

Draft chapter from Robert Klitgaard, *Your Life, Your Hero*, a manuscript in progress
Comments welcome

5. Getting Insights from Experts

“I cannot stand chicanery,” says the interior decorator Rodney Wright in a feature on himself in a magazine called *House and Leisure*. “I’ve always considered myself successful but I like to think I’ve got there on my own merits, not on hot air.”

The magazine reports many such insights from Rodney Wright and includes photographs of his antique-stocked, gilt-laden home. (“You can never have too much good gilt,” he says.) “The opulence,” Rodney Wright points out, “is born of my eccentric liking for things which are just a little bit oversized...”

The pictures of Rodney Wright’s home are instructive. His study effectively mixes gold-leaf accents, a satinwood desk, and walls the color of oxblood. In the sitting room the theme of rope recurs in mirror-frame, ottoman, and even the braid-like design on the pillars; and this theme combines interestingly with arrow motifs in the coffee table, the curtain rods in the passage, even the stylized arrowheads in the wonderful ivory-coral-dark rose fabric on two easy chairs.

In the negative sense, from Rodney Wright’s home one learns once again that clutter is the enemy. In the incomplete scope of one photo of the sitting room, one can count thirteen black sculptures and statues herded below and around a mirror. On a small corner table are crammed at least seven vase-like objects plus a table lamp, leaving no space for even one of the small framed pictures or photos that contribute to the clutter on top of the satinwood desk.

As always, design magazines succeed when they show us such specifics, even when these are not to our taste. But design magazines are much less helpful when they offer up canned insights.

As the great English historian Thomas Macaulay put it long ago:

Every man who has seen the world knows that nothing is so useless as a general maxim. If it be very moral and very true, it may serve for a copy to a charity-boy. If, like those of Rochefoucault, it be sparkling and whimsical, it may make an excellent motto for an essay. But few indeed of the many wise apophthegms which have been

uttered, from the time of the Seven Sages to that of Poor Richard, have prevented a single foolish action.¹

Macaulay's point is valid for design as for the rest of life. Rodney Wright, I am sure, suggests many specific and helpful ideas to his clients. Yet in magazine features the Rodney Wrights of the world seem compelled to spout general maxims. Indeed, Rodney Wright's pronouncements, as layered in pretense as his home is in gold leaf, beautifully illustrate that, aside from being useless, so-called insights in the field of design are seldom "very true."

Without meaning to pick on the overstatements and conceits of Rodney Wright in particular—"If there's one thing I detest, it's a boring tie," he says, in the caption to a close-up photo of a Disneyland cravat and, on the jacket's left lapel, eight Art-Deco brooches—it is worthwhile using him to illustrate, and if possible thereby to deter, the common phenomenon of expert insights in design. And to help us rethink how it is we get insights, from magazines, experts, or each other.

Misleading Maxim 1

Don't be afraid of colors, or afraid to mix colors. In fact, colors are one of the things Rodney Wright's clients and *House and Leisure*'s readers should worry most about. But Rodney Wright says: "Colours are colours and with few exceptions they're going to mix pretty well."

In this Rodney Wright is simply wrong. It is true that most colors are nice, just as most spices are pleasant. It is also true that color schemes, in the sense of symphonies of peach, often fail. But in fact most combinations of colors are simply not nice to live with, just as most mixtures of spices prove not to be delicious.

Misleading Maxim 2

Don't be afraid to mix styles and genres; be eclectic. Like mixing colors, mixing styles is one of the happy dangers in design, therefore precisely something one *should* be afraid of in the best sense. But Rodney Wright says: "I think one should be able to appreciate anything from any period for its own worth. That's why I believe one can mix periods and styles."

¹ "Machiavelli" [1827], in *Macaulay: Poetry and Prose*, ed. G.M. Young (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), p. 263.

Some design successes do mix styles. Unfortunately, so do many failures. In combining periods and styles, it is easy to go astray. Many different kinds of pieces are indeed nice—but, contrary to the maxim, not usually nice together.

Misleading Maxim 3

Genres travel well. In fact genres usually do not travel well. Your choice of interior style should depend among other things on the climate, your house’s architecture, and your garden and surrounding landscape. He and partner Frederick Goss “began consulting in interiors because while there were a lot of Perspex and fussy curtains about, there was nobody in the market doing good, intelligent, English interiors.”

I once lived in a sub-tropical part of South Africa. It was stunning to find a predominance of English country style. One encounters colors and fabrics and what Rodney Wright correctly calls “fussiness” that belong, if anywhere, in the gray and the cold. English interiors are as out of place in many parts of South Africa as a rondavel would be in Oxfordshire.

