

The Politics of Function and Social Discipline in Victorian Interior Spaces

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Abstract: Victorian interior design is a typical case of the manifestation of social relations in space. Waddesdon Manor has a hierarchy of lapis lazuli and gilding; Red House is the ideal of craftsmanship with red brick and mortise-and-tenon joints, and Queen Anne Revival houses have created various designs to offer a sense of culture. These examples show that space is not only a place for daily life but also a vehicle for expressing power, morality and culture. Material choices visually asserted class identity, while spatial arrangement and the symbolic coding of soft furnishings expressed social discipline. At present, the main problems that Victorian homes have presented are related to the basic qualities of space. Key questions include how to meet the demands of both technology and tradition in materials and craftsmanship, and how to promote social interaction through spatial arrangement without reproducing hierarchical oppression. As the Red House suggests, design innovation should first consider people. Space can better meet people's physical and cultural needs, thereby reconciling tradition and modernity.

Keywords: Victorian Era; Interior Design; Spatial Discipline; Material Construction; Soft Furnishing Craftsmanship; Social Relations

1. Introduction

In the Victorian Era (1837-1901), Britain had been industrialised and urbanised at a high rate. Interior Design kept some elements of classical decoration but, due to technological progress and changes in society, also began to incorporate other styles. The features were the result of combining the inherited decorative language with the new conditions for industrial production, and they were not in a single style.

Victorian houses were divided into many areas for living. At the same time, the particular treatment of soft furnishings also showed social

relations, such as differences in age and status, and divisions between public and private life. Functional planning and decoration thus worked together to present the social order in the home. Through typical cases, this paper examines the art and decoration of Victorian homes, explores the reasons for their appearance in history and society, and considers how they are applied today.

Politics of function refers to the social judgments about apparently practical arrangements, such as which people's activities are given special attention, whose presence is noticeable, and whose movement is restricted. Social discipline is the demand put forward in the above arrangements. The two are not identical: the study of spatial plans differs from that of furniture. Room allocation sets up a space, and curtains, wall coverings, decorations, etc., determine how that space is felt and used in daily life.

2. Historical Background and Driving Forces of Victorian Interior Design

The new technology in the Industrial Revolution changed many aspects of Victorian home design. From 1837 to 1901, there were many changes in the social structure, economy, population and geography of Britain. It was the first urbanised country in the world to change from a mainly agricultural society to a modern urban society [1]. Changes also occurred in the production of domestic furnishings and in people's sense of home.

With the increasing number of roller printing machines, semi-automatic knitting machines and industrial tanning equipment, wallpaper, furnishing textiles and leather could be produced in large quantities. At the same time, with the rise of the middle class, people started to want more from their homes. A residence became a way to show one's social status and a specific type of life, no longer just a place to live. Due to the difficulty of craftsmanship and the poor quality of furnishings, people were not afforded

such luxuries.

At the level of ideas, Michel Foucault's concept of disciplinary space can be used to examine the above interiors. The degree of detail in the Staircase Decoration varied according to different households. The division of children's rooms from the principal bedroom, along with different colours and arrangements of furniture, also indicated the discipline of different generations and genders. Victorian domestic writing also had separate rooms for the body and morals, and the nursery was placed at the top of the house to organise the relationships among parents, children and servants. Foucault referred to the art of distribution of space as enclosure, division, functional organisation and ranking [2]. Therefore, the division and decoration of one's home also helped to organise the relationships among the people living there.

The theoretical reading is about the connection among spatial organisation and social norms; it does not mean that a particular layout would lead to obedient behaviour. The provided excerpts and the abstract support the connection between domestic differentiation and the establishment of roles, but they do not cover all the households' experiences. Therefore, the organisation of space referred to here is an organising logic for particular relationships. There will still be differences between the required behaviour, material conditions and people's actual use of their homes.

