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BLENDED STYLES

STYLE UNDEFINED

Mixing styles in design and retail settings can — and should — be done to create a unique and eclectic space with tons of personality.

BY AMY MCINTOSH

Modern. Traditional. Farmhouse. Coastal. Industrial. Glam. As home furnishings professionals, you know the names of all the design styles and can likely identify them at the drop of a hat. But design is still about individuality, allowing clients and customers to express their personality through their home. This expression comes in many forms and may not fit into one restrictive design style definition.

"There's such a rise in home sales right now and that has so much to do with people wanting to be able to express individuality and their own personalities through their space in their home," says Adam Dunn, Creative Director for Four Hands. "So if as a designer you're really only offering out of the box solutions or room sets, you're not really servicing what the wave of desire is for customers right now. I think it's really important to really pull in unique items that really help tell that story for your customer."



Materials can help dictate a product's style direction, says Quorum's Aaron Johnson. "When I'm working with a material, the material dictates how it's going to come together. ... I try to let the product have a life of its own."

Blending in Design

Part of showcasing a client's personality includes incorporating clients' existing furnishings and sentimental pieces into the design, and often these pieces will not fit a specific design profile.

"Most homes have accumulated furniture over the years, and many have much loved pieces that they're not willing to hide away; possibly heirlooms or those that are loved," says Liz Zwissler, Director of Product Development for Park Hill Collection. "It makes sense for stores and designers to demonstrate how easy it is to crossover styles."

Aaron Johnson, Creative Director for Quorum International, says each design project begins with what he calls "style DNA," which is made up of three parts: the project's context (where it's located), the client's personal history, and current trends.

"When you take all of these variables and you put them in a pot, and you're trying to come up with a plan for that particular project, that's what your style DNA is going to be, and inevitably that's going to be a blend," he says.

The best way for designers to blend styles in a project, says Dunn, is to stick to a neutral color palette.

"Instead of doing a really heavy color focus, do a really heavy texture focus," he says. "That way, all of those different design areas and shapes and curves and straight lines are still kind of telling the same story."

Park Hill's Zwissler agrees, noting that mixing texture and pattern add layers and visual interest.

"The trends are leaning toward an updated traditional style using prints and wallpaper but not shying away from a more modern glass cocktail table," says Zwissler. "We're not afraid to mix bold patterns and add texture. Rattan has become so popular in almost every environment giving designers another opportunity for an additional layer and texture in the space. Mirrors with clean lines that look modern on their own easily adapt to the style of the room they're in."

Blending in Retail

In a retail environment, the same rules, or lack thereof, apply. Johnson says retailers should apply the same style DNA approach to merchandising their stores. The overall look will vary based on geography, season, and the design style of the shop owner or merchandiser, but these factors again should lead to some type of blended style.

"I really think that anytime you go in with a heavy hand and you say, 'I'm going to do this style,' I think it's a bad idea," Johnson says. "It's always about blending. It's the personality of the people that are styling, it's the

Right: Part of Park Hill's evolution has included complementing its signature farmhouse-style pieces with different materials to create a more eclectic environment. Below: When blending styles, Four Hands' Adam Dunn suggests sticking with a neutral color palette and experimenting with a variety of textures.

personality of the space, and the city. All of those things have to be taken into consideration when they're putting their showrooms together."

Retailers can also pay attention to the ways manufacturers merchandise their showrooms. Dunn says presenting customers with options so they don't feel tied to only one design style is key.

"Even as a wholesaler, we always make sure that if we have a really strong design, that that language is expressed and it can cross multiple subcategories," he says. "But how we present that to the customer is very different. I think it's important for retailers to make sure that the customer comes in and sees the store as an opportunity to be able to express what it is that they want. Not walking into the store and saying, 'Well, we only have one option.' It's not that difficult to blend all of these styles together either. I think it just takes a little bit of creativity."

Mixing styles on the retail floor can also help give new life to existing product — and inspire customers to buy new pieces to add to their existing decor for an instant refresh.

"In stores or showrooms, mixing styles can make pieces stand out," Zwissler says. "I'm sure everyone has experienced the phenomenon when you move a sofa that you've had for many months and your customers (and salespeople) think it's a brand-new introduction."

Just like in interior design, retail merchandising is all about balance.

"If you have a really beautiful piece that you consider to be modern farmhouse, which could be a black steel sideboard, or maybe even an old antique piece, just always look for what's going to balance that out," Dunn says. "What's going to make that one unique piece not stick out in the rest of the room or in the rest of the retail floor? You definitely want those items to be showcased because they're cool, and they can be those really amazing showstopper pieces. It's really just about that balance. If you have something really hard, find something really soft. If you have something really soft and fluffy, mix it with something a little bit harder and more modern."

Development Process

Manufacturers have different strategies for product development, and rarely do they involve boxing themselves in to one specific style.

Each year, Four Hands develops a creative brief in which they address three different hypothetical customers and the products and trends these customers would gravitate toward.

"We balance our assortment through new development by what we see happening inside each one of those looks," Dunn says. "That's how we do design. How we present our brand is really through collecting all of those looks together to make a cohesive story."



In early 2020, Park Hill reimagined its product line, placing its signature farmhouse-style pieces into new environments to give them a new life.

"Mixing clean lines and different materials such as glass, marble and iron with the signature Park Hill wood pieces creates an interesting and eclectic interior," Zwissler says. "We've created an identity for each collection, but many pieces lend themselves to several of these."

It's also really great to see how our customers interpret our product in ways we might not have thought of. It's important for us to create a cohesive line and present it as such then make it easy for our customers to recreate our look or use it as a starting point to create their own."

Product evolution is always top of mind for Quorum's Johnson as he's designing new pieces for the company, looking for inspiration and fresh ideas everywhere. He says many reps are looking for full collections that they can sell, but that's not how he designs product. Rather, he lets the manufacturing process work to create pieces that have their own personalities.

"I don't ever really have a style statement that I'm looking for," he says "I run into products or techniques at factories and I think, 'What if you did this?' and then before you know it the factory is doing a whole different thing with an existing manufacturing technique, but it's an entirely different product range. And then that's evolution. That's how we evolved. That's how new trends are started, so I think it's critical that you do it that way." **FLD**