

How to Establish “Good Bones” for Your Rooms

SCALE AND PROPORTION

“It doesn’t look right.”

“Something’s ‘off’.”

“It just doesn’t seem to go with the room.”

“I think it is overpowering (or looks totally lost).”

Have you ever muttered these sentiments when you moved a new sofa into your den or living room, hung a beautiful painting in the dining room or added a pretty bedside lamp to your night stand? If you have ever been disappointed or even just unsure about how a new item looked in a room, you can blame scale and proportion. Two, very dynamic, powerful forces in design, they have a tendency to work behind the scenes. They can be a formidable pair to confront at times. But when they’re on your side, you practically want to celebrate, the results are so awesome!

Let’s find out why...

Scale and Proportion... the Power to Make or Break

Scale and proportion define the “fit” of that new porch, deck or roof you may be



considering for your home. Clients who use the services of Home Plan Designs are seeking to find out if the new addition will diminish -- or enhance -- the house it will become part of before they commit to having the work done. Naturally, clients are hoping for an outcome that will flatter, complement and improve the home’s overall appearance. Other “scale and proportion” considerations involve new furnishings -- will they fit the room they are intended for? Will the new kitchen cabinets work well with the rest of the space? Even color can influence scale and proportion, since it has the power to “shrink” or

“enlarge,” bring forward or recede. The misuse of scale and proportion is most often the culprit behind expensive, difficult-to-correct and emotionally upsetting problems. So, we, at Home Plan Designs, felt a discussion on the two was necessary. Our goal is to familiarize you with the concepts behind scale and proportion so that every room in your home looks graceful, comfortable and beautifully arranged. Once you fully grasp the meaning of these two concepts, they will become valuable tools for you whether you are designing a studio apartment or an entire house.

Keep in mind, as you navigate these pages, that establishing proper scale and proportion takes a trained eye and an experienced professional. But patience -- and practice -- will have you “seeing” like a pro before you know it!

What is “scale?”

Scale pertains to the size of a room, its furnishings and other objects placed in the room. Since scale is based on what is to be considered “average” dimensions, larger-

than-average rooms or objects are termed large scale; if the room or object is smaller than average dimensions, it is said to have a small scale.

Many designers and architects feel a large-scale room should be filled with large-scale items, only, and vice versa for a small-scale room. But flexibility and a bit of rule bending are always options in a good designer’s mind. For example, some experts feel that a few, well-placed, large-scale pieces in a small room can actually visually “enlarge” its dimensions. In very large rooms, it can sometimes be more effective and pleasing to place several, “human scale” seating areas, or groupings, all of harmonious heights and shapes, throughout the space, rather than fill it with large-scale furnishings along the room’s parameters, which can result in a cold, awkward “warehouse” effect. One notable designer feels that multiple seating areas make an overly large room feel friendly and cozy.

What is “proportion?”

Proportion refers to an object’s shape, form, lines, curves and detailing. Think overall form -- and style -- and you will have an accurate definition of proportion. Like scale, proper proportion is equally subtle to the viewer; it pleases the eye without your knowing why.

Proportion also contributes to the overall “mood” to a room. You would want to keep the same style and shape repeated throughout a room, rather than varying these elements, whether in furnishings or accent pieces. Remember, it takes only the slightest variation to completely upset an intended decorating scheme. A good example of this is the shape of chairs. While it isn’t at all necessary to have all the chairs in a room match, when they have the same shape -- say, oval backs -- and are tastefully arranged, the effect can be one of positive, uplifting energy without the unsettling, emotional “dizziness” that comes from creating a disturbing, disproportionate “hodgepodge” of seating.

Scale and Proportion... Together

All objects have a scale and proportion that

impacts us visually and emotionally. Proper scale and proportion are the sculptors of that quiet harmony in a room. The room looks “pulled together.” Everything, from windows to furnishings to fabrics seems to “fit.” There is a friendly cohesiveness to the space, because all of the objects are of the same scale within themselves and their interrelation to the other objects in the room. As a result, you experience that wonderful, calm feeling because your eye is visually pleased. When a room says “ah-h-h-h...”, you know that scale and proportion are working well together. If, however, you feel uneasy, slightly disturbed, or sense that something is off kilter the minute you enter a room, chances are, an item or two needs adjusting.

Take an ordinary kitchen hutch, as an example. To determine whether or not it contains good scale and proportion, you would first define its overall scale as bold or refined. Next, you would observe that the shelves and drawers are in proportion to the scale of the hutch, itself, and that its detailing, such as knobs, latches and drawer pulls are in proportion to the

drawers. This is an overall illustration of how scale and proportion work compatibly together.

