
Shashi Caan has chaired the interior design program at Parsons the New School for Design, as well as teaching in many other interior design programs, and this book seems to have been written partially to fill a void in the textbook market for certain interior design studio classes. She is also the founder of the Shashi Caan Collective, an eclectic design and architecture firm whose projects have included product design and experiments, as well as the design of interiors. Caan feels strongly that the field of interior design has not been clearly defined, with architecture pulling from one side and decoration from the other. In order for the discipline to thrive, interior designers need to refocus on the point of design in the first place: human beings.

Rethinking Design and Interiors: Human Beings in the Built Environment reads as an introductory text to issues faced when designing interior environments, although the author hopes to open the eyes of seasoned designers as well. The first section of the book is devoted to the history of the built environment, from the earliest cave and cliff dwellers, through the invention of the chair, and up to modern day.

The book’s second section focuses on what humans need for their interior environments, not only as a species, but also those needs specific to culture and to individuals. It is only after establishing this foundation that Caan gets to the meat of her argument: “In order to be regarded as a serious intellectual pursuit, the field still needs a design science with a focused research methodology.” Caan posits that interior designers must approach designing for the built environment through the lens of “the experience of occupation” by humans. She advocates for less reliance on intuition or the strictures of architecture, and more focus on actual data from human behavior.

Rethinking Design and Interiors is full of illustrations, most in color, which both clarify and break up the text. In addition to detailed endnotes, arranged by chapter, and an index, the book also contains an extensive list of books and articles for further reading. The book is best suited for undergraduates or beginning graduate students and is recommended for libraries that support programs in interior design, interior architecture, and design history.

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