

## DESIGN: IT'S WHAT CONSUMERS CRAVE

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This season, current trends are all but impossible to survey without mentioning design. From food, to retailing, to travel, one question seems urgent: Design with what objective?

Function? Comfort? Social responsibility? Aesthetics? Certainly, design can be, and quite often is, about all of these notions. More and more, design is seen as encompassing emotion. Design, says Jean Marie Massaud, recipient of the *Createur d'Année* of the 2007 Paris Salon du Meuble, is about "feeling alive."

In *Metropolis* magazine, [Chris Younès](#), a French anthropologist who studies the philosophy of architecture, explains what this means. "Feeling alive, for this new generation of architects and designers, is our physical sensation involving our sense of touch, smell, hearing, sight and taste," Younès says. "It's about lying down in the grass, feeling the wind, taking a long shower, or enjoying the warmth of the sun."

There's that primal emotional component craved by consumers today. In retailing, this emerges as "emotion per square foot," as described by London's Future Laboratory. In cuisine, witness the dramatic food presentations of famed Ferran Adria and disciples, whose culinary experimentation with liquid nitrogen, calcium chloride and foam are intended to provoke, surprise and delight diners.

Design is attracting consumers by integrating their needs. "The Modern," a new luxury address in Boca Raton, features condominiums specifically designed with art collectors in mind. Specially lit, recessed alcoves throughout each unit allow buyers to showcase prominently their treasures.

In the travel industry, design is an increasing lure for consumers. Hotels as art galleries and as showcases for art are on the rise and the newest twist, [21c Museum Hotel](#) of Kentucky has an in-house art curator. Indeed, art is increasingly seen as an important component of the sophisticated affluent lifestyle. Spain's [Derby Hotels](#) offer a unique variation with a totally integrated marketing approach encompassing art and archaeology in sales and product offerings. Its hotel in Madrid boasts an onsite Egyptian museum and another property puts valuable ancient art in guest rooms, displaying it without security or any barriers to enjoyment, and using it to educate and cultivate its current and future guests.

Jordi Clos, founder of [Barcelona's Egyptian Museum](#) and Derby owner, offers guests check-in letters inviting them to his museum. They are informed that, by staying at the company's hotels, they are "patrons of culture" in helping to support research, exploration and preservation of ancient sites in Egypt. In addition to tours for adults to archaeological sites in the Middle East, Clos helps cultivate hotel guests of tomorrow through museum tours for children and day camps where youngsters can spend time doing a dig.

Going one step farther is Starwood's designer hotel-retail offering at the [Westin in Philadelphia](#). In a joint marketing promotion with the Greater Philadelphia Tourism Marketing Corporation – now boosting Philly as an incubator of artistic talent - the newly renovated Room 414 is decorated with art by area artists. Hired to do the work was a "curator," not an interior designer. Another twist: All the décor is for sale to guests. Not only does the local art on the walls come with a pricetag, but so does almost every design element in the room, from Jenny Lynn's photo art shower curtain to the Sherman & Gosweiler custom dresser. Guests can even buy the lighting, designed by Warren Muller of Bahdeebahdu, as well as the armchairs and the salt and pepper checker set.

### HEDGE FUND LUXE AND INFORMAL DECOR

"I like your look," said the Barney's salesperson to a young designer dressed in Bermuda shorts, fancy dress shirt and sport coat. "I can't tell if you're going to play golf or going out for a night on the town."

The anecdote, recounted in *The New York Times*, is a sampling of a new luxury market trend gaining steam on both sides of the Atlantic. Young affluents today are demonstrating different ideas about luxury: Call it informal luxury. It's not an oxymoron.

One reflection is in more relaxed dress codes, illustrated by recent print ads for the all-business class [EOS Airlines](#). Gone are the staid khakis and polo shirts of yesterday's dot.com casual. Now, even men's shorts, once restricted to backyards and beach vacations, are becoming part of the casual luxe wardrobe.

Take a look at Wimbledon tennis champion [Roger Federer's new Nike-designed](#) casually elegant clothing collection, with its tailored blazer and loose linen pants, for an idea of just what a step up today's new informal luxury is from our '90s notions. Federer, whose classic tennis game is as effortless as his wardrobe, is practically the icon of this new style. Or, taken up a notch, with bespoke tailoring and money-is-no-object expensive fabrics, it has been called "hedge fund luxe."

Hotels are noticing the need to reach out to this new class of dressed-down traveler by offering a more relaxed atmosphere. Barcelona, among Europe's design capitals, is one of the cities leading the way. [Hotel Omm](#), though just four stars, commands one of the city's highest rates by promoting its informal décor to upscale travelers who increasingly reject the stuffiness of yesterday's notions of luxury. Instead, Omm replicates the living room of a contemporary home. The lobby is easy-going, lively, and inviting. Everything happens in the open: a bar, a business meeting area, two casual restaurants, and even concerts with no walls in sight. In the absence of potentially "controversial" art, management reasons, is pure serenity.

In designing the bar at the new [The Regent Bal Harbour](#), in Miami's tony Bal Harbour Village, traditional concepts were tossed aside in favor of a "salon" environment with a mix of quiet places and areas for social or business interaction. The goal was to achieve a calm sense of "Feng Shui." Explains Jeffrey Beindorf, Principal of CMMI, the hotel's architecture and design firm: "The days of the old dark paneled bar tucked away in a hotel corner or hidden behind a large door are gone. We are designing space for the way people live and use public facilities in the 21st century, thus empowering the hotel guest to decide what he wants to do where."

Hyatt's answer to this new informal luxury niche is their new [Andaz](#) brand, positioned as luxury boutique hotels with highly functional environments of "sophistication, innovative design, local identity and casual elegance."

Simpler dress codes are making their way to hotel staff uniforms. The Hollywood Roosevelt decks its people in the season's latest Diane von Furstenberg wrap dress for women or a Michael Kors ensemble for men. The subtle message to guests is relaxed American chic.

In today's world, new notions of just what luxury means are being created all the time. This is one evolution I'm confident we will all come to appreciate the more it takes hold.