



Why Beauty is a Human Necessity, Not a Luxury

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BY MARINA TAPTUGYAN

From prison walls to modern homes, aesthetics is more than visual appeal, it is a fundamental human need. Explore how art and design transform sterile spaces into sanctuaries of meaning and inner refuge.



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The inspiration for this article came from a conversation with a friend who shared a striking experience. At one point in his life, he found himself living within the stark, lifeless walls of a correctional facility. The environment was cold and impersonal, designed to erase individuality. Yet, instead of surrendering to despair, he responded in a way that revealed something profoundly human: our innate drive to seek meaning, connection, and comfort through aesthetics.

Longing for warmth and familiarity, he and his cellmates began drawing bricks on the bare walls, brick by brick, transforming a sterile environment into something that resembled a home. It was a small, instinctive act, but it spoke volumes. It showed that humans are wired to seek beauty, to create, and to shape their surroundings for emotional survival even in the harshest conditions. This simple act reminds us that aesthetics is not a luxury; it is essential for emotional and mental well-being.

Beyond mere visual appeal, aesthetics is fundamental to psychological health. Environments stripped of color, texture, and visual stimulation often lead to emotional distress, anxiety, and detachment. In prison cells, where monotony and isolation dominate, the absence of aesthetic elements becomes an additional form of punishment. When individuals are deprived of engaging surroundings, their mental state deteriorates more rapidly, which reinforces the critical role aesthetics plays in emotional resilience.

There are countless examples of people in confined or restrictive environments instinctively enhancing their surroundings to regain a sense of control and identity. Many incarcerated individuals carve images into walls, fold paper into intricate shapes, or arrange their few belongings with intention, turning their limited space into something they can emotionally connect with. One former inmate described mixing instant coffee with toothpaste to create pigments for painting his cell. Another recounted braiding bedsheets into woven patterns to introduce texture into an otherwise dull room. Many individuals even use improvised tools to tattoo symbols onto their own skin, an act of storytelling, identity, and belonging. These creative acts reveal something deeper: aesthetics, expressed through various art forms, can serve as a tool for inner resilience, offering a sense of agency, meaning, and refuge in restrictive environments.

These observations underscore that aesthetics is not a superficial extra but an integral part of the human experience. Our appreciation for beauty is rooted in both evolution and culture. Throughout history, humans have been drawn to the patterns, colors, and forms found in nature, shaping our aesthetic preferences. This connection explains the profound psychological impact of biophilic design. By incorporating natural materials, textures, and colors into a space, designers can create environments that promote relaxation, focus, and overall well-being.

In today's world, minimalism has grown in popularity, often driven by economic pressures and the desire for simplicity. While minimalist design has its strengths, an overemphasis on sterile and overly pared-down spaces can result in environments that feel cold, unwelcoming, and emotionally detached. While distinct from the extreme conditions of a correctional facility, this highlights a broader principle: we must be mindful to avoid aesthetic deprivation in any designed space.

Understanding the psychological impact of aesthetics makes it clear that aesthetics is not just decoration but a human need. Whether through a grand mural or a simple sketch on a wall, people instinctively seek ways to make their environments more comforting, expressive, and emotionally supportive. Spaces lacking visual stimulation can feel oppressive, undermining well-being and productivity.

As interior designers, we carry the responsibility of honoring this deep human instinct. Our role is not only to create functional spaces but to design environments that nurture the mind and soul. This perspective challenges us to move beyond viewing aesthetics as a luxury and to recognize them as a necessity that transforms spaces into sources of healing, inspiration, and human connection. Whether we are designing a home, an office, or a space for individuals in crisis, we must remember that beauty is not an afterthought. It is a lifeline.