Material expression is another way to present this idea. Kenneth Frampton's *Studies in Tectonic Culture* are employed here as a theoretical reference and do not directly refer to all Victorian houses. His account indicates that the truthfulness of materials and the sincerity of craftsmanship are the foundation of architecture [3]. This way, the symbolic display of aristocratic residences will be in opposition to the material ethics of the Red House. Charles L. Eastlake's *Hints on Household Taste*, according to the online edition identified above, also associates good furnishings with honest materials, sound construction and suitability for life. At the heart of this paper's interpretation of Victorian Design is the conflict between asserting one's status through decoration and living in accordance with material honesty.

3. Artistic Characteristics and Decorative Techniques of Victorian Interior Design

3.1. The Systematic Organization of Functional Space

Spatial Organisation of the Victorian Era in Home Design. Generally speaking, the rooms in a house were an entrance hall, a drawing-room, a dining-room, bedrooms, a study, etc., and each had its own purpose and decoration style [4]. Functional Differentiation thus included both the organisation of rooms and the design of their interiors. All the places had certain purposes, and the materials and furniture used were suitable for them. Contemporary household manuals also provided room plans to guide behaviour, linking the intended purposes of the rooms with the expected conduct of the people living there.

Queen Anne Revival houses are a typical example of the above phenomenon. Generally speaking, they have red brick walls, raised entrance steps, high bay windows with sash windows and decorative capitals. Hand-woven lace curtains were made for the bay-window area. Silk, cotton and linen are all translucent materials that can allow some light through but still provide some privacy for people in the drawing-room. Thus, the curtains served to separate the world from one's private life; at the same time, they did not need to be completely closed. Soft furnishings were used to spread the disciplinary system of the home in this reading.

3.2. Eclectic Interpretations of Decorative Elements

Victorian interior decoration liked to have many fine details and often adapted the old styles. Ornate fireplaces, elaborate wallpapers, porcelain ornaments, gilded picture frames and lace curtains were all common. Designers have drawn from all sorts of historical styles, such as Gothic, Rococo and Renaissance, to create their own mixed-style designs [5].

It was not merely a collection of the above styles. It showed the joint effect of technological adaptation and class consciousness. Wallpaper in the aristocratic houses was often hand-painted on fabric-backed materials, and the main themes were religious stories or family crests. Middle-class families used machine relief printing on wood-pulp paper, on the other hand. In these products, the aristocratic decorative language was reduced to repeated floral and geometric patterns [6].

The difference was in how the aesthetic language was realised through production. Simplification of labour-intensive methods has enabled the

production of mechanical replicas of aristocratic ornaments. The article finds this imitation in the form of simpler production to create a middle-class identity; although the decorative form still carried an association with status, the material, execution and reproducibility had all changed. Thus, reproduction created the problem of decorative differentiation. A motif could spread more widely, but the means of producing it continued to differ among the people. Therefore, similarity at the level of pattern did not necessarily mean the same cost, labour or prestige. Based on the interpretation of the manuscript, it can be seen that technical simplification and the pursuit of social ideals are closely related; the copied form spread a sense of culture, and its modified use showed the material conditions for achieving such cultural assimilation.

3.3. The Coordinated Expression of Materials, Craftsmanship, and Imagery

Materials, production methods and decorative motifs in Victorian homes were related and together conveyed ideas about social structure. The type of furnishing material and the equipment for processing it were also linked to the class. Among the differences mentioned

above, aristocratic furniture was made of calfskin that had been hand-tanned with vegetable tanning agents and included hand-stitched family coats of arms. Middle-class furniture was chemically-tanned leather and machine-embroidered with flowers. Materials for building and decoration were chosen according to people's social status.

Another way to distinguish them was dyeing. Aristocratic furniture used plant dyes, such as indigo and madder, to make light colours with many shades. Industrial synthetic dyes for the middle class of furniture are more colourful but lack shades. The contrast is in the combined visual effect of materials and processes; colour was once part of the mode of production for furniture and also its final appearance.

Decorations are also representations of society. Aristocratic schemes had religious stories and family coats of arms; middle-class schemes had been simplified to simple, reproducible floral and geometric patterns [7]. Contrast connected the particularity of inherited symbols with the broad spread of repetitive ornaments. Table 1 presents the main differences in the furnishing practices of these classes in terms of materials, equipment, techniques, motifs and their interpreted social functions.

