

The Secret Life of Rooms Teaching Guide

Summary

THE SECRET LIFE OF ROOMS explores the true fundamentals of interior design. Color and proportion and furniture styles are the *heart* of interior design, but its *soul* lies in the relationship of people to things and spaces. Our video describes this human aspect as "the secret life of rooms."

The Secret Life of Rooms explores:

- => Why interior design and decoration is far more than creating a pleasant space.
- => Why "people" is the starting point for all design and styling.
- => How the appearance and design of rooms actually changes behavior.
- => Why a chair far more than merely something to sit on?
- => What is the difference between style and design?
- => Can a well designed interior can lack style and a stylish room lack design.
- => How interiors are status symbols even in the most humble of apartments.
- => Why a room that is unused is not necessarily useless.
- => The four ways people relate to things.
- => Feng Shui as a recognition of the power of design.
- => Interiors and our love of the familiar.

Video Transcript With Commentary

The following pages contain excerpts from the narration of **The Secret Life of Rooms** followed by commentary and questions in italics.

The boundary separating "you" from the world is not precise. It's not your skin or your clothing. You place part of your SELF into your living spaces, as well as into what you buy or create. Imagine showing a friend a room you decorated. She takes one look and says, "Gross. This is the ugliest room I've ever seen."

The comment was about the room, but you feel personally hurt because part of you is in that room. So, part of you suffers rejection.

This idea is key to understanding interior design as well as much of human motivation. Design and fashion objects are important insofar as they become part of your "extended self." We often judge people by how they dress, by the cars they drive, the houses they live in, and the rooms they decorate. Many object and say such judgments are shallow and fail to reflect the "true person." But the "true person" IS extended into things and these extensions do reveal much about their owners and makers.

Discuss in what ways do we "extend ourselves" into objects and living spaces? In what ways does this cause conflict? What happens when people "extend themselves" into their nation, race, or religion so that these become part of the person? Give everyday examples of people who go to "extremes" in identifying with their beliefs or their possessions.

What we commonly call "decorating" social scientists call "personalizing." Personalizing means manning your space to let people know where your boundaries begin and end, and putting your personal stamp on its contents. Personalizing is the human way of adapting to environments.

Our second fundamental of interior design concerns the difference between style and design. Style is an expression of personality. Design is about how something works, about how it is used.

7776 words "style" and "design" are often used interchangeably, but they are not the same. In this video we use style to mean personal expression and design to reflect function. A well designed room is one that enables people to live or work in it with comfort. A stylish room is one that reveals personality and taste. So a room with lots of style can be poorly designed— unlivable. And, in contrast, a well designed room can be cold and impersonal — lacking in style.

The word "style" is often used to mean a particular type of design. For example, Art Deco style or contemporary styling or traditional styles. This type of style is defined by common features and motifs. This definition of the word "style" is not the one used in this context.

Interior designers who prepare model homes face the challenge of decorating rooms in which no one lives. How can they create style if there is no personality to express? Many designers use a clever solution. They create a fictional family to live in the house. This is the FIRST step in the interior design process. Not what colors, what style furniture, but WHO lives here. All decisions flow from the family they create.

If you have model homes with professionally de- signed interiors nearby, check to see if they are designed for "fictional families." Decorators know that working on rooms in which no one lives is like writing a novel with no real characters in mind. Think of an interior as part of a person. As the video observes, "You could say we put some of our "interior" into our interiors. Based on early idea in the video, what do you think is the first question a designer (or inhabitant) should ask about a space to be decorated? Make up some questions that would be helpful to ask in "decorating" any room. Certain spaces in the home have a gender— there are distinctly "male" and "female" rooms and design schemes. Discuss the difference between a "male" space and a "female" space in terms of interior design.

Interior design magazines and model homes often inspire people "looking for ideas" for their own homes. One subtle message of these professional interiors is that a room should be "complete and finished."

In reality, our own houses tend to be works in progress. They await enough money to buy a chandelier, they await babies growing old enough to live with furniture, they reflect the fact that we change.

That our interiors should look like model homes complete with "tasteful" color coordination is a message

learned from mass media. In reality, interiors are messy works in progress. Since we extend ourselves into our interiors, they change and reflect our uncertainties as well as our tastes. Some of the "guilt" many people feel about the condition of their homes comes from this misconception.

