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The Mathematics of Design

MAXWELL & FISHER INTERIORS

text: ROBERT GOFF | photography: BHGM PHOTOGRAPHY

Designer Robert Goff approaches interior design as a math problem waiting to be solved, molding the clients' needs into a complete vision.

GROWING UP IN WOODSTOCK, VERMONT, a 250-year-old New England town, I learned at an early age the aesthetic integrity of preservation and restoration of older things such as hand-built homes, barns, covered bridges, and furniture. I remember going to a yard sale at a house built in 1815 and seeing a slender, tall back wing chair. Its profile appeared so sculptural I had to buy it. The maroon upholstered seat cushion had been chewed up by a puppy that was once part of the household, so the owner tucked it away in a barn where it sat for years. With no intention of fixing it up right away, I paid \$12.50 for the chair and hauled it home thinking one day I would rescue it and give it a new life.

After finishing college and venturing out into the world with a business degree to begin a marketing career in New York City, the wing chair sat in my parents attic for a decade until my mother called to inform me they were selling the Vermont house and needed me to collect the chair, along with many other “collectibles” I had accumulated over the years. The question before me was what to do with all these old pieces.

Since I had gone to the trouble to rescue them, I felt obligated to restore each piece. With the creative advice of an upholsterer who steered me in the right direction, I was able to bring all my items back to life with modern adaptations. Once all the pieces were installed in my apartment, I received nothing but rave reviews on how customized my interior looked, which led me to realize the value of interior design.



Design work is like solving a complicated math equation, forcing the right and left sides of the brain to unite across artistic and mechanical disciplines. A designer creates a crosshatch between the two to solve for many independent variables—all under one roof or within one room. The sum total must be whole and always able to be proofed back against an original design objective. Above all, it must demonstrate a value-added service of pushing the envelope of creativity to give clients something unique and distinctive, delivering an unexpected result of thinking outside the box.

TRANSITIONING INTO A DESIGNER

After working for international marketing consulting firms across the country, I found myself returning to New York City after finishing an assignment to look for a new job.

At the time, the job market was sluggish, so I decided to take a time-out and explore options for making a career change. One snowy afternoon, I was driving through the historic New England towns north of Manhattan in Westchester County. I stopped to poke around at an antique shop in a house built circa 1770 with a barn attached to it. It was a large business and featured antiques from Europe. The shop owner was an interior designer who created a unique display style of all her merchandise I had never seen before. Intrigued by this shop, I volunteered to create a website for them, which evolved into a part-time sales job. I ultimately became the shop's in-house client resource for design advice and support. Two years later, I relocated to Dallas, and opened my own interior design firm, Maxwell & Fisher Interior Design, in the fall of 2007.

DESIGN STYLE/PLANNING PROCESS

You can deduce quite a bit about a client's personality based on what they've surrounded themselves with. I always start a new project with some basic interior detective questions: (1) Why have you invited me to your home for an evaluation? (2) What about your existing interior do you like and dislike? (3) If you closed your eyes and cost didn't factor into the project, what would your ultimate interior look like?

Before I begin my hunting and gathering phase for paint colors, fabrics, and furnishings to use in my design plan, I first take my clients to the nearest design center to expose them to a slice of interior design they would not normally have access to. It is during these showroom tours which I use as my test lab where I observe what appeals to clients, as well as point out examples I am considering for their project to set their perception of an overall design plan.

ROOMS WITH A SKYLINE VIEW

The clients for this featured project are both extremely busy with demanding jobs that require weekly cross-country or international travel; therefore, they are seldom at home. Having neither pets nor children, they wanted an oasis for relaxation during the brief times they were in Seattle. They also wanted to create a showcase for entertaining a large number of people, both for corporate and personal functions. They were prepared to invest in an interior that truly made a bold statement announcing, "They had arrived."

The design inspiration came from three elements and was used throughout the entire interior: (1) Create a layout direction within each room to capitalize on the Seattle city skyline view as the focal point; (2) use primary colors found in nature so the interior would complement all the exterior lush greenery as seen through the large glass walls of windows; and (3) incorporate family heirlooms into the mix of furnishings while keeping it modern and transitionally "now."

The stucco home was very modern to begin with—four floors squarely stacked on top of each other but joined together by a staircase at one end of the home connecting each floor, a rooftop deck of 1,000 square feet that can only be described as the "jewel in the crown," and two floors of floor-to-ceiling windows that overlooked the downtown Seattle skyline from atop a bluff.

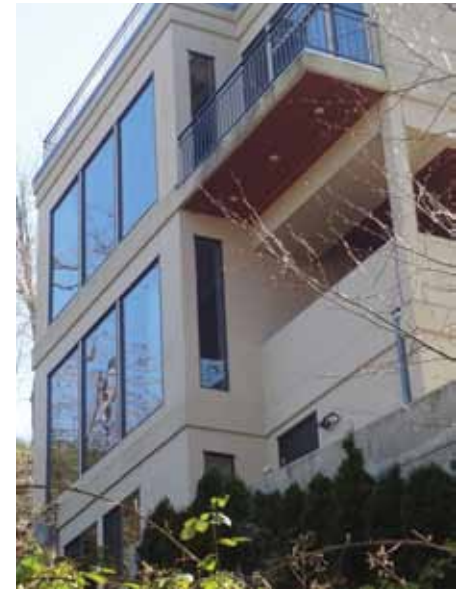
The client inherited some family pieces I was asked to incorporate into the mix of new furnishings. Luckily all the pieces were either art deco, an eclectic style with bold geometric shapes, or art nouveau, a style inspired by natural forms and structures. These items all had scalloped layering, bold dimensions, and looked highly architectural in form and profile. We used this as an influence when choosing some of the furniture styles.