Table 1. Comparison of Soft Furnishing Materials and Techniques across Social Classes in the Victorian Period

Social class	Furnishing type	Materials	Processing equipment	Techniques	Imagery and motifs	Social function
Aristocracy	Wallpaper	Fabric-backed paper; hand-tanned leather strips	Hand-operated block-printing frame	Hand painting; multicolor overprinting	Religious narratives, family coats of arms	Reinforces the "legitimacy" of family lineage and power
Aristocracy	Furnishing textiles and upholstery	Silk; hand-tanned calfskin	Handlooms; temperature-controlled dye vats	Hand-worked chain-stitch embroidery; plant dyeing	Embroidered family coats of arms; classical motifs	Uses the complexity of hand craft to mark status
Aristocracy	Porcelain ornaments	Hard-paste porcelain	High-temperature wood-fired kilns	Underglaze decoration; hand-painted heraldry	Family coats of arms; mythological scenes	Reinforces the interdependence of rank, wealth, and aesthetic authority
Middle class	Wallpaper	Wood-pulp paper	Roller printing machines	Machine relief printing; multicolor overprinting	Simplified floral patterns; geometric repeats	Uses the reproducibility of machine printing to emulate aristocratic taste
Middle class	Furnishing textiles and upholstery	Cotton and linen; chemically tanned leather	Semiautomatic knitting machines	Machine satin-stitch finish; chemical dyeing	Mass-produced floral emblems; simplified borders	Balances practical function with affordable decoration
Middle class	Porcelain ornaments	Soft-paste porcelain	Medium-temperature wood-fired kilns	Overglaze decoration; transfer printing	Simplified botanical patterns; printed borders	Serves as a "symbol of social aspiration" through imitation

The table preserves the supplied manuscript's comparative categories; it is not a survey establishing the frequency or exclusivity of these practices. Its analytical value lies in connecting production choices with attributed social meanings across several furnishing types. The social-function column therefore records interpretations rather than measured effects. Read in this way, the comparison clarifies the argument without implying that every aristocratic or middle-class interior followed one consistent technical specification, or that material composition alone determined an object's social significance.

4. Analysis of Typical Cases of Victorian-Era Interior Design

4.1 Queen Anne Revival-Style Residence

The Queen Anne Revival Style is one of the representative residential design models of the Victorian period. Red brick walls, a separate porch, many bay windows and decorative capitals are among the attributes. It can continue the aristocratic cultural inheritance of traditional British architecture and also express the aesthetic demands of the bourgeoisie through rich ornamentation.

The design of the living areas at Cardiff Castle (Figure 1) shows several basic features of Foucault's theory of discipline. With the integration of power infiltration, spatial allocation, symbolic control and surveillance, power operations are to be discreetly included in the functional layout and aesthetic expression of the building [2]. Oak flooring, painted ceilings and biblical-themed murals are for the centre and outer areas, so this paper will focus on the centre. Solid wood bookshelves are organised by the type of antique books in the study. Five ancient scripts are engraved on the fireplace mantel, and they represent the hierarchy of knowledge systems. Porcelain ornaments with underglaze decoration often have carved family heraldic emblems and graphics that are similar to those on old book covers, so they give off an aura of "knowledge and power".

4.2 Philip Webb's Design for the Red House

Designed by Philip Webb for William Morris in 1859, the Red House (Figure 2) marks a pivotal practice signalling the modern transition of Victorian interior design. Its anti-historicist spatial experiments and craft ethos

foreshadowed innovations in design ethics.



Figure 1. Interior of Cardiff Castle (Partial View).

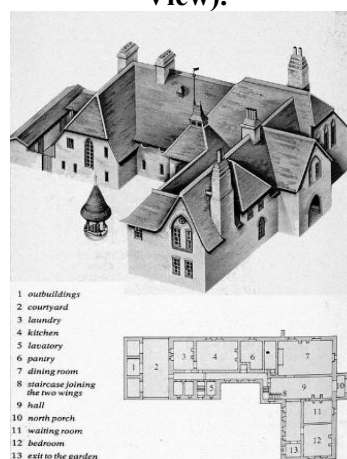


Figure 2. Floor Plan of the Red House.

