

Design Trends 2008, or Glam Slam, Luxe Redux

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In 1988 during public remarks, President Ronald Reagan famously made a slip of the tongue when quipping that facts are stubborn things — it came out as “Facts are *stupid* things.” — and a classic (and undeservedly enduring) sound bite was born.

I’m often asked about the rules of good interior design, and I shamelessly borrow from President Reagan when I give my stock answer: “Design rules are stupid things.”

To the dismay of many designers (and their clientele), there are no hard and fast rules for achieving good design, and nothing is funnier than dated attempts to create them. (I own a 1925 guide to gracious decorating that counsels dining rooms should be painted lavender “to soothe digestion.”) Since there is no easily defined end product, there is no failsafe recipe for producing it. Good design is an organic and changeable thing — partly achieved by considering current trends and partly achieved by ignoring them.

That said, here are what I see as the most important trends in interior design for 2008. Trends are fascinating things to observe. They can grow in parallel to current tastes, creating subtle variations; they can also veer wildly in unpredictable directions. Both phenomenon are seen in the coming year. (And remember, no *rules* are implied here. Embrace or reject these trends as suits your own taste.)

The Return of Glamour

While the current appreciation of natural materials and their inherent “imperfections” continues to be a defining concept of the first decade of the new millennium, it has spawned a reactionary, renewed appreciation for refined lines and finishes — a 2008 trend I call “Luxe Redux.”

Taking its cue from the post-Deco period of the first half on the 20th century, the look is sleek of line and strongly geometric, but without the exaggerated extremes of the Deco movement. The silhouette is high and delicately legged or styled “to-the-floor” in all room categories, with strict limits on embellishment, letting each piece’s architecture be the defining characteristic. Upholstery pieces are eschewing skirts, pillows, back cushions and in some cases even seat cushions, preferring a tight-upholstered finish, often with button-tufted or channeled detailing.

Case pieces have gently swept lines, curved fronts and graceful aprons, incorporating stepped design elements and jewelry-inspired hardware. The preferred finishes are medium to dark tones, often with dimensional fancy faced veneers that capture the light, where grain is a strong but controlled design element.

The look has a certain matinee idol appeal – think of the smart interiors found in West Coast homes circa 1935-40. Glamorous, yes, but in an approachable way that’s meant to be incorporated into rooms that are welcoming, not cordoned off behind velvet ropes.

The Up Side of Downscaling

One long-lasting design aesthetic that is finally on the wane is upsized furniture. Often attributed to the need to fill large rooms with cathedral ceilings, it has resulted in the 50-inch wide club chair with

shoulder-height arms, the sofa so massive it makes the average person resemble Lily Tomlin's "Edith Ann," and the 35-pound dining chair that requires youthful upper body strength to take one's place at the table. Pieces are scaling back to normal proportions, and a grateful nation cheers (well, okay – *I'm* cheering). But interestingly, while silhouettes shrink, decorative patterns are growing. Large-scale prints are being found in fabrics and floor and wall coverings like never before. (Yes, you read that correctly. Wall coverings. *As in wallpaper.* Wallpaper is back in a big way.) Upholstery with large repeats gives added visual weight to even the most petite frames — whether in a traditional form such as toile, retro geometrics with their roots in the 1940s or 70s, or in the sumptuous new patterns from today's textile designers. Watch for large-scale, graphic black and white prints to dominate the look.

Which leads us nicely into color trends...

Full Spectrum Black and White

The trend toward darker, mineral tones in interiors continues full tilt, resulting in a renewed interest in black as the focal color for rooms. Last year's timid overtures toward incorporating black into upholstery, wood finishes and wall colors has blossomed into a full-on surge of smart and stylish rooms done in black and white. When care is taken to let one or the other dominate, the results can be refreshingly and maturely chic. (When used too equitably, black and white can muddle up the look of a room pretty quickly.)

Hot accent colors for 2008 are clear but natural-looking tones, and leading the pack is acid green (take chartreuse, add a dollop of caramel and stir gently). The resurgence of the 70s palate is aging gracefully, such that the colors are taking on a spice-inflected hue, resulting in tones of carnelian, flax and russet red. And in 2008 watch for a strong — and I do mean *strong* — return to grace of the color blue. Each of these colors is the perfect foil for mineral-toned or black and white interiors.

Making it Multi-Generational

One charming offshoot of the still-strong *a la carte* school of coordinated interiors is the increasingly robust trend of mixing vintage and new pieces in such a way that it's difficult to tell which is which. (This is also part of what's fueling the downscaling of new furniture; the huge-scaled stuff only works with other oversized pieces.) Among the benefits of incorporating heirlooms, auction scores or estate sale pieces into interiors: it helps guarantee the uniqueness of your décor, it gets one thinking in new and different ways about what complements what, and vintage furniture comes with instant *ya-ya* — a hard-to-define energy that can simultaneously elevate a room's sense of humor and gravitas.

Light Fantastic

With an increasing use of darker tones, it becomes more and more important to consider how light complements décor, which explains the trend of accent materials that reflect, refract and bend light. Materials such as silver, chrome, mercury glass, mirrors, crystal, and Lucite are part of this key trend, and are being used as decorative accents as well as being incorporated into furniture pieces themselves. Color in metallics and glass is out of favor — clear is "the new pink," so to speak. Aged finishes with crackling, pitting or patina help keep the look from becoming too severe.

Final Rites

Soap box time. There is a distinction between what's trendy and what's popular, as the former implies a certain level of excitement and newness. The latter can simply point to what's seen everywhere, overused and accepted for no better reason than ennui. I've held my tongue on this topic for a couple of years, but I'm glad to finally herald the decline in popularity of microfiber, the fabric I refer to as the kudzu of the furniture industry.

Like kudzu, microfiber upholstery was introduced to the American consumer for its aesthetic value and rugged strength. Fine. It's soft to the touch and easy to clean. Bravo. But then something happened. Before microfiber's largest drawback became clear (except with constant brushing of its nap, it always looks messy, leaving the imprint of every finger – or other, less mentionable parts of the human anatomy – behind as a sort of unwelcome souvenir), it was everywhere. Showrooms of popular furniture retailers were filled with a greater selection of microfiber than all other upholstery materials combined. It started spilling out of the living room and onto dining chairs and upholstered headboards. And, like kudzu, it started supplanting other, nicer materials like a creeping and unstoppable force. (Insert standard 50s horror movie panicked-crowd-fleeing-menace scene here.)

I'm happy, therefore, to report that at last this popular trend is showing signs of abating. Microfiber is not in any imminent danger of complete banishment, as its charms are still finding an audience. But I'm experiencing some guilty pleasure (the lesser angel of my nature) and taking some comfort in knowing there is an increasing amount of choice for consumers (the redemptive and more evolved part of my character).

Okay – One Rule

Despite what I said before about rules, let me end with one — my design mantra. (I'll even encourage you to decide for yourself if, like other design rules, this one is stupid.)

Remember that however well put together a room may be, it's meant to be used. If a room isn't comfortable and inviting for those inside it, it's a design failure, no matter how stylish it may be.