When considering a room's proportions, you would make the same observation; that furnishings and decorative objects are sized to the overall scale of the room and then to each other. As we pointed out earlier, with the chairs (see *What is proportion?*), it is extremely helpful when shapes are repeated throughout the room, which explains why sofa and love seat sets look so appealing and harmonious and seem to instantly "pull together" a room.

Scale and proportion are not limited solely to furnishing. Accents and accessories can throw a room off, as well. The wrong centerpiece on a kitchen or dining room table can disappear or overwhelm and, in doing so, lose its own proportional integrity. In other words, the same object you loved in the store, boutique, or museum can quickly lose the very beauty that attracted you to it in the first place. So, think of scale and proportion as the glue that holds a room's design together.

Scale and proportion take time and an experienced eye to be achieved well, so don't be discouraged if you can't "get it right," right away! If you have studied interior design or architecture, you're way ahead of the game; for those of us who have not, scale and proportion and their interrelationships can be difficult to grasp. For architects and interior designers, however, it must become second nature if they are to perform their jobs successfully.

A Personal Element: "Human" Scale
it may seem obvious, but the size of occupants also influences the decision as to what size furnishings to incorporate into a room's decorating scheme. A small-boned, petite woman, for example, will be more apt to choose furnishings of smaller, daintier dimensions than will a heavy-set man over six feet tall!

Body size has to feel compatible with furnishings as well. In many cases, it's just plain common sense. We have heard of instances where an architect or designer failed to take into account their client's physical size and installed a bathtub that was much too short in length for the taller-than-average occupant. Or, a beautiful, antique tub's sides were much too high for a five-foot tall, elderly lady or small children to climb in and out of, easily and safely! Another client confessed to us that she tended to sit on the floor of her living room while watching television because the large scale of her couch and love seat felt too overwhelming for her tiny physical proportions.

When planning for a space that will be occupied by two or more people of different builds, your best bet is to strike a balance. Design experts advise that you aim for an average scale as a comfortable compromise.

At times, human scale can be quite tricky so, of course, there must be exceptions. For example, human scale has to be totally

sacrificed within environments such as museums, churches, train stations, office building and hotel lobbies where scale and proportion are generally gargantuan. In these cases, the large scale clearly holds the power and ends up dictating the scale of the objects and furnishings that go in it.

But when it comes to our personal spaces, keep in mind that, just as it makes perfect sense to wear clothing and accessories "to scale" to our bodies, the same should apply to the furnishings and objects we surround ourselves with in our daily lives.

Determining the Scale of a Room

Figuring out the overall scale of a room is probably easier than you think. Simply measure the "permanent" elements of the room, such as the ceiling height, the window dimensions, the size of the doorways and closets, even the height of the baseboards and the width of floorboards. Assess the overall scale after taking these measurements and jotting them down. Is the overall scale large and bold? Small and delicate? Once you've answered this question, you are in a good

position to decide to “scale up” or down, all the while trying to stay as close to the middle or average range as possible, in most cases. (I need to try to find out what the “average scale” dimensions are -- maybe one of those web sites I’ve got in my files will contain this info.)

Determining the scale of a room is an essential first step and one that must be taken before you even conceive of adding anything architectural, such as furniture or decorative objects. Once you have set a true scale for yourself -- and it is one you feel certain you will be happy living with, meaning you have also considered your physical size, cultural and aesthetic preferences, as part of the equation -- congratulate yourself. You are now free to move to the less “technical” steps in interior design.

Consider the “Personality” of a Space

The personality of a space is one final, but very important, consideration in determining scale. Typically, the more formal and delicate the style or “character” of a room, the smaller the scale should be in most

cases. The more casual the style, the larger and bolder the scale. Once you determine a scale range for your home, it is important that you adhere as closely to it as possible. Going too far in either direction is what causes difficult-to-solve problems in most homes.

General Rules to “Play” With

- When purchasing a sofa or a pair of chairs, always consider the height of an accompanying end table.
- Chairs should be about the same height as a sofa to look balanced, and tables, while not having to be exact, should echo similar heights throughout a room.
- Skirted love seats can have an end table with narrow, wooden legs. Conversely, a sofa can have exposed wooden legs if you have a draped end table.
- A pair of wing chairs with exposed wooden legs will look especially elegant with a wooden chest or trunk serving as a coffee table.

- Place a high table against a solid wall and let a lower table “float” freely, unanchored, anywhere in the room.
- Large scale furnishings create a bold environment and smaller, more delicate pieces exude a refined, conservative look.
- Place large pieces a good distance apart from one another. This allows them to “breathe” and visually stand out. Crammed together, they would disappear and compete for attention.
- If you like bold, large-scaled furnishings, it is far better to have just a few well-placed pieces, rather than too many. Your room will appear to be balanced and not too crowded. Keep woods compatible and cover upholstered furnishings in the same fabric to create unity and elegance.
- Do not accessorize a bulky, clunky coffee table or trunk with a collection of delicate, miniature crystal animals atop it. A much better choice would be a stack of large, old books and an oversized wooden bowl of fruit.
- If you buy something that is over scale, made it the focal point in your

room, surrounded by smaller-scale, but similarly proportionate, items.

