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Abstract

This paper challenges the notion that early interior decorators relied solely on aesthetic criteria to guide their decisions during the design process by suggesting that the selection of certain design motifs and ornamentation were, in fact, vehicles for criticizing particular characteristics of late 19th and early 20th century American society. Two early interior decorators are used as case studies. The first is America's first self-proclaimed interior decorator, Elsie de Wolfe, who consciously embraced 18th century France as a means of expressing her desire to be an independent, powerful, modern woman of the twentieth century. The second, Dorothy Draper, an interior decorator who pioneered the area of commercial design, sought to bring a level of equality to the growing separation of class. She attempted to elevate people's experience through her designs by introducing palatially-scaled, aristocratic ornamentation to her public projects.

The educational implications of this study are two-fold. First, this paper emphasizes the continued importance of understanding the social context of the artist as a means of revealing the intentions behind the product. Second, the role of the interior decorator should be given more attention when discussing the interpretation of the built environment's reflection of American society. This may be a challenge since interior design, like many disciplines, is impacted by gender bias; thus, preventing easy access to information. This paper should provoke a re-examination of the intentions of the earlier generations of interior decorators as a means of viewing society from yet another unique vantage point.

Introduction

"Furniture reveals many confidential things about the social life of the past and present; like architecture, it amplifies and illuminates the story of civilization in nearly every country and provides an intimate personal record of habits, postures, manners, fashions and follies" (Gloag, 1966, p. 1).

Any artifact created by a culture is embedded with critical information regarding politics, class structure, values, and belief systems. The architecture and interiors that housed the artifact are no different. Within the forms, materials and ornamentation of the built environment lies a message, or blueprint, of a culture specific to a time, place and people. However, Adolf Loos (1910), an early twentieth century architect and theorist, believed that in the second half of the 19th century humankind "had decided to live without culture; that is, outside of the spirit of their age, looking to the past and

the future, ahead and behind, but not to the present" (p. 29). His statement, like so many other modernists that followed, was fueled by the pervasive desire of the Victorians to produce anachronistic objects under the auspices of new mechanization processes.

From the reform movements to modernism, architects and designers denied the paradigm of the Victorian period. Instead, they followed a similar philosophy to Loos', attempting to create a unique expression for their particular time and place. While architects continued to reinvent the building, advancing it structurally and slowly moving toward the austere compositions that privileged form above all else, the interior designers had quite another vision for the space within.

Historically, early American interior decorators have been stereotyped as being mostly re-creators of period styles. Prevailing dictums, such as Edith Wharton's and Ogden Codman's (1897) notion of "good taste," which included any design of English, French, or Italian origin beginning with the Renaissance, not only gave the new interior design profession direction, but seemingly defined the decorator's sole method of production as a blind system of thoughtless replication. In 1902, this attitude was decisively stated by H. J. Jennings when describing the 19th century art as "effeminate, invertebrate, sensuous and mawkish" (Jeremy Cooper, 1987, p. 7). This, however, may not be entirely true. By examining critical life experiences and the writings of Elsie de Wolfe and Dorothy Draper, this discussion will challenge the notion that early interior decorators relied solely on capricious aesthetic criteria generated by the accepted fashion of the public, suggesting instead that the selection of certain design motifs and ornamentation were, in fact, vehicles for criticizing particular characteristics of late 19th and early 20th century American society.

The American Landscape: Divisions of Gender and Class

In the second half of the 19th century, two significant social events were occurring almost simultaneously in America. The first was the early stirrings of the suffragette movement. For most, the role of the Victorian woman was quite clear. Women were still seen as decorative objects, and men assigned any power they had to them (Chase, 1996). Though situated in this patriarchal quagmire, some women began challenging this traditional idea of female submission and inequality (Lewis, 2000).

The second event involved social structure. America witnessed the growing separation between classes as the captains of industry began acquiring inconceivable wealth. Consequently, cities like Newport, Rhode Island, became havens for the rich. When these cities were no longer private or prestigious enough, this new American aristocracy bought vast amounts of land and built grand gated estates and communities. For example, the

Vanderbilt fortune peaked at \$200 million dollars by the turn of the twentieth century. With such wealth, the family commissioned some of the grandest architectural structures, including the Biltmore House. At a staggering 125,000 acres, the Vanderbilt's estate literally, and figuratively, carved the American social landscape, delineating the 'haves' from the 'have nots'. The severity of the separation was irrefutable.