Historical styles rise and fall in popularity, but the idea of capturing the past remains popular. What is "old fashioned" today might become a "hot new look" in fifty years. But "decorating a house" shouldn't be like going to the ice cream store. I'll have the Colonial flavor. Or I'll have one scoop of art deco and a scoop of Victorian. Ideas from the past do remain important, but the task of an interior decorator is not to present a list of pre-approved styles. The task is to help express personality in things and spaces. The space you live in is part of your life story - your biography expressed in things.

Professional interior designers can be very helpful, but the best will never tell a client what they should have. A designer will attempt to draw out a style from the person. A home owner cannot extend herself into a room by telling a designer to "make it look good."

What would happen to your family if you moved into a professionally decorated model home that you purchased complete with furniture, color scheme, carpeting, accessories, lamps, etc. ? Assume for this question that you like the house but had no input into selecting colors or any elements of the design.

A third fundamental of interior design is to realize people use interiors (and consumer goods) as status symbols. A status symbol shows where we're at, our status. To most people, a status symbol is outrageously expensive and announces its owner is flush with cash. A six car garage (with cars), a twenty-one room mansion with a front lawn the size of a soccer field, or a giant diamond ring are obvious status symbols.

The more useless the object, the lower its practical value and the higher its symbolic value. That's why a true status symbol is frivolous - say gold plated faucets, or a bathroom for every day of the week.

But status symbols are not just for the ultra rich - we all use them. It's part of human nature to communicate using things. A small rented apartment will feature status symbols just as much as a twenty room mansion - they just won't cost as much.

Critics often charge Americans with being too "materialistic," by which they mean too taken with buying and owning things. But such criticism fails to take into account that these "things" are usually NOT an end in themselves, but a symbol. Humans are symbolic creatures. All of what we make, buy, own, and decorate is symbolic. A materialist would exalt in living amid wonderfully designed and styled interiors. But someone who wants the most expensive fabrics, the "hot" names in artists, the right brand name appliances in the kitchen, is not so much a materialist as a person using materials for psychological ends.

Ask students to identify some "status symbols" that people who don't have tons of money typically display. Can you recognize your own status symbols?

The living room, for many, is a symbol of a family success or achievement, a way of showing off its good taste. It's where most people put their art or heirlooms. Usually the family room can have comfortable chairs and yellow pine tables, but the living room has formal chairs no one would want to sit in for long and dark, polished woods. Perhaps a better name would be the "showing room."

Home builders and designer often speak of the "end of the living room." They foresee a day when a "great room" or "family room" with a casual atmosphere will be enough. The demise of a "front room" used more for show than for living has been common for decades. Living rooms have shrunk in size over the past decades, but designers know the room serves more of a psychological need than a real space need. Even in 1900, American magazines spoke of the wasteful Victorian parlors. But living rooms survive. Discuss why rooms that are unused can still be useful.

The next fundamental of interiors is to realize that although we shape our rooms, they shape us as well.

The video describes some research that suggests the quality of a room influences how people judge others, how quickly they recover from an illness, how much they enjoy work, and how they perform on a written test. Discuss these experiments and explore what meaning they might have to the rooms in which we live and

work daily. Are there room that influence your feelings?

The Chinese recognize that rooms shape people in their three thousand year old "art of placement" called feng shui. It seeks the harmonious use of what the Chinese call *chi*, the vital energy that moves through people, spaces, and objects.

The true Chinese art of Feng Shui is a guiding force in interiors and buildings throughout China. Even high tech skyscrapers are designed with on staff Feng Shui experts as an integral part of the building team. Many of the tenets of Feng Shui relate to Chinese spirituality, but the art recognizes that interiors do indeed influence people.

Feng Shui reached almost faddish proportions in the 1990s among New Age designers. Using Feng Shui as a guideline works only if you accept the Chinese spirituality and beliefs behind it, and few Westerners understand them. Yet Feng Shui embodies some universal truths about how people relate to things and spaces. Chi might not be a measurable force, but there is no doubt energy levels and feelings are influenced by objects, spaces, colors, and design.

...we're often not aware of the interior patterns we prefer. For example, given a choice people will prefer rooms that have outside light coming from at least two directions. We see interiors with our eyes, but we react to their colors, materials, shapes, and odor with our bodies - with gut reactions. Rooms affect our adrenal systems, our brain waves, our hormonal balance. We can't really like a place unless it feels good physically.