The idea that English interiors travel well, itself travels—often with unfortunate results. The classic example of this design mismatch—at least in my thankfully limited experience—is a villa in Eze-sur-Mer, on the Riviera, which faces the Mediterranean but pulls its decor and drawing rooms directly from the London fog.

Misleading Maxim 4

Follow your tastes; do what appeals to you. If this is not a tautology, it is unhelpful, in the same way as was your mother’s advice, “Darling, pursue whatever career makes you happiest.” Alas, most of us do not know very well what we want or like, at least not until we experience it. Rodney Wright’s version of the fourth unhelpful maxim is that people “should have enough confidence to be themselves and not to ask whether something is in or out.” A truism, but beside the point. Later Rodney Wright says, “The only people afraid of being out are the nouveaux riches who are pretending to be the anciens riches!” (exclamation point in original).

In design as elsewhere in life, we are better at knowing what we love than knowing what we like. We can therefore begin our design task by building on specific things we love—objects, art, a color, a texture, particular sorts of materials and qualities of light. Where most of us need ideas is how to proceed from there.

In fact, most of us are bad at generalizing from fabric swatch to completed object, be it curtain or bedspread or sofa. Most of us are not good at visualizing combinations of shapes, colors, textures, light, and space. It is not that we lack taste, only that our taste is untrained and unpracticed. We can easily lose our bearings. Left to follow our own taste and do what appeals to us, we too often choose things that we soon discover are not to our taste and do not appeal.

Misleading Maxim 5

If you are going to decorate, get serious. Make a statement. Rodney Wright compares your task to the Venetian oligarchy's. "One should hardly have to decorate more than once in every generation. The silks in Venice have been up for 300 years. They're cleaned and restored and rehung. In those terms good objects are not really expensive." In this spirit, Rodney Wright's new shop "is going to be by some standards a little over the top. We feel that while one wants to have a traditional style there is also a need to update more to the high style, and people want a little more gilt, a little more whimsy, a little over the top."

Many other decorators, although disagreeing (one hopes) with Rodney Wright's choice of design statements, would concur that statements do need to be made. But in fact statement-making is suspect in interior design.

No matter how arresting or valid they may at first appear, statements of any kind are, when repeated, a bore. This is why a poem or a dress that "make a statement" are best heard or seen once in a while. And this is why interior design presents a compositional challenge entirely unlike, say, creating a poem or a piece of music or a piece of wearable art. Your home surrounds you intimately, every day.

For the interiors of family homes, it is not a statement that we usually seek but comfort, practicality, beauty, and fun. If you must think in terms of statements, make them multiple and subtle and changeable. And don't listen to that maxim that decorating must mean getting serious. Often it means having a sense of humor.

A sense of humor does not mean telling jokes. As with statements, jokes quickly lose their charm. John Kenneth Galbraith was once asked how he managed so successfully to insert humor in his economic essays. The note of spontaneity so often praised in his writing, Galbraith replied, in fact only entered on the fifth or sixth draft. This is suggestive for design as well. Striving for an effect, perhaps especially for humor, usually fails. Yet being aware of the possibilities of

spontaneity and humor in design suggests that we try many combinations and make many changes, until we begin to feel as it were on the fifth draft what works.

Changing things and adding things, especially perhaps inexpensive objects and perishables such as flowers, allows you to vary moods, create refreshing surprises, suggest parallels. For example, think about hanging your paintings and photographs and posters in such a way that you can rotate them, interchange them, substitute new pieces or old pieces you've stored for now in the cellar. Ditto for objects of art. Plants also move nicely, if you plan their sizes for compatibility. A friend of mine leaves his chess table set in the position of a different famous game each week. Another friend covers his couch in a material suitable for winter, then zips on off-white unbleached linen for the summer. Pillows and some objects of art also make seasonal changes.

As with curatorship, wit and insight in design often coincide through the use of creative contrast. The famous Parisian exhibition of Picasso's art alongside African carvings provided both a smile and a jolt. Less grandly, hanging a contemporary lithograph alongside an exotic weaving may reveal a similar geometry and palette. Juxtaposing different woods may educate as well as please. The point is that such design decisions should be experimented with, and not thought of as "serious business" or as a design decision for this generation.

Misleading Maxim 6

Good taste is expensive. Here Rodney Wright is at his most hyperbolic, which is saying something. "I have little patience with fools and there are lots of them about. Why pay so much for the second-rate when for a little more you can have the real thing? . . . Good furnishings, objects and paintings are extremely costly and have always been so. The notion that good decorating can be done inexpensively is entirely erroneous."

In fact, the correlation between expense and taste is low. Not only do many expensive decorating efforts—and one cannot rule out Rodney Wright's own home in this regard—display dubious judgment. One also finds many examples—including some by the greatest designers of furniture, fabric, and interiors—of refreshing, comfortable, practical, and beautiful creations that middle-class people can afford.