Elsie de Wolfe: Criticizing American Gender Stereotypes

Elsie de Wolfe, America's first self-proclaimed interior decorator, grew up in this milieu of social change. According to Smith (1982), early in her life, de Wolfe expressed the desire to be a member of the new American aristocracy whose extravagant expenditures and lifestyles justified the term, the Gilded Age. At the same time, she became rather outspoken regarding her displeasure with the traditional role of women. The growing pains of the United States had an extreme effect on the young de Wolfe, creating, in essence, a feminist elitist disposition.

Disappointing relationships with men plagued de Wolfe's life. Her father, whose social standing as a doctor did not permit her entrance into the closely guarded privileged class, squandered the family fortune, leaving her a pittance of what she had expected. She described it as "a time when everything was lost...my old home and the fortune" (Smith, 1982, p. 40). Secondly, the media accused her of receiving too much attention and money from Pierre Lorillard, financier of New York's most exclusive planned community, Tuxedo Park. Thirdly, de Wolfe's unabated eagerness hindered her entrance into the prestigious Patriarch's Ball whose invitations carved New York's elite down to its most pure number of 250. However, in 1888, de Wolfe received the invitation of a socialite who could not attend. Her attendance at the ball was so unexpected that she was removed from the dance floor and asked to re-present her invitation. The roster was checked and her embarrassment was quite severe. As time passed on, de Wolfe became more and more cynical toward the traditional role of women and their implied social dependence on men through marriage. She was even quoted as saying "Children!...an abomination upon the earth" (Smith, 1982, p. 29).

De Wolfe's desire to create a new and modern image for women and be a member of the aristocracy acted as a catalyst for her growing fondness toward French society. France offered a much more liberal environment for women and was rich with old aristocratic vestiges. De Wolfe was so enamored with the French culture that by 1905 she and her friend, Elisabeth Marbury, secured ownership of the Villa Trianon, a small pavilion located on the outskirts of Versailles. It was the one place that embodied a society of fascinating and intelligent women who ascended to social levels equal to men.



Figure 1. "Map to Versailles, Villa Trianon", Oil on Canvas, c. 1920, 73" x 83". Excerpted from Christie's Auction Catalog, *Innovators of twentieth century style: Including the property sold to benefit the Elsie de Wolfe Foundation* (15 September 1999).

where women continued to fall behind men in the social hierarchy through predominantly domestic assignments.

After its restoration, the Villa Trianon glorified de Wolfe's values of her beloved 18th century France. They included a supreme respect for style, in conduct as in objects, and a conviction that artificiality can be a positive quality that celebrates the shaping power of imagination, a philosophy that closely parallels the very essence of the feminine induced French Rococo style.

Typical French planning systems governed the interior of the Villa

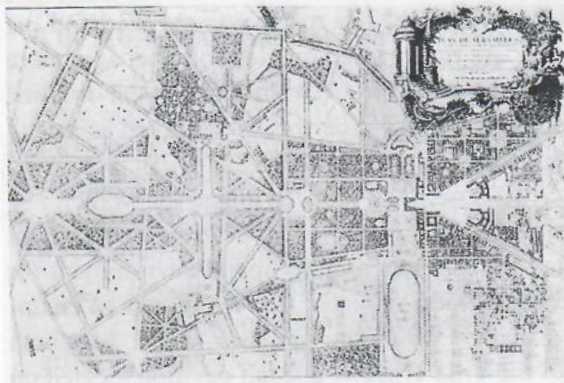


Figure 2. Landscape plan of the Palace of Versailles, late 17th century; engraving by Pierre Le Pautre; designed by Andre Le Notre.

The interior of the Villa Trianon, designed by de Wolfe, served as a criticism of the patriarchal social system of America. The 18th century-inspired ornamentation and detailing harkened back to the salons where women such as Madam du Barry, Madam Rambouillet and Madam de Pompadour orchestrated intellectual conversations with the leading aristocrats and scholars of the time. This intentional association revealed de Wolfe's infatuation with the idea of living in an environment that supported such exquisite feminine role models; unlike the United States,

Typical French planning systems governed the interior of the Villa Trianon. The *enfilade*, a series of axially aligned doors creating an implied circulation space through a particular set of rooms, served as a mechanism for identifying a guest's social status as well as accentuating the importance of the control of the inhabitant, in this case de Wolfe. The most common *enfilade* connected salon, antechamber, chamber (bedroom) and

cabinet. Much like today, a guests accessibility into the more private spaces corresponded directly to their relations with the host or hostess. At a large function, a guest could actually look down the *enfilade* to see how far they had advanced socially, but more importantly, how much further they had to go to stand in highest favor with the host or hostess.

