

# Furniture for Interior Design





Published in 2014  
by Laurence King Publishing Ltd  
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London EC1V 1LR  
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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 78067 322 6  
Design: John Round Design  
Senior Editor: Peter Jones  
Printed in China

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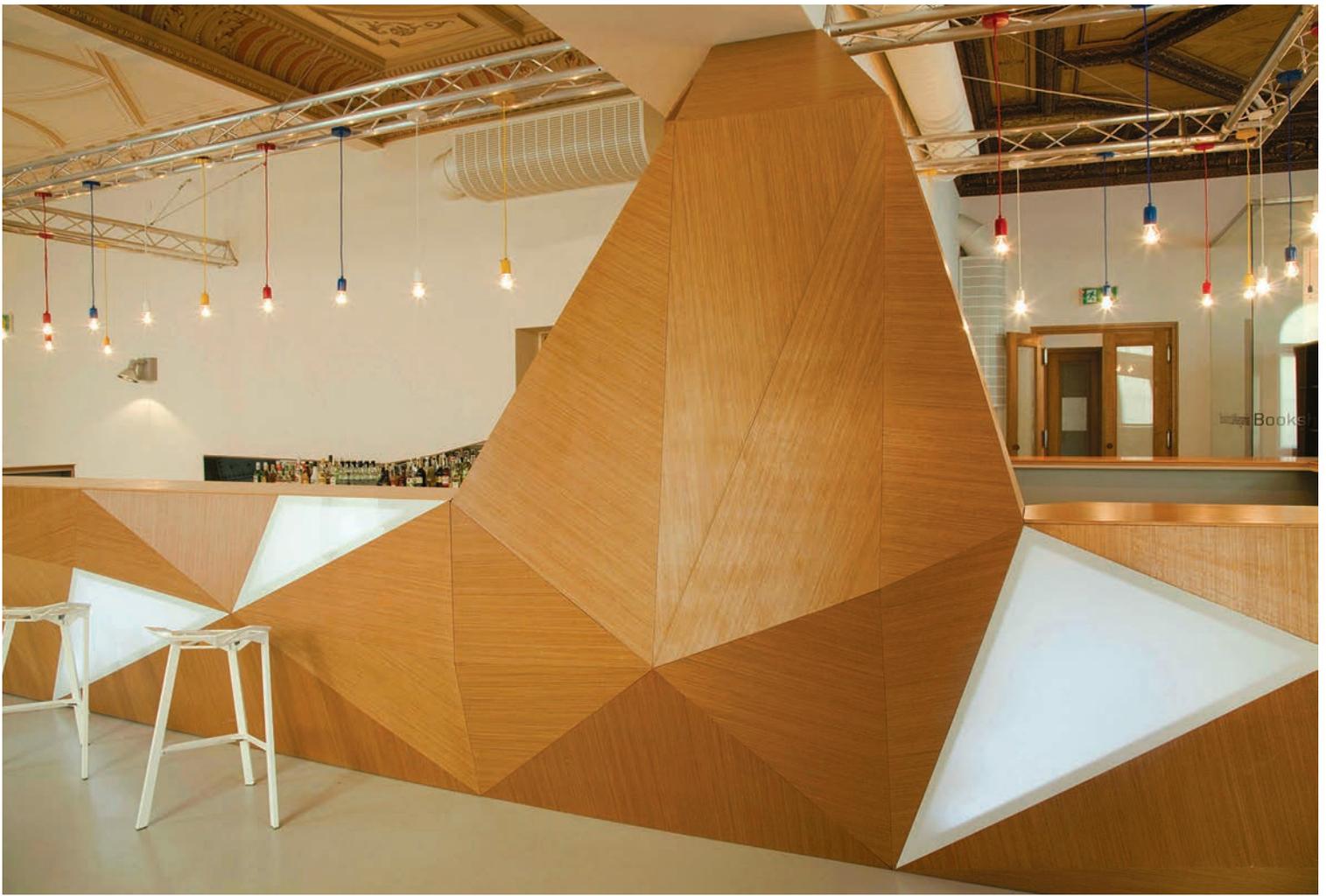
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# Introduction

## No furniture = no interior

Interior designers work within the shells of existing buildings, which are sometimes new but more frequently old and in need of adaptation to refresh tired aesthetics, create new identities and accommodate new functions. This book will explore the role of furniture in the process of that transformation of empty, underperforming shells. It will demonstrate the processes of designing, making and selecting furniture, and explore the strategies for its deployment.

The architect Norman Foster has said: 'Furniture is like architecture in microcosm.' As such, it must bear closer scrutiny than the exterior of any building because those who use it come, unavoidably, into direct visual and physical contact with it and are made more aware of its practical efficiency and of the aesthetic language it speaks.