*The observation that a room with only one source of natural light is less pleasing than with one two is from **A** Pattern Language by Alexander, Ishikawa, Silverstein, et al. (NY, Oxford University Press, 1977). Examine the rooms you live in to test the pattern. A Pattern Language states "When they have a choice, people will always gravitate to those rooms which have light on two sides, and leave the rooms which are lit only from one side unused and empty." The authors claim "This pattern, perhaps more than any other single pattern, determines the success or failure of a room. The... presence of windows on two sides is fundamental."*

Another fundamental of interior design is that people prefer to live with the familiar rather than the strange. 21st century furniture still has to resemble what was built in the 18th or 19th centuries. So called "traditional" furniture is the most purchased today.

Contemporary styling remains a minority taste. Many people feel even a well designed contemporary interior is "cold" or "lacks feeling." Such comments are not so much about interior design as about oneself. They say, I feel more comfortable with a look that suggests the past. Traditional styles give a sense of connection to the past — they are the design equivalent of chicken soup.

In summary, interior decorating is about much more than fabric swatches and paint chips. It's about how we see ourselves and how we want to be perceived by others. The rooms and houses we live in are both shaped by us and shape us. We decorate and create living spaces, but those spaces in turn influence us.

Questions and Projects

1. Select a room with which you are familiar. Write a "biography" of the room's secret life. In a page or two, describe the room and explain what it communicates. Explore how it extends the personality of its creator. What story does the room tell? How does it announce status? How does it influence how people behave? What are its secrets?
2. Explore the idea of the "extended self." The video comments "the boundary separating 'you' from the world is not precise. It's not your skin or your clothing. You place part of your SELF into your living spaces, as well as into what you buy or create." One reason we value some material objects more is that we invest some of our selves in it — they represent us. Explore this idea as it relates to: Fashion in clothing, Home ownership, Interior decorating, Automobiles, Brand names we prefer
3. Explain, in your own words, the difference between style and design. (Wofe: *The video speaks of style as an expression of personality and design as relating to the function of a room. The word "style" is used in a variety of ways. It often refers to a group of shared characteristics as in "gothic style" or "French style " or even "deli style."*)
4. The video describes some University of Chicago research involving in-home interviews with 82 volunteers. The researchers found that "almost every woman of the house started the conversation by apologizing for the condition of her home. Even in homes that were perfectly clean, researchers heard the line, 'pardon the mess.'" Have you heard (or used) this line? In what situations is it most common?
5. The video comments that "historical styles rise and fall in popularity, but the idea of capturing the past remains popular. What is 'old fashioned' today might become a 'hot new look' in fifty years." Why are "traditional" styles so much more popular than contemporary styles? Do other cultures share the American fascination for what is traditional?
6. The video observes that a "status object" is often considered something available only to the very rich. The reason a gold plated faucet handle is a status object is that it serves no other practical value. It seems to say only, "I've got so much money I can afford to put gold in my bathtub." The video points out that we all use objects as symbols, and often these symbols reveal our stands or status. What status symbols (in this broad sense) do you have? Include things you collect, display in your room or apartment, wear, or generally value as symbolic.
7. The video explores four ways people relate to things. A "thing specialist" is intrigued by objects themselves. A "people specialist" thinks first of who would use an object in what way. A "self specialist" judges objects in terms of "is it right for me?" A generalist strives to balance an interest in people AND things. Find examples illustrating each of these approaches. How might the same room differ if decorated by each type of "specialist"?
8. The video states "The elaborate front door and entry foyer serves the need for symbolic meanings even though rarely used. Along with the living room, it is the stage where performances where performances for guests are given." Discuss how front doors, living rooms, and entryways (foyers) serve as non-verbal communication about the residents.
9. One of the main themes of the video is that rooms and their design influence the people who live in them. In what ways do rooms "shape people"? Examine the room in which you are right now. How does its design and use of furniture influence the way people behave?
10. Analyze pictures of rooms in terms of what they communicate about their owners. Avoid rooms done only for "show" or for magazine ads. Try to use pictures of rooms in which people actually live.
11. Debate this statement pro and con: "You can't judge people by what they own or how they decorate their living environment.
12. Is Feng Shui a source of ancient wisdom that could guide our own interior decorating or is it a collection of strange ideas not practical in the modern world? What is Feng Shui and how is it used today? What can it teach us about rooms and spaces?