It does not follow the traditional symmetrical and hierarchical spatial arrangement of a mansion; rather, it is L-shaped and irregular [8]. Arched doorways connect the drawing room, dining room and study to form an open-plan area and break down the traditional division of "public and private" areas and the "master-servant" system. Functionalist ideas promote efficient living; thus, the kitchen is next to the dining room and the service area is in a conservatory. Machine-woven plain cotton-linen curtains for the servant's quarters have practical purposes and do not conflict with hand-embroidered curtains in the master's rooms [9], so they do not fall under the disciplinary power mechanism of aristocratic households at that time.

The language of ornamentation is materially true. The outside wall has a rough texture and is not uniformly coloured due to the effect of firing. The inside of the wooden parts is rough-hewn and there are visible mortise-and-tenon joints. There is a hand-forged wrought-iron fire

surround with vine patterns and hammer marks, and it is also vented. Brass light fixtures have branched shapes and a natural patina due to oxidation [10].

Soft Furnishings are full of craftsmanship. Hand-flat embroidered botanical patterns are used on the cotton-linen drawing-room curtains to imitate Morris's wallpaper design (Figure 3). Small-batch semi-mechanical printing is used to make hand-drawn drafts on wood-pulp paper; thus, they avoid the "false refinement" of full-scale industrialisation and are both practical and beautiful. Architectural Structures and their functions are concrete results of the craft, unlike the superficial polish of industrial production [7].

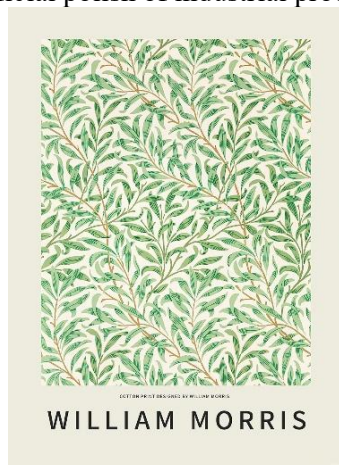


Figure 3. William Morris, Wallpaper Pattern Poster.

The Red House has an ambiguous attitude towards industrialisation. Although furniture has many handcrafted traditions, some machine-made parts are now used, such as metal curtain track fittings. Morris & Co. hand-produced wallpapers and textiles had standardised designs and semi-mechanised production, thus paving the way for the concept of "mass customisation". Master Suites and Children's Bedrooms are on the same floor and share a balcony. Machine-printed simplified botanical pattern wallpapers with blended chemical and plant dyes have been used to decorate the children's bedrooms, and unembroidered cotton linen curtains have also been employed. The arrangements prioritize the safety and convenience of the children, and are also economical. The servants' quarters have been given private bathrooms and plain, affordable machine-printed wallpaper; they are practical and unpretentious. Although the arrangement and soft-furnishing divisions have moved closer to equality, they have not yet changed the fundamental problems of society

due to historical reasons.

De-hierarchised Spatial Planning is a material expression of craftwork, and egalitarian exploration in soft-furnishing craft has built a new aesthetic system that does not need much symbolism in the Red House. Architecture no longer needs to be a symbol of power and will once again be about people's daily lives. Its care for the people and commitment to material ethics provided the ideological basis for the "humanistic space" in 20th-century Modernist Design. It is a specific expression of the Arts and Crafts Movement and a way to avoid industrial alienation..

5. Historical Influence and Contemporary Implications

Victorian interior design provided many concepts for later periods of design. Pugin, Ruskin and Morris all opposed the division of decoration and ethics or materials, but they did so in different ways. Medieval Revivalism and a critique of industrial production led designers to believe that traditional crafts had social and cultural value, so they began to be used. Their work also showed that furnishing, pattern and construction could not be understood separately from labour, use and moral life.

Morris first put forward this idea in his defence of the decorative arts. His writings and works explored the idea of decoration in relation to making work meaningful and connecting beauty with daily life. The item of art was not a symbol of wealth but rather an amalgamation of high craftsmanship, sensory delight and social significance. It no longer had to be a great work of art or done in a museum. It also helped establish a new Design Ethos that gave weight to the quality of material processing and the dignity of craft, in addition to visual appeal.