The physical dimensions and aesthetic character of any building shell will, and should, influence the nature of a new interior inserted within it. Furniture will play a crucial – probably the most crucial – part in the refinement of the new installation and the physical interaction between interior elements and those who use them. It should comprehensively fulfil its practical obligation to support human activity without compromising efficiency or comfort, but it should also meet a less tangible obligation to stimulate and satisfy the aesthetic appetites of those who use it, regardless of how utilitarian or how hedonistic the activity it supports may be. While a designer must understand how to construct the major elements of walls, floors and ceilings, it is as important to master and refine the practical skills that

shape the miniaturized architectural language of furniture. However grand the conceptual intention, poor practical resolution will invite and deserve a negative response.

Form will be defined by function. Generic forms have evolved to serve, and enrich, the range of physical and intellectual human activities, and these are the rudiments of an aesthetic language that is shared by designers and those who use their work against which each new piece will be assessed. Chairs must be for sitting on. Tabletops must be horizontal. Dimensions will be determined by the limitations of the human body, and materials by the diverse degrees of use and abuse to which they are subjected. However, while it is comparatively easy to meet these prescribed practicalities, ultimately the success of a piece of furniture depends on its capacity to satisfy and stimulate the user's sensory experience. Its texture and temperature will be intimately experienced. It will affect the acoustic of the room in which it sits for good or ill. Its smell can pervade and characterize a room. It will make an impression on those who use it and they may well leave an impression on it.

From the simple utilitarian layout of plastic stacking chairs in an otherwise empty and characterless meeting place to pieces that go beyond conventional definitions and expectations to become something akin to sculpture or internal architecture, furniture inevitably communicates symbolic, aesthetic and cultural values. The reception desk in the entrance lobby of an office can encapsulate the status and intent of the business. The chairs in the



The functional element, the conventional, albeit grandiose, chair on which the emperor of China sat, mutates into an expression of divine status.

**Left**

A newly elected president selects a chair that is comfortable – and thereby implies a more democratic intent.

**Above**

The ubiquitous stacking chair is wholly egalitarian and has achieved its dominance because it works. It is easy to sit on, at least for a limited period, easily adapted to different activities, easily stored and comparatively easy on the eye.

lobby of a hotel can signal the quality of the experiences it offers. The service counter becomes the signature of a bar. The same empty space can be populated with different furniture pieces organized in different layouts and each variation will give it a different identity – formal or informal, practical or romantic, tranquil or vibrant, without making reference to the architecture of the original shell, other than to use it as a foil to intensify perception of the new.

Throughout the book the word ‘furniture’ will be used to describe any element that is functionally independent of the walls, floors and ceilings that enclose the space in which it sits. It may be built into walls or fixed to walls and floors for most of the furniture created by interior designers, other than project-defining set pieces, is intended to resolve the idiosyncracies of layouts and sites. Equal status will be accorded the one-off pieces and the wealth of manufactured options that are available and are specified rather than designed.

It is unlikely that designers will often have the opportunity, or obligation, to devote the time necessary to produce a successful piece in the pressurized design phase of the vast majority of interior projects; it is questionable whether it would always be appropriate to do so anyway. The complexities of designing something as apparently simple and familiar as a chair – the fine-tuning of dimensions and testing of the structure – demand their own expertise. Mass production of tried-and-tested pieces by specialist designers in specialist factories is, almost inevitably, more efficient and cost-effective. Throughout this book, mass-produced furniture will be described as ‘specified’, meaning that an

interior designer will choose pieces from a manufacturer’s pre-existing range, specifying the model, finalizing options for materials and performance if necessary, and the number of pieces required. There are occasions when the particular needs of a project will justify the production of a small number of bespoke pieces, such as restaurant seating or shop display systems, and an interior designer can and should seize enthusiastically the opportunities they offer for creative speculation. The manufacture of pieces in limited numbers is classified as ‘batch production’ and the work is usually carried out, off site, in a specialist workshop.

Many of the elements that most emphatically establish the identity of an interior – bar counters and reception desks, hanging rails and display plinths – are unlikely to be available ready-made. Their size or their importance in creating identity demands that they be project-specific. Whether they generate or augment decisions about the whole, they should be compatible with the material palette of the walls, floor and ceiling, and with other pieces specified from manufacturers’ catalogues. They need not be complex. Their detailing should be honed to clarify expression of the conceptual idea that underpins them and to simplify the processes of their production.

Before choosing to reinvent the chair or any other generic piece, a designer needs to be sure that his or her creation will be genuinely better than one that already exists and that, regardless of its visual qualities, its practical performance will meet its obligations. From Charles Rennie Mackintosh and Frank Lloyd Wright, through Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier, to Philippe Starck and