

Fashion First? Not Always.

When it comes to setting the latest trends, experts say the consumer plays a bigger role than you might think.

By Camilla McLaughlin

Some trends walk off the runway, but many others spring from the hearts and minds of consumers. Although the synergy between fashion and furnishings continues to grow, trends for homes and interiors have as much to do with consumer values and priorities as the runways in New York, Milan or Paris. What makes a trend? "Ultimately trends are those new ideas that the arbiters of good taste say makes sense and they leverage that," says Christopher Ramey, chairman of the Luxury Marketing Council Florida and Affluent Insights. But consumers are the tipping point between fad and trend. Ramey emphasizes that "trends find their legs with consumers."

Rather than a single source, trends seem to emerge from a mix of random inspirations, wants and desires. Consider color forecasts, a much-publicized trend that always spawns a flurry of predictions. As director of color marketing for Sherwin Williams, Jackie Jordan is a member of the Color Marketing Group, which projects color trends for diverse industries ranging from automotive to textiles to health care. She explains the process: "As forecasters, we are constantly researching and gathering information from all sorts of resources. We look at the economy, spending habits, the political climate, pop culture, what's happening in the cinema, fashion trends — all of these things play a role in what drives consumer behavior and what drives color to the marketplace."



Glamour Returns Glamour is back, but don't think of outright bling. Rather, these luxe touches are often subtle and sophisticated with glints of matt silver, burnished bronzes or even fabrics with almost a metallic sheen. For awhile, wool and linen were considered tasteful, but now, says designer Matthew Patrick Smyth, "People are much more ready to pick a fabric that has some sort of a sheen or a shine to it." Even in London, he finds, "they are turning up the volume on interiors."

Fashion does spillover to textiles and furnishings, but there is no guarantee that influence will blossom into a trend or that it will resonate with consumers, especially affluent consumers. "Many who are selling

home products tend to say it's about fashion, but fashion is fleeting. If you are selling fashion, the affluent tend not to pay that much attention because they know it will be out of style," says Ramey.

Ramey recently created The Home Trust, which he describes as "an alliance of tastemakers whose expertise is the home." Members include ASID fellows, an Italian fabric company, Ritz-Carlton Residences and Casa de Compo, one of the most prestigious developments in the Caribbean. Members commit to sourcing globally and bring an exceptionally high level of expertise. Most importantly, says Ramey, they understand luxury consumers.

Today, worldwide wealth has been recouped and the number of billionaires and millionaires exceeds pre-recession levels. Affluent consumers are spending again but they have returned to the market with a new set of priorities, especially regarding their homes. Expectations are that their homes will reflect the way they want to live. Value is most important, whether it's the worth derived from the experience of a home, or a room, or the lasting value an investment piece brings. Even colors in the high end tend to be "sophisticated, more classic. And not way out there so they have longevity," says Jordan.

"People are still spending, but they are much more careful about how they spend. They are more involved and they want it to be a bit more personal. They don't want cookie-cutter anymore," says Matthew Patrick Smyth, owner of an eponymous design firm in New York.

"But what's the difference between pre-recession super-luxe purchases and today's? While today's buys still represent fantastic amounts of money, there is some inherent investment value in them," blogs Karen Weiner Escalera, president and chief strategist of KWE Partners, a marketing and public relations agency.

Looking ahead, it's hard to project spending preferences, but there is already a good indication of what will happen with some trends. Many experts say a trend tends to max out once it's taken up by the mass market. The lifespan of a trend is three to five years, but many stick around to become classics. This year, the color experts at Pantone declared tangerine as "color of the year," but there seems to be little chance it will become a classic seeing as a number of designers who work in the high end says it's already on its way out.



Traditional and Contemporary Merge

It's hard to decide if the trend is an updated, elegant, edited traditional or a contemporary softened with a traditional influence. "Things I used 10 or 15 years ago are coming back. Even people who were holding out are going traditional now," says New York designer Matthew Patrick Smyth. "Classic yet contemporary" is how the judges for the National Association of Home Builders Best in American Living Awards described the trend. "The blending of modern and traditional elements creates timeless and elegant spaces. Interiors are not as ornate and heavy. Instead, they are fresh

and light, simple yet elegant, with exquisite detail," said BALA judge Terri Saint, a design consultant at Classica Homes in Charlotte, N.C.

Few other vernaculars reflect the renewed focus on value, the desire for the familiarity or the sense of timelessness better than traditional. "When you do traditional you get the sense that you don't have to do it over again. It's about being a little more cautious. No one wants to have to redo a room.

Upgrade yes, but not redo," explains Smyth. Still, affluent consumers are not scrimping. Antiques and luxurious fabrics are in demand. With antiques the emphasis is on statement pieces that are also wise investments, rather than having many antiques in one space.



The New Leather

Leather is timeless and it's getting a boost from new processes such as embossing, stamping and subtle texturing. "I don't think leather goes in or out of style. We're seeing more of it today and there are many variations, and they are doing interesting things to it," says Christopher Coleman, owner of Christopher Coleman Interior Design in New York. For example, he says he uses a checkerboard pattern of embossed leathers.



Wood Tones Down

Woods are lightening up. "Thank heavens we're getting away from the dark espresso woods," says Coleman. "I am not seeing the boring blond wood that was popular in the 1950s and I am not seeing the espresso that was in all the furniture stores." Instead, look for mahogany, a toned down walnut and dark cherry.



Indoor/Outdoor Transitions

Outdoor living has been a strong trend for several years and it is not only changing the way the homes are designed but it is also influencing furnishings. The transition between indoor and outdoor has almost disappeared in new homes, particularly in warm climates. In *The New American Home* at the 2012 International Builders Show, indoor spaces transitioned to covered outdoor spaces with patios, pool and water features. A white vein-cut, honed and polished limestone used in all three areas married the spaces. Additionally, many of the furnishings were covered with indoor/outdoor fabrics.



Color Me What?

While they are the most watched, color trends are confusing. This year alone, in addition to orange, we've seen announcements that green and purple are colors to watch this year. For luxury homes, almost everyone agrees that grey is still the neutral of choice, but look for hints of blues or beige or even pink in today's neutral grays. Also look for pops of color in rooms, with greens and blues predominating.



On the Road Again

Travel continues to be a big influence on interiors. "It's always been a trend, but people are traveling more and

bringing that life experience into their homes," says Christopher Ramey, president of The Home Trust. Additionally, experience in five-star hotels is also shaping consumer attitudes. "Hotels are great sounding boards and think tanks for designers," because as things get dated they make a change, says designer Matthew Patrick Smyth. "That's where people pick up new ideas, when they actually see it and stayed in and enjoyed the experience," it makes an impact. It's not an accident that in recent years major paint companies have one scheme or palette keyed to travel.

Let It Shine!

Maybe it's a sign of an aging demographic, but consumers are more conscious of light, often asking for the option of turning on the lights full blast. Overhead lighting has become more clever. Lighting has become an important design element that can change the mood of a room, add drama or an artful element. Look for more statement fixtures in spaces ranging from master suites to power rooms. Wonderful new transitional designs open the door to many options for designers and homeowners.

