile surface is fine enough to render curves without stepping, to modulate color across a transition of a few millimetres, to produce, in the central medallion and its radiating system of pendants and arabesques, an image of such optical precision that it reads at twenty metres as a single composed form and at twenty centimetres as an almost incomprehensibly intricate network of individual coloured threads. The carpet was made for the shrine of Sheikh Safi al-Din at Ardabil in northwestern Iran, and its central medallion is understood to represent the interior of a dome — not a dome depicted naturalistically but the geometric essence of a dome, its radiating structure expressed through the arabesque as the steppe nomad's circular tent had been expressed through the cruciform field: as a complete world contained within a boundary, a cosmology you could stand inside.

The garden carpet, which emerged as a distinct type within the Safavid tradition during the seventeenth century, makes the architectural ambition of the Persian carpet most legible. The *chahar bagh* — the formal Persian garden divided by water channels into four quadrants, the word itself meaning four gardens — was one of the central spatial ideas of Islamic architecture, an organization of outdoor space into a geometry that referenced the Quranic description of paradise as a garden through which rivers flow. The garden carpet translates this organization directly into the textile: water channels represented as blue-bordered bands dividing the field into quadrants, trees and flowering plants filling each compartment, birds visible in the branches, fish in the streams. To unroll a garden carpet inside a room or a tent was not to bring a picture of a garden indoors. It was to construct a garden — to define, through the logic of the carpet's internal geometry, a space that possessed the spiritual and spatial properties of the *chahar bagh* regardless of what was actually outside the walls. This is the nomadic spatial logic carried to its highest expression: the carpet not as a representation of an environment but as the environment itself, complete and self-sufficient wherever it happened to be placed.



Garden carpet (*chahar bagh*), Safavid Persia, 17th century. The garden carpet translates the architecture of the Persian formal garden — divided into four quadrants by water channels, the *chahar bagh* — directly into textile form. Where the courtyard garden organized space around the idea of paradise, the garden carpet carried that organization into rooms and tents that had no garden of their own.

The material technology that made this possible was as carefully developed as the design tradition it served. The foundation of a Persian carpet is a grid of warps — threads running the length of the carpet — across which weft threads are passed horizontally, locking the structure together. The pile is created by tying individual knots around pairs of warp threads and trimming the ends to a uniform height, so that the knotted ends stand upright and form the visible surface. Persian carpets use the asymmetric knot, known in the trade as the Persian or *Senneh* knot, which wraps around one warp thread fully and the adjacent one only partially, allowing the pile to incline slightly in one direction and permitting finer resolution of curved forms than the symmetric Turkish knot used in Anatolian weaving. The fineness of the pile — the number of knots per square inch — determines the resolution of the image the carpet can carry: a coarse tribal carpet at 30 to 50 knots per square inch can render geometric forms with great force but cannot hold figural detail, while a Kashan or Isfahan court carpet at 200 to 400 knots per square inch can produce images of near-painterly complexity. Both are structurally carpets. They are, in terms of what they can express, as different as a fresco and a miniature.

The dyes used in classical Persian carpets were entirely natural until the introduction of synthetic aniline dyes from Europe in the 1860s and 1870s, a development that the most knowledgeable collectors and dealers of the period recognized immediately as catastrophic. Madder root provided the reds — from the palest rose to the deepest burgundy depending on the mordant used, the mineral compound that fixes the dye to the fiber and determines how it will bond chemically with the wool. Indigo provided the blues, a dyestuff of extraordinary lightfastness whose depth of color deepens rather than fades with age and exposure. Weld, pomegranate rind, and vine leaves provided yellows. The interaction of these dyes with wool and silk fibers, mordanted with alum, iron, or copper, produced a palette whose characteristic quality is warmth without garishness, saturation without harshness — a palette that reads, in a room, as if the color were generated by the light inside the wool rather than applied to its surface. Synthetic dyes, by contrast, sit on the surface of the fibre and fade or shift in undertone within decades, which is why the color in a genuinely old Persian carpet and the color in a synthetic-dyed imitation of the same period are distinguishable at a glance to anyone who has spent time with both.

The question of what a classical Persian carpet is worth as a collectible object is inseparable from the question of what it is as a cultural object, and the two questions cannot be answered independently of one another. The market for antique Persian carpets is among the oldest, most internationalized, and most legally complicated in the decorative arts. It is also among the most consistently misinformed, partly because the commercial carpet trade of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries created an enormous secondary literature of attributions, provenance claims, and regional designations that subsequent

scholarship has substantially revised, and partly because the physical complexity of the object — its dyes, its knot structure, its foundation materials, its pile height and condition — requires a level of technical knowledge to assess correctly that the general auction market rarely possesses and the specialist dealer market does not always apply disinterestedly. For the serious collector, there is no substitute for sustained direct study of authenticated museum-held examples, followed by equally sustained consultation with scholars rather than exclusively with dealers, and an understanding that the most important carpets in private hands today almost always carry institutional documentation stretching back through multiple generations of recorded ownership.