Beyond the existing structure of the Villa Trianon, it is perhaps no coincidence that de Wolfe's description of her interior parallels that of Bonnie Anderson and Judith Zinsser's (2000) description of the Marquis de Rambouillet's *chambre bleu*, the blue room, the first known salon.

[The Marquis'] house featured...numerous relatively small, well-proportioned rooms, instead of the great hall and central staircase. Passing through a series of ornately finished rooms, a visitor arrived at last in the famous *chambre bleu*, whose intimate proportions and daring use of color established an elegant and fresh tone. The *chambre bleu* had waist-high painted and gilded panels lining its walls, which were hung with patterned blue tapestries encrusted with gold and silver. Paintings and Venetian mirrors hung on the walls. The focus of the room was the blue, damask-hung bed in the second alcove where the Marquis de Rambouillet reclined. (pp. 103-04)

De Wolfe's (1913) description of the Villa Trianon from her own *The House in Good Taste* reads as follows:

The house is very simply planned. There is a broad hall that runs straight through it, with dining room and servants' hall on the right, and four connecting salons on the left. These salons are charming rooms, with beautiful paneling and over-doors, and great arches framed in delicate carvings. First come the writing room, then the library, and then the large and small salons. The interior woodwork is cream, pointed with blue, and there are blues innumerable in the rugs and curtains and *objets d'art*. (p. 294)

With French planning aside, the most interesting images in the Villa Trianon were actually a set of murals that de Wolfe used as her boldest statements indirectly criticizing America's treatment of women. The entry hall possessed a wonderfully symbolic mural entitled *Map to Versailles, Villa Trianon* (Figure 1).¹ "A tromp l'oeil frame surrounded a parchment map depicting an impressive motorcade of limousines consciously passing in all directions the well-marked Palace of Versailles, an icon of patriarchal power" (Smith, 1982, p. 232). The implication was that all roads lead to the Villa Trianon, not the historic palace of the Bourbon monarchs. Looking at the site plan of Versailles, Elsie de Wolfe was employing imagery similar to that of Louis XIV (Figure 2). The strong axis of the Sun King's plan generated by the location of his bedroom and de Wolfe's mural, in which the Villa Trianon is the clear point of emphasis, represented both structures as major



Figure 3. The Tea Room at the Colony Club. Excerpted from Elsie de Wolfe's *The House in Good Taste* (New York: The Century Co., 1913).

beloved Paris. In this spiritual flight, the unfettered de Wolfe personified the freedom American women were championing. "She smiles straight down on her guests as she makes her effortless leap through space, the conquest of distance and circumstance she had spent the last half century perfecting" (Smith, 1982, p. 232).

In the United States, it is perhaps poetic that one of de Wolfe's best-known projects was the Colony Club, the first and most exclusive women's clubhouse in America (Smith, 1982) (See Figure 3). Many of the rooms favored an 18th century French style, including the tea room whose foliage and trellis work acted as a foil for the abstracted organic motifs of the other Rococo inspired interiors. The smoking rooms and cocktail bars accentuated the club's liberal attitude toward women's roles in society. According to Smith (1982), "when the club opened its doors on March 12, 1907, it was denounced as immoral, elitist, injurious to health, and not worthy to stand in a neighborhood of churches" (p. 110). However, the size and visibility of the project established de Wolfe's reputation as a professional decorator. More importantly, the nature of the club itself was as close as she could have hoped to come to her own personal vision of utopia; a paradise of women where children never entered and men were not allowed above the first floor.

Dorothy Draper: Dematerializing the Class Boundary

What took de Wolfe 50 years to achieve socially, Dorothy Draper accomplished instantaneously (Figure 4). Born and raised in the wealthy community of Tuxedo Park, Draper was automatically a member of the American elite by birthright. Yet, she had a completely different outlook regarding her strict, unyielding Edwardian up-bringing, where etiquette and manners transcended political law and often held the fate of many of the *nouveaux riche* in the palm of its hand. She was once quoted as saying about the

gravity points for people of prestige and power to live and/or visit. De Wolfe, however, trumped the patriarchy of the Bourbon Kings by emphasizing her own personal power as a self-made influential, female figure.