Thus, the Victorian inheritance can be regarded as a collection of problems rather than a particular style. How can historical memory be kept vibrant without becoming mere imitation? How can craft knowledge be integrated with technical production? How can the plan promote social participation and avoid repeating the old problems? These problems still arise when designers organise circulation, determine the extent of privacy, select materials, and decide which forms of labour are visible.

A contemporary community public-space concept can be regarded as a theoretical application of the above problems. The first is a

demilitarised circulation. Following the concept of the Red House, there will be connected arches connecting the entrance to the common-use area and the semi-private study room. It lacks a single dominant axis and offers multiple routes of entry. Users can move between the public area and the quiet area freely, and there is no need to pass through various places with different values. Therefore, this paper will treat circulation as a social phenomenon rather than merely a traffic problem.

The new area for textiles will be recycled cotton, flax and plant dyes. Digital printing is now being used to digitally draw and reproduce the Morris-style plant pattern. This combination can keep the original association of nature and handicraft, and it is also more efficient to produce. It is not to reproduce the craft conditions of the Victorian era or to equate digital printing with hand embroidery. Therefore, the first issue of material properties will be tackled in a new way to promote environmental protection and reuse.

The two materials of furniture are solid wood and fabric. Thus, there is no longer a need to distinguish different grades by separate materials. Lighting is used to create a lighter-zone division; the main area will have a brightness of 500 lux and the supplementary area 300 lux. These are used to set up different areas for people without using heraldry or other obvious symbols of power. It is still practical, not merely symbolic. It can help people read, gather and orient themselves without the visual stress that is often associated with areas that are too bright, central or comfortable.

Functional differentiation should be maintained in the proposal; therefore, the lack of obvious status symbols does not mean there is equality in life. The corresponding distinction is whether the difference is due to activity or an increase in status for some users. Regenerated fibres and plant dyes also have an environmental concern but do not show an amount. The boundaries are listed in the Design Rationale to present the reasons for the Design, such as social and material factors, but not verified performance data.

Therefore, circulation, textile production, material consistency and differentiated lighting are all ways to reduce the hierarchy of the Victorian era. There is no hierarchy of circulation; regenerated textiles are connected to material production and environmental awareness, consistent furniture materials reduce

status coding, and a difference of 500 lux/300 lux guides behaviour without making illumination a symbol of privilege. The above are only interpretations of the Design and not results of empirical studies.

The above should be taken as a concept design interpretation and not as an empirical study. The lighting parameters are the planned arrangement; they are not the actual performance data or user results. It can be seen that historical ideas are not copied but rather adapted here. De-hierarchised planning, visible material logic and adaptable production can be combined with current technology, and the Design should start from bodily experience and cultural identity. Thus, the historical significance of Victorian homes is less about their decoration and more about the ideas of interrelatedness among people, labour and values.

6. Conclusion

Victorian Homes were places to show off one's status. Queen Anne Revival houses had historical motives, functional division, symbolic furniture and restricted views to display lineage, learning, privacy and authority materially. Their decorative eclecticism organised cultural memory, and households were distinguished by uneven access to materials, labour and technical skills. Red House had a different path. An irregular plan, interconnected rooms, exposed construction and handmade textiles loosened the rigidity of space, and the production of materials became an issue of ethics and aesthetics.

All of the above cases show that living spaces are not merely places for daily life. Material selection and craftsmanship can be used to show off one's class; furniture and ornaments can carry knowledge and authority, and circulation, thresholds and room allocation can serve as devices for social discipline. At the same time, the comparison also shows that the design may prioritise function, use and material quality over symbolic expression by giving less weight to hierarchy.

Therefore, it will not be in the Victorian style today. It is a new investigation into the circumstances of making space and living in it. Materials should have a history and meet the technical and environmental requirements. Layouts should not be based on the status of people. Furniture and lighting should guide people to live comfortably without being too imposing. Red House is still good because its

first idea concerned the people's bodies, work and daily life. When the interiors are in that state, traditional craftsmanship and modern technology can be combined to create new products, and design can serve to express identity and equality rather than merely demonstrating power.

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