What the Persian carpet offers a collector that almost no other object in the decorative arts can match is the combination of portable scale, extraordinary longevity of the best examples, and a design intelligence of the highest order operating within a tradition whose internal logic is coherent and learnable. A great Safavid carpet is not a beautiful object to which historical significance has been attached. It is an argument about space, geometry, and the nature of the interior that happens to have been made in wool and silk rather than stone and plaster, and that has survived, in many cases, five centuries of use, travel, and changing ownership with its argument intact. To own one, and to understand what you own, is to understand something essential about what building a room has always meant.

Identifying a Classical Persian Carpet

FOUNDATION MATERIAL:

Court carpets of the Safavid period (16th–17th century) typically use silk warps and wefts, which allowed finer knot density and a suppler, flatter handle than wool foundations. Wool-on-wool foundations are associated with tribal and village production. Cotton warps and wefts appear from the late 17th century onward and became widespread in 19th-century commercial production. Foundation material is one of the most reliable dating indicators available without laboratory analysis.

KNOT TYPE AND DENSITY:

The asymmetric Persian (Senneh) knot opens to the left or right — the direction is consistent across a genuine workshop carpet and can be determined by parting the pile with a fingernail. Knot density in classical court carpets ranges from 200 to over 400 knots per square inch. Tribal carpets typically fall between 30 and 100. Density alone does not determine quality, but inconsistency in knot type within a single carpet is a significant red flag.

DYE CHARACTER:

Natural dyes — madder, indigo, weld, pomegranate — produce color that reads as luminous and internally warm. Critically, natural red dyes often cause slight corrosion of the wool pile over centuries, creating a subtle pile depression in red areas known as abrash. Synthetic aniline dyes, introduced after the 1860s, produce harsher, flatter color that tends to fade unevenly. Chrome dyes, introduced in the early 20th century, are more stable but still distinguishable under ultraviolet light examination.

PILE CONDITION:

Even wear across the field is consistent with genuine age and use. Localized wear in high-traffic areas (door ends, centre field) is normal and expected in authentic pieces. Repelling — the replacement of worn sections with new knotting — is extremely common and ranges from sympathetic restoration to deceptive reconstruction. Replied areas are identifiable by slight color discrepancy and by pile direction inconsistency visible under raking light. All repelling, however minor, should be disclosed and should affect valuation accordingly.

SELVEDGES AND ENDS:

Original selvages — the overcast or wrapped side edges — and original kilim ends — the flat-woven terminal bands — are among the first elements lost or replaced in the life of a carpet. Their presence in original condition is a strong indicator of minimal intervention. Machine-overcast selvages and added fringe are consistent with commercial restoration and signal that the carpet has been significantly worked.

DESIGN COHERENCE:

In a genuine workshop carpet, the central medallion is precisely symmetrical on both axes. The border system is internally consistent in scale and spacing. Repeat patterns in the field show no abrupt shifts in colour or scale that would indicate a cartoon change mid-weaving. Tribal carpets may show intentional asymmetry and pattern variation as a design virtue, but workshop production — the category commanding the highest prices — should be geometrically rigorous throughout.

PROVENANCE AND LEGAL STATUS:

The Persian carpet market carries significant legal complexity. Iran is a signatory to the 1970 UNESCO Convention on cultural property, and export of antique carpets without proper documentation has been heavily restricted for decades. Any carpet attributed to a Safavid or earlier period should carry documented provenance predating 1970, ideally with auction, institutional, or dealer records extending back through multiple decades of ownership. The absence of pre-1970 provenance documentation does not necessarily indicate illicit origin, but it substantially increases due diligence requirements and should prompt independent scholarly authentication before any significant acquisition. For carpets of museum quality, consultation with the Textile Society of America or the Hajji Baba Club — the oldest and most authoritative collector organisation in this field — is strongly recommended before purchase.

REGIONAL ATTRIBUTION:

The major classical weaving centres — Tabriz, Kashan, Isfahan, Kerman, Herat — each have distinguishing structural and ornamental signatures: Tabriz carpets typically use a depressed warp structure giving a ribbed back; Kashan work is characterised by a very fine wool pile on cotton foundation from the late 19th century onward; Isfahan is associated with the most refined Safavid court production. Attribution should be confirmed by a specialist, not assumed from a dealer's label.

WHAT TO AVOID:

Machine-woven carpets replicating classical designs are produced in large quantities and are identifiable by perfectly uniform pile height, machine-regular knot spacing visible on the back, and synthetic fibre content. Hand-tufted carpets — made with a tufting gun rather than hand-knotting — have a canvas backing that is glued rather than woven, visible when the carpet is turned over. Neither category has collectible value. In the genuine handmade market, avoid carpets that have been painted or chemically washed to simulate age — both practices are widespread and both damage the textile irreversibly.

THINGS DESIGNERS NO LONGER SAY *out loud*



A frank inventory of what the design industry knows, discusses behind closed doors, and rarely commits to print.