- A good test to see if your furnishings are well scaled and proportionate to each other is to see if it can all be rearranged easily and successfully.
- Sit and lie down in your “finished” room before giving it the final approval for proper scale and proportion. The sense of balance should be the same at all angles and heights. Nothing should suddenly seem obtrusive. Think of your room as a beautiful painting. Just as that painting can look equally “balanced” upside down or placed on its side, your room should ideally appear perfectly harmonious from all points of view.

An Exception to The Rules: Your Comfort and Preferences

There are always exceptions to scale and its logistics, one of the most important being personal. For example, if you are a tiny person who feels most comfortable and relaxed with large-scale furnishings or feel they look more luxurious, by all means, go with your feelings. Always ask yourself a

lot of questions about your preferences, your lifestyle and your habits, just as a good designer would, before starting your floor plan. Remember, “logic” and floor plans do not drive everything. How one feels, personally, in an environment, is paramount in making decorating decisions. With that in mind, feel free to stray from the ground rules of scale when, for example, you find something that speaks to you, even if you are not sure where you will put it. If you love any item enough, you will most definitely find a spot for it!

“Symmetry” Needn’t Be Boring

With experience and time, you will no doubt establish a style and preferences for your furnishings. You will also find that you can be flexible with some of the principles of scale and proportion the more you decorate. While you want to create graceful, harmonious rooms, you will learn that everything needn’t be “matched.” In fact, you will develop free license to take chances and risks with your decor in order to express yourself freely and truthfully.

So know that while a sofa looks great with

end tables on either side, they needn’t be a matching set. They should, however, be the same height and scale, so as to interest the eye without confusing it. Even accents and objects can be placed at different angles from each other to add a dimension of movement and energy to a room.

“Training” Your Eye for Appropriate Scale and Proportion

Becoming skilled at determining good scale and proportion is an ongoing course of study, and you can “practice” every day. Start by opening your eyes to what is around you and paying attention to what you like -- and what disturbs you. Experts recommend that you carry a six-foot measuring tape with you at all times and whenever you come across a design you like, say a small room on display at an expo -- you can measure the objects and the spaces between them and note them down. This applies to both the arrangements you like and those you don’t. The dimensions of the “pluses” could prove beneficial to you at some future point when you are planning and designing a space. As for Scale &

those objects or arrangements you don't like, measure them, too, and identify the "mistakes" that were made, such as arms on a chair that are too high or legs on a table that are too chunky for its demure table top. Some errors will be obvious to your eye, such as chair backs that extend well beyond the top of a chair rail in a room, or a bulbous lamp whose base and shade overpower the small, delicate end table it sits on.

Walk through your rooms and picture your ideal dimensions for each. Even details such as counter and sink heights contribute to your comfort and ease in living. Study how a space's function relates to an ideal scale and proportion that's appropriate for you and you will have rooms that work way more efficiently for you. You may even discover new uses for spaces you once thought held little or no functional potential.

As you become more skilled and practiced, you will soon "see" how to enlarge rooms, correct mistakes and overcome any other limitations by focusing on the interrelationships between permanent and

movable elements. You will have learned that everything you bring into a room relates to one another, beginning with the scale of a dining room table to its chairs and continuing on to the style of the dinnerware, flatware, and beverage ware you eventually incorporate into the room. Everything will beautifully relate to each other form a pleasing, harmonious whole. Your room or rooms will exude a shared spirit.

A solid understanding of scale and proportion will enable you to develop interiors of grace, ease and elegance in which every object contributes to the whole. And because you will have factored your personal characteristics into the equation, you will be able to take your furnishings with you as you move from house to house, knowing they will fit not just the homes' interiors but your personality as well.

It is entirely within you to create the home of your dreams. It is a life-long process that you will find more and more pleasurable as you learn to sharpen your vision and reach out to whatever speaks to your senses.

Scale and Proportion: the Perfect Duo
Think of scale and proportion as “good bones” supporting a beautiful face. What comes after or on top of that is almost inconsequential. A room that is off in scale and proportion can never be beautiful, regardless of the rich furnishings, the fine art objects, the elegant, expensive window treatments, the exquisite, cut crystal chandelier, the lush oriental rugs and what have you. Just as architecture and interior design go hand in hand, so do scale and proportion.

“Correcting” Scale and Proportion Using Color

Color can work wonders when dealing with unwieldy proportions. It can “erase” clumsy lines, lift, expand,, enclose, drop, anchor or simply fool the eye. Understanding the principles of color can help you easily solve problems of scale and proportion in your rooms.