Another example of de Wolfe's dissatisfaction of gender issues in the United States is found in the small library. A sepia sketch by Hungarian artist, Marcel Vertes, depicts de Wolfe leaping across the Atlantic from New York to her



Figure 4. Dorothy Draper. Excerpted from Carleton Varney's *The Draper Touch* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1988).

place of her upbringing, "I can't stand Tuxedo. I can't stand any place with a fence around it. Tuxedo had holes in its fence and I escaped through one of them" (Furman, 1984, p. 102). The exclusive nature of Tuxedo Park, in both its gated entries and restrictive rules of etiquette, enflamed Draper's resentment for her confined, exclusive childhood.²

As a result of her upbringing, Draper developed a rather socialistic attitude toward design

early in her career. Her philosophy was to create "a place for people to come and feel elevated in the presence of great beauty, where the senses could look and feel and absorb the meaning of a quality life" (Varney, 1988, pp. xiv-xv). Draper achieved this proclamation by focusing her professional energies on public commissions ranging from restaurants to beauty salons.

In order to elevate the visitor, Draper surrounded middle class America with striking interiors characterized by unapologetic baroque scrollwork straight from the aristocratic palaces of Europe. One of the best examples was Kerr's Department Store in 1944 in the middle of America's heartland, Oklahoma City. The most spectacular space on Kerr's Department store third floor was the Mirror Room, an octagonal vestibule or fitting room surrounded by numerous dressing chambers. In this space, Draper disintegrated the wall planes by utilizing mirrors. An historical illusion of a French *enfilade* was created by two mirrors on opposing walls, framed in dead-white scrollwork, which reflected the most important image of all, the customer (Figure 5). The numerous reflections in the space evoked a rather narcissistic response from the customer being attended. To further enhance the idea of the "woman on the pedestal," Draper encouraged a voyeuristic relationship between the participant of the activity and the ones outside viewing it by framing the central portion of the Mirror Room with its compressed entry (Figure 6).

To enhance and contrast the historical motifs, Draper added modern expressions to the already rich interior. The overall atmosphere beckoned images of the silver screen, where America's rich and famous acted out fantasy roles against a black and white backdrop of crisp, glamorous, reflective art deco forms and materials. The color palette for the Mirror Room's walls and rich, long velvet hangings was gunmetal gray with multi-colored linings



Figure 5. The Mirror Room in the Women's Department on the 3rd floor of Kerr's Department Store in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Excerpted from the April 1944 issue of *Interiors* magazine, p. 51.

public commissions, Draper attempted to create environments for a much broader range of American society.³

Educational Implications

From these two examples of interior designers who reflect the social context of their times, it should be apparent that we need to understand the context of art, not solely with respect to its stylistic traits, but also engaging the social forces that impact the artist/designer's personal life experiences and consequently his/her decision-making process. Specifically, in this case it is important how educators, researchers, and students perceive the work of the early interior decorators in a social context. There are considerable obstacles that hinder the exploration of interior design and its cultural significance. Most individuals would have little interest or motivation to select a "decorator" as a topic of study because it is not viewed socially as a major art form. This is, in part, because the work of architects is so prolific and framed in terms of "theory" or "philosophy." Architecture as a discipline also has a well-defined history that is covered in humanities and art history courses throughout a student's education. Such accessibility is appealing to the student.

On the other hand, an analysis of interior design textbooks reveals that interior decorators, a vast majority of whom were women, have been omitted, devalued or marginalized in the history of the profession (Turpin, 2000). This may be a residual effect of the traditional historical frameworks employed by art historians, since interior design scholars have often bor-

of sparkling chintz for accent. The environment was specifically crafted to enhance the middle-class woman's experience of treating herself to new clothing during the challenging World War II period in American history. The Mirror Room was the stage for middle class American women. The mixture of modern images of Hollywood glamour combined with the old European aristocratic motifs ensured that trying on a garment was an event marked by the customer's social power, as she was the point of focus, physically and visually. In many of her

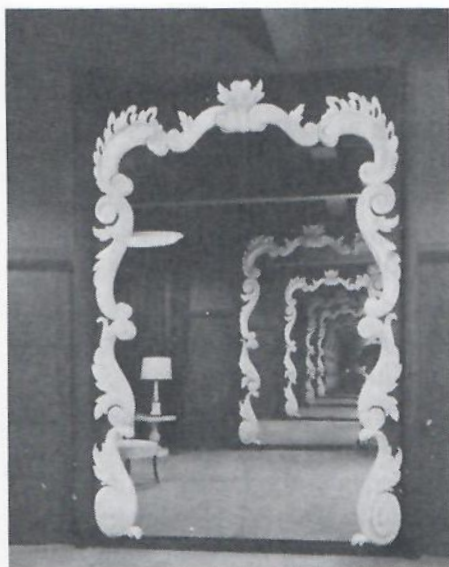


Figure 6. A classic example of Draper's Neo-Baroque scrollwork creating an implied *enfilade*. Excerpted from the April 1944 issue of *Interiors* magazine, p. 51.

rowed these frameworks to analyze the history of interiors. Unfortunately, the discipline of art history has structured the access to women's contributions. Chadwick (1996) states, "It is clear that critical issues of women's historical production remain unanswered" (p. 15). The history of interior design suffers from the same issues. The current literature lacks scholarly rigor with most of the biographies of interior decorators reading more like romance novels than scholarly research.