DESIGN DETAILS: KITCHEN

The kitchen has many natural elements like dark wood cabinets, glass tiles for the backsplash, limestone-colored tile flooring, and stone countertops. In the center of the kitchen is a large stone-top island with a cooktop. I wanted to use the island as an interactive area for people to gather around, or for the homeowners to work on their laptops when not entertaining. To achieve this, I chose counter stools that are oversized and upholstered so it would appear more inviting—more like a reading chair rather than a stool. Underneath the generous overhang of the island countertop, there are four stainless support braces with circular cutouts, similar to the look of support brackets you find in the underbellies of airplanes. Throughout the project, the clients and I referred to these as "the Boeing brackets," given Seattle is home to the Boeing Corporation. The brackets provided a sculptural element with a natural repetitive theme.

DINING AREA

The client had a mission style dining set with simple, clean lines and seating for six. Given the expansive new dining space and the passion for entertaining, the opportunity to



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entertain on a larger scale became an obvious possibility. I tracked down the maker of the existing dining set which turned out to be an Amish workshop in Ohio. They were able to find the original pattern templates for both the leaves and chairs, so we had more of each custom made to accommodate twelve at a sit-down dinner. As if this wasn't the only stroke of luck, later that same week, I was visiting a local consignment shop having a sale. Buried in the back of the shop was a pair of modern china cabinets in the exact same wood finish as the dining table and chairs, and they featured a stainless circular face grill that matched the brackets on the kitchen island. I had all the dining chair seats upholstered in a sky blue fabric with straw tan- and hay gold-colored dots to keep within the circular accents. To enhance the blue in the seat fabric, I chose a darker stone blue accent color for one of the smaller walls to serve as a backdrop for the china cabinets.



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LIVING AREA

I chose two primary colors found in nature for an overall harmonious blend: a deep blue from Sherwin-Williams® and several pale yellows from Farrow and Ball®, both reminiscent of a blue sky and of sunshine—something we don't see too much of in the Pacific Northwest. The yellow had a creamy eggnog hue to it and was used predominately to connect all the open areas to introduce the subliminal concept of brightness during daylight hours and a candlelit glow during evening hours.

I carried variations of these two primary colors across several furnishing elements in the living, dining, and kitchen areas as seen in the blue and pale yellow ribbons in the custom rug pattern, the blue in the accent pillows and glazed pottery planters, the accent walls to create a splash of color for the dining and living areas, and the golden hay-colored tweed on the sofa fabric.

The fireplace surround with its block-form and simple, clean lines influenced my design strategy in the living room. The cocktail table

base and the sofa arms carry the bold, layered block form through the space.

Throughout this main floor's interior, I wanted movement and repetition of natural elements, both in color and shapes. The fabrics on the two barrel club chairs were in a blush color to keep within the mocha rug color of the dining area. Ribbon patterns in the rug, the tweed in the sofa, and the chain link in the chair fabric all give a sense of natural shapes creating movement, vitality, and dimension to the furnishings.

ROOFTOP DECK

With a clear view of the downtown Seattle skyline, I chose not to overfurnish the rooftop deck so it wouldn't compete with the view of Seattle. We positioned a large outdoor sectional facing directly east in the direction of the Seattle Space Needle. Off to the side, we positioned a dining table to seat up to ten comfortably with cushioned chairs and a stone-tiled top. Back behind the dining area, the builder constructed a full outdoor kitchen. We dotted the perimeter of the areas

with tall, glazed ceramic pottery filled with bamboo and annuals.

MASTER BEDROOM

The clients travel and work exhaustively, so I wanted the master bedroom to be a sanctuary, and subconsciously evoke a feeling of rest. In contrast to all the lighter, brighter colors of the public areas, the design strategy for the master bedroom was to bathe the walls in Bittersweet Chocolate by Benjamin Moore®, working up to the gold-capped ceiling and lighting trough. The gold from the paint color is echoed in the custom bed and bedding to pull the ceiling color down into the room onto the largest piece of furniture—the bed frame. By removing sconces from a wall where the builder intended the bed to be placed, we were able to reposition the room so the master bed faced the windows and the Seattle skyline instead of a fireplace. The room was an odd square with dark wood floors, and no ready-made rugs were available in such an odd size, so I had one custom made for the room. The fireplace surround was a gray, dry-stacked mosaic stone, so I



chose a similar stone gray color for the custom rug. One of the clients grew up in Ireland and frequently returns to visit family in Dublin. Given his strong Irish roots, he is proud of his family's ancestral history and wanted to reflect that in some way in the interior. I was able to incorporate the Celtic symbol triskele in the master bedroom rug design with swirls hand-carved into the rug pile. This swirl was thought to reflect the personal spirit of an individual's attainment of balance in the inner consciousness and cosmic energy—what

better place than in a master bedroom where the primary focus of sleep also achieves this? Given the home faces east, the sun during the summer season can be blinding in the early hours of the morning, so we had to use black-out lining on the custom drapes which covered an entire wall of floor-to-ceiling windows when drawn. This provided us with an area to use another intertwining ribbon pattern to give it movement, with each ribbon color picking up on one of the other natural colors in the room—gold from the ceiling,



straw color from the bedding, and a gray background echoing the warmth of the custom rug and fireplace stone.

The interior changed from a sterile builder-beige house to a customized home that reflects the personal sophistication of the clients, their avocations, and their lifestyle of enjoying finer food, wines, and travel. Overall, it's an oasis for comfort and luxury throughout each room.

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