For example, darker, richer colors can make an object appear visually “heavier,” although not necessarily larger. Darker colors draw the eye to the object,

sometimes making it a visual focal point. Objects of a darker color will also appear to be more “anchored or grounded than those of a lighter color, which tends to receded and expand. The latter is why using white on the walls and curtains of a small room is so effective. The room’s parameters seem to “open up” and suddenly it doesn’t appear to be so cramped and limited in space.

If, on the other hand, you want to enclose or “cocoon” yourself in a room, bring the walls toward you by painting them a deep, rich hue such s forest green, periwinkle or cornflower blue, a bright or brick red.

To “lift” a low ceiling, paint it sky or atmosphere blue. The mind’s eye will visually associate the ceiling with the sky, and so it will appear to be higher. If your low ceiling has heavy, dull brown beams supporting them, paint the beam a light color or at least the ceiling space in between the beams a beautiful, heavenly blue which will reduce the contrast of stark white and dark brown.

Make a chunky or large bed appear “lighter” by dressing it with white or very light-colored linens. Darker sheets and coverlets will weight it down and draw the eye to its clumsy proportions.

To raise and expand a wooden floor, bleach it a lighter color. When stained with a darker color, it will shrink considerably and appear to be lower by at least a foot.

To reduce a bulky piece of furniture, paint or cover it in the same color as its background. The blend will blur its lines and make it appear to recede into the wall. This technique works wonders with bookcases, couches, armoires, cupboards, shelving and other overbearing or unattractive pieces.

If you want a handsome piece of furniture to stand out or command more than its share of attention, place it against a highly contrasting background. For example, a dark, cherry desk looks irresistibly striking against a pink, cream or pale lavender wall.

To showcase a dark art object or accent,

place it on a white shelf. The level won't matter because the eye will be drawn directly toward it.

If you have a dark antique shelf, a decorative ledge, or a heavily framed mirror, its character, weight and shape will be much more pronounced when affixed to a light colored or white wall.

To “save” space in a small room, use the same color in different tints and shades, so your objects and furnishings blend with each other and do not visually take up much room.

More Solutions for Awkward Scale and Proportion

There are many for “tricks” for fooling the eye and making a room or group of objects appear to be of similar scale and in proportion to one another. Design experts have grappled with seemingly unsolvable problems and won. Here are some popular solutions for not only solving problems of scale and proportion, but for enhancing or bringing out the best in favorite items and art objects.

If you have inherited a piece of furniture that is too big for the small room it has to go in, make it the main attraction. Showcase it intentionally instead of attempting to downplay or hide it. Place an oversized bed diagonally in a room, for example. Use solid, light colors for its coverings but add a beautiful, light canopy or mosquito netting for drama. As a final touch, place a tumble of beautiful decorative pillows in complementing colors at the head of the bed to draw the eye to the bed instead of to the small room.

For a large, ugly, antique footed bathtub trapped in a tiny bathroom, paint it black or red or black and white. Use gold or silver metallic paint for the fixtures and exposed piping. Keep the window treatments so simple (such as shutters painted the same color as the walls) that they appear not to be there at all. Make the tub a star in its own right.

To make a dark art object or accent really stand out, place it on a white shelf. The level won't matter because the eye will be

drawn directly toward the object, not the shelf.

To open up a small room, keep window treatments simple (such as a single, tailored valance), preferably non-existent, and window panes squeaky clean.

To increase the allure and presence of a favorite painting, or to make it appear larger on a wall, change the frame. Choose a simple molding in a gold leaf pattern or a color that complements the painting.

Special Treatment for Narrow, Hard-To-Take Spaces

Skinny, tunnel-like hallways can be transformed with little touches that will make these spaces not only appear wider, but visually more appealing.

You can both widen and shorten a too-long, too narrow hallway by placing a large, framed mirror on the end wall (or door, as the case may be). Better yet, mirror the entire wall. This will bring in more "light" which will visually increase the hallway's width.

To add width to a too-narrow, too-long room, hang a pair of mirrors on the opposite wall. This will let in light and widen the room since light reflects. Windowpane mirrors will go even further, since the eye will be fooled into “seeing “ two windows, which, alone, have the power to visually widen a room.

If you have a long, narrow hallway with a wooden floor, change the pattern of the boards. If they are vertical, they naturally increase the length of the hall and narrow it as well. Add a pattern that goes horizontally, diagonally, or even in circles. Or, install wall-to-wall carpeting to cover the narrowing, vertical lines of the floor boards.

A third way to visually widen a too-narrow space is to place small area rugs down to “break up” the continuous direction of the floor. Use rugs that are close in color to that of the floor.