Another consideration is the perception that the decorator simply selected furniture and wall coverings based on historical models of the past, implying little ingenuity and

that the decorator was a vehicle for a larger extant trend or fashion. This paper reveals that there were other conscious factors involved in the design process of two important designers of the last century. However, society has relegated interior design as low art, while architecture is considered high art. This is particularly interesting when one considers the parallel between the genders that are predominant in each profession. In fact, this author hypothesizes that the profession of interior design was immediately engendered with the same second-class status as the women who helped shape its early foundations.

The first step in rectifying this is for educators to become aware of the role of the interior decorator/designer as reflective of social values and mores when speaking of the construction of the built environment. The second step would be to encourage students to research these individuals and their body of work in that context. What values are manifest in the work? Whose sensibilities do they reflect? How? Students engaged in answering these questions would have the opportunity to search for linkages between all cultural aspects of society (social, economic, political, religious, gendered), the designer, the client, and the finished product in order to craft an analysis of the significance or meaning of a selected interior. This would require accessing information from a variety of resources and allowing the interpretive conclusions to be unique to the individual student. Because the resources for such research are rather obscure, post-secondary students would be the

most likely to benefit from such an assignment. However, in order to foster interest in this topic, high school educators should consider introducing interiors as an equal but separate component of the built environment in humanities and art history courses.

Conclusions

Both with de Wolfe and Draper, an interior decorator made aesthetic decisions based, in part, on social stimuli and historical understandings. De Wolfe consciously embraced 18th century France in her own home and at the Colony Club as a means of expressing her desire to be an independent, yet powerful, modern woman of the twentieth century. But the social landscape in America was too restricted and deeply grounded in a traditional patriarchal system of gender relations to allow for her unique social needs and expression. Draper, on the other hand, sought to bring a certain level of equality to the growing separation of class. She attempted to elevate middle American women's experience through her designs by introducing palatial-scaled, aristocratic ornamentation to her public commissions.

Historians in the field of interior design have perpetuated the myth that early interior decorators were driven almost exclusively by Wharton and Codman's definition of taste, which is clearly circumscribed by aesthetic criteria,⁴ but the history of interior design does not lie exclusively within the proportion of rooms or the scale of furniture or the selection of textiles. Instead, it also exists within the private life experiences and thoughts of the individuals involved as they existed in particular social contexts. As a result, the above case studies of Elsie de Wolfe and Dorothy Draper could provoke a re-examination of the intentions of the earlier generations of interior decorators as a means of viewing society from social as well as aesthetic perspectives, stimulating design education students to examine contexts as well as forms in their understanding of interior design.

Notes

1. There are conflicting accounts concerning the creator of this piece. Jane Smith (1982) attributes Map to Versailles, Villa Trianon to Hungarian artist Marcel Vertes. However, in 1999, the painting went up for auction at Christie's in Los Angeles. The catalog states the artist as Adrien Etienne Drian.

2. This is certainly not to imply that Draper did not appreciate her luxurious surroundings. Draper's (1939) dedication in *Decorating Is Fun!* clearly demonstrates her fondness for exquisite interiors and architecture. She states, "To My Mother and Father Susan Paul Tuckerman: The best amateur planners I know, who after more than fifty years of married life, secretly long

to build still another house and to whom plans and decorations are an unending fascination, delight and challenge, this little book is dedicated with love, gratitude and admiration" (Dedication page).

3. Draper also attempted to elevate the experience of the middle class American at home. See Dorothy Draper's (1939) *Decorating Is Fun!* and John Turpin's (2000) "The Doors of Dorothy Draper: Vestiges of Victorian manners with a middle class sensibility".

4. See Stephen Calloway's (1988) *Twentieth Century Decoration*; Anne Massey's (2001) *Interior Design of the 20th Century*; Peter Thornton's (1984) *Authentic Décor: The Domestic Interior 1620-1920*.

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