The observations that follow were not attributed. Not because the designers, architects, and creative directors who shared them asked for anonymity, but because the moment a name is attached to a professional truth, the truth becomes a controversy and the person becomes a story. These are not Indian problems or European problems or the particular frustrations of any single practice or market. They are the quiet, shared realities of an industry operating simultaneously at the highest level of creative ambition and the most ordinary level of human negotiation, in studios from Mumbai to Milan to Mexico City. Design Diary International gathered them not to embarrass anyone but to say, on behalf of a profession that is rarely permitted to speak this plainly in public: we see you, we recognise this, and we think the conversation is long overdue.



Clients want minimalism. They rarely want emptiness.



The brief almost always says clean, simple, uncluttered. What it means is: remove everything I am embarrassed by and keep everything I love. The designer's job, for which no fee structure adequately compensates, is to help the client understand that these two instructions are not the same.



Most homes are designed for photographs, not for time.



A room designed for photography needs to look resolved at a single glance from a fixed point with good light. A room designed for living needs to work at seven in the morning, at midnight, on a Tuesday in February when nobody is coming over. These are different briefs, and the industry has spent the last decade pretending otherwise.



The reference images and the actual budget have never been introduced to each other.



Every project begins with a mood board assembled from the world's most expensive interiors, photographed by the world's best architectural photographers, in cities with entirely different material economies. It ends with a conversation about what can be value-engineered without the client noticing. The gap between those two moments is where most of a designer's actual work happens, and it is the part of the process that no portfolio ever shows.





Sustainability is most passionately discussed before the budget is opened.



Rammed earth, lime plaster, reclaimed timber: the conversation happens enthusiastically at the start of a project, when everything is still possible. The moment the quantity surveyor's report arrives, the language shifts to value engineering and practical alternatives. Sustainable design at genuine scale requires a client willing to protect a budget line that is the first one questioned when costs run over. Most projects do not have that client.



You do not need a large budget to make responsible choices. You need an early conversation.



The assumption that sustainable design costs more is true for some materials and untrue for most decisions. Orientation, ventilation, the placement of windows, the choice of locally sourced stone over imported marble, the decision to repair rather than replace existing joinery: none of these cost more than their conventional alternatives if they are made at the right stage of the design process. The expense of sustainability is almost always the expense of changing your mind late.



Locally sourced is not a compromise. It is a decision that most global supply chains cannot match for honesty.



A stone quarried within two hundred kilometres of the project site, worked by craftspeople whose skills are rooted in that material, installed by contractors who have used it their entire careers, will outperform an imported material on almost every measure that matters over the life of a building: carbon, durability, repairability, and the particular quality of feeling that it belongs exactly where it is. The design industry's preference for the imported and the exotic is a habit, not a necessity.





That room does not exist. It was never meant to.



The AI-generated interior that a client shares as a reference has no structural logic, no real material, no budget, no building regulations, no site conditions, and no particular relationship with the life of the person who will live inside it. It is an optimised image of what a room looks like when nothing inconvenient has been allowed to shape it. Using it as a brief is not a starting point. It is a way of postponing the actual conversation.



Pinterest is a catalogue of other people's finished decisions, not a brief for yours.



Saving five hundred images of beautifully resolved interiors tells a designer a great deal about what has already been done and very little about who the client is, how they move through their home, what they cook, who they have over, which possessions they cannot imagine living without, and what kind of light makes them feel most at ease. A brief built from saved images is a brief built from the outside in. The rooms that endure are built from the inside out.



An interior that photographs well and an interior that lives well are often designed by different instincts.



The sofa that reads beautifully in an architectural photograph is frequently the sofa that nobody chooses to sit on for a full evening. The kitchen that looks resolved in a wide-angle lens is sometimes the kitchen that does not work for the way the family actually cooks. The tension between the photographable room and the habitable room is one of the defining unspoken pressures of contemporary residential design, and the clients who feel it most acutely are the ones who moved into their Pinterest-worthy home and quietly understood, within the first year, that something was missing.





Awards are for portfolios. Repeat clients are for practices.



The design industry celebrates the project that photographs well and argues compellingly in a jury room. The practices that survive and grow are the ones whose clients come back, which requires a completely different set of skills that no award has yet been created to recognise.



Trends exist to sell things. Taste exists to outlast them.



Terrazzo came back. Arches came back. Curved furniture came back. Each return was reported as a discovery. The clients who ignored all of them and furnished their homes according to what they genuinely responded to are, without exception, the clients whose homes still feel right a decade later.



Handcrafted is a price point before it is a philosophy.



The word appears most frequently in the materials accompanying the most expensive objects. Its use has expanded in direct proportion to the market's willingness to pay a premium for it, which has not always been accompanied by a corresponding expansion in what it actually describes. Craft deserves more precision than the word currently receives in most design communication.



The best interiors are never finished. They are simply lived in long enough.



The rooms that endure in the memory are rarely the ones completed according to a plan. They are the ones that accumulated over time, that absorbed the evidence of a life being lived rather than a brief being executed. No designer can produce that quality at handover. It requires the one thing no specification can include: time.



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