Redecorating does not have to mean a top-to-bottom redo. Remarkable improvements can be made inexpensively by beginning with lighting, plants, and what is displayed on the walls.

Downlighting, uplighting, pools of light: the technical possibilities are many and the effects can be stunning. You can also transform a room by adding large standing plants, flowers, hanging pots, and small plants including cactuses, which always seem to have a sense of humor.

Regarding what to display on walls, I am impressed by the possibilities of fabrics: Guatemalan dress fronts, silks and embroideries from India and Pakistan, woven *aguayos* from the Andes, reverse embroidered *molas* from Panama, and African batiks and block prints. Fabrics may be stretched and framed or hung in various ways. The results can be dramatic and distinctive, as well as affordable.

But there are so many other ideas for your walls, besides the usual paintings and photographs and graphic arts. Perhaps it's not everyone's taste, but a friend has created an interesting and functional wall full of sporting equipment ranging from baseball gloves to hockey sticks, interspersed with sports posters. I have also seen the successful hanging of antique and contemporary maps, plates, stringed instruments, surfboards, a huge patchwork quilt of African fabric, hats, and box-mounted propaganda posters from the Chinese cultural revolution. Admittedly, not together.

From Maxims to Ideas

Macaulay was right. In decorating as in other areas of life, general insights are seldom valid. What we seek in a magazine like *House and Leisure* are not Rodney Wright's maxims—nor, for decorating reasons anyway, his observations about his eccentricities and the things he most detests. What we love are the ideas.

True, when we read *House and Leisure* we also experience a kind of decorating pornography. Thus all the emphasis in design magazines on things rich people possess that we'll never afford, and thus all the details about the exotic provenance of various pieces. This phenomenon of titillation also occurs in periodicals dealing with, say, motorcycles, surfing, travel, and food. Vicariously, we experience dream bikes, waves we'll never ride, resorts and restaurants we'll never be able to try. Charitably, these exemplars convey to us a standard of excellence that we can apply to our less grand worlds. Less charitably perhaps, they simply turn us on. After reading we quickly take our own less exalted motorcycles out for a ride, or paddle out on a mediocre surfing afternoon, or whip up a cheese soufflé. Or, in the case of interior design, start thinking again about what to do with the bedroom.

But beyond stimulating our appetites, magazines like *House and Leisure* give us ideas. Sometimes we simply didn't realize that such-and-such a design or decor was possible, and the article expands our creative imaginations. Coastal South Africans would, I think, profit in this sense from extended features on interior design in southern France, the southwestern United States, and Brazil. Sometimes we see a piece or a fabric or a color we love and then go get it. Magazines and not least their advertisements are a kind of window shopping.

Getting Ideas

Design problems involve space, light, color, function, flow, mood. The solutions are often complicated. Lighting, for example, is a specialized subject where expert knowledge and advice can make a big difference. Color and texture are other areas where specialists can be invaluable; so are paint and furniture and carpets.

When consulting experts, we don't ask for general maxims, or shouldn't. Nor should we simply ask them for a recommendation. Rather, to get ideas from design experts, we should engage them in dialogue, with our problems in the forefront. We should tell them what we love. We should explain what we think the problems are and what we think we want—recognizing, however, that we may not yet understand either very well.

And then we should listen. To how they understand our design problems. To how they work toward solutions. To the specific advice they offer. And we should consult several experts if we can.

In these ways our consultations with experts can catalyze design *ideas*. They may or may not be something as grand as an insight that resonates with us. But ideas are things we can borrow, and experiment with. As far as we can we should try out these ideas before making final decisions. For example, most dealers in Oriental rugs will allow you to take pieces home on approval. So will many art dealers. Our painter can put different patches of color and paint effects on the wall to give us an idea. Helpful lighting consultants will get up on the stepladder in the living room and hold various low-voltage downlighters, so that we can see the effects on our specific surroundings. With curtains it is easy to make a mistake without actually hanging a few meters of uncut fabric *in situ*. And we should make sure we see the upholstery draped on the sofa before we order it.

How can we get design ideas from what we see in *House and Leisure*? Once I visited a museum of wearable art with the clothes designer Denise Benítez. After a while I began to wonder what she learned from such a visit. Was she picking up techniques or styles to copy, I asked? No, she said. Were the pieces on exhibit analogous to data points in some general theory of design that she might be developing?

No, not at all, she replied. What, then? She paused and pondered.

“Well, it’s like this. I look at each piece carefully. I try to imagine what the problem was that the designer was trying to solve. Then I see how he or she solved it. And that gives me . . . *ideas.*”

And this is how we should read magazines such as *House and Leisure*—leaving all the canned insights behind. The same lesson applies to many other, more important areas of our lives.