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Helena Clunies-Ross Design is a New York and London-based international design studio. Clunies-Ross discusses the next generation of interior design taste, Quiet Luxury, and how lighting plays a role within it.



As we've spent an increased amount of time in our homes over the past few years, attention has switched to the walls that surround us; seeking and needing a place to escape the outside world — a place of calm and zen. However, this next generation of design taste was around long before Covid and chaos, quietly luxuriating in corners, it's just that more people are now catching onto it. Now it has a name — Quiet Luxury.

Since I can remember, I've had a fascination with the space I inhabit. From rearranging the placement of furniture in my childhood home, to now designing spaces for my clients with a sensitivity to how it will make them feel. Offering a way of life, not just something pretty to look at; playing with styling, lighting, and the contours of each area; in search of balance, warmth and wellbeing.

On some level, I believe this feeling is what the Danish call Hygge, but Quiet Luxury goes further than a feeling of coziness and contentment. It's about a way of living that appreciates the finer details of our environments; embracing natural beauty and simplicity. Opting for spaces that bare their skin, with a touch of 'je ne sais quoi', as opposed to a full face of makeup. Rooms that resonate, punctuated only by objects and items that hold meaning and memory, sophistication and story. Or at least it is for me.

This is luxury redefined. No ostentatious displays of grandeur and wealth, demanding your attention with bells and whistles, or filling a space with stuff just for the sake of it. This is a soft caress of textures, shapes and materiality — whispering luxury rather than shouting it. Less about the stuff we put in a space, but more about the space itself and the way it makes us feel.

The architecture of a space has always been the first consideration for me. Allowing it to have a voice as part of a bigger picture rather than masking its presence; uncovering or reshaping its parameters to release beauty and balance. Appreciating the way it interacts with light and shade, then allowing the design and styling to nestle into place within it without distraction. A total visual comfort, created first and foremost by the architecture, and then—of course—by the lighting.

In New York, there seems to be an unwritten, unspoken rule regarding lighting, and all establishments seem to have received the memo. With dimly lit, ambient spaces that softly say, "step inside and experience me", Manhattan is simply a glowing metropolis after sunset. From one street, one bar, one restaurant to the next — simply put; it's theatre.

You don't necessarily notice the light fixtures themselves though, rather the level of light they emit, the ambiance they create and what they draw attention to within the space. The perfect supporting role. Of course there are certain styles of lighting that will do this more successfully. Therefore in our projects, we regularly opt for covered

wall lamps that bounce the light onto walls in little pools, or up and down depending on what the space demands.

We also consider how lighting can complement the architecture in terms of scale or materiality. A recent project of ours in Tribeca showcases a light that hangs 20ft from the ceiling, accentuating and drawing attention to the double height aspect of the space. For another project we designed a bespoke pendant with a metal box-like structure that runs the length of a dining table; zoning the open plan living space and allowing the light to illuminate the table beneath. In a lobby, we concealed light fixtures entirely beneath ceiling panels with shadow gap details; allowing shards of light to escape at intervals, spotlighting the beauty of the brickwork and blurring the line between architecture and lighting.

Directional, low-level lighting that can be thoughtfully placed to highlight different aspects of the architecture, creating zones within a space, or illuminating objects and pieces of art, is at the heart of what Quiet Luxury means to me.

But it's at its quietest and most luxurious in a space within a space — a zone. A pocket of peace that's been designed to offer just that — a moment of stillness. For the eyes to rest on something beautiful, considered, simple, elegant. Somewhere that breathes through the light that dances on a plastered or washed stone wall, or the shadows that softly fall around an object.

Quiet Luxury is creating vistas that gently lead the eye from one point to the next, like a guided meditation — gently leading the mind away from chaos; encouraging it to let go.

It's a piece of music that ebbs and flows, then stops, and starts again. And it's in those moments of silence that we truly appreciate the notes we just heard, and yearn for the melody that's yet to follow. It's only then that we can truly appreciate the intricacies of the harmony that held the tune — the architecture that holds the design — press pause, and then repeat.

It's a way of living with a carefully curated world around you that speaks to who you are; that allows you to quietly breathe it in, and then out. It's not about filling that space with meaningless objects that you'll just discard of next year when you get the ones you really want. It's about practicing patience in a world of instant gratification; curating a world around you, piece by piece, that will stand the test of time. Appreciating raw, earthy materials; wood, metal, clay and plaster. Carved, forged, moulded and applied, by skilled craftsmen, with passion and care. Personal spaces that tell stories, one piece, one wall, one view at a time. Never screaming to be looked at, always gently humming a symphony of calm and warmth.

The next generation of interior design taste was always here, and for me — it's here to stay.

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