



Generational Design: A Study Of How Age May Shape Interior Design Approaches And Perspectives

Abstract

The paper discusses the effect of generational differences on interior design styles and views of four generations of Baby Boomers, Generation Y, Millennials, and Generation Z. By examining the secondary data of various sources such as Pew Research Center, industry reports, and other scholarly works, this study examines the difference in design preferences, the use of space, color preferences, furniture preferences, and the integration of technology. The results show that Baby Boomers prefer comfortable conventional and formal environments, Generation X is focused on functionality and unconventional pairings, Millennials are minimalist and eco-friendly, and Generation Z are more daring self-expressive and digitally driven. The paper is also an analysis of the growing trend of multigenerational co-existence, which grew since 12% in 1980 to 18% in 2021, which impacts the residential design needs. These generation differences have immense effects to interior designers, architects and stakeholders in designing space that supports various needs and preferences, related to age, in the modern society.

Keywords: generational design, interior design preferences, Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, Generation Z

Introduction

Interior design is not just the aesthetic supplement but a core manifestation of identity, values, and preferences regarding lifestyle, which differ greatly among the generational cohorts (Albadi and Zollinger, 2021). Every generation has its own flavor of design sense that is dictated by the cultural events that impacted the childhood, the economic status, the technological patterns, and social trends that the generation goes through (Seemiller and Grace, 2017). These generations differences have become a significant concern in the modern world where multigenerational contact on a common ground at home or in the workplace is witnessed as never before.

The four major generational groups that are now dictating the interior design scene were Baby Boomers (1946-1964), Generation X (1965-1980), Millennials (1981-1996), and Generation Z (1997-2012). The studies suggest that these generations have significantly different perspectives on the use of space, the preferences toward the material they choose, colors, and the use of technologies (Modsy, 2021; Wood, as cited in PureWow, 2022). Moreover, the economic disruptions that have characterized every

generation, such as the inability to afford housing and heavy student debts, have essentially changed the traditional trends of homeownership and spatial needs (Fry, 2022).

The multigenerational living phenomenon has undergone an apocalyptic revival, as by 2021, 59.7 million Americans are living in multigenerational households, which is 18% of the entire population (versus 12% in 1980) (Cohn, 2022). This population change requires the solutions of the design that will fit the different needs of different generations under one residential building as both a challenge and opportunity to interior designers. These implications go beyond domestic settings to include workplace design, healthcare facilities, educational institutions and commercial spaces where there is interaction of the multiple generations on a daily basis.

The study uses secondary data analysis in its effort to examine how the factors associated with age influence the interior design practice and attitude. The research has three main research questions, which are: How are the preferences and priorities of generational cohorts to interior design different? What are the psychological and socioeconomic reasons of these differences between generations? What are the implications in terms of practice as a design professional in multigenerational spaces? This study can make a contribution to evidence-based design practices that embrace the needs of a wide range of generations in increasingly age-diverse settings through synthesis of existing research in the field of environmental psychology, consumer behavior studies, demographic analyses and industry reports.

Results and Discussion

Generational Consumer Spending Patterns

Consumer spending analysis on consumer expenditure data shows that there is great difference in the amount spent by different generational groups on furniture depending on their economic capacity, as well as the lifecycle. Table 1 shows annual furniture spending by generation with the help of the data of the survey by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2023) and Home Furnishings Association (2024).

Table 1

Annual Furniture Expenditure by Generation

Generation	Birth Years	Annual Spending (USD)
Baby Boomers	1946-1964	\$679
Generation X	1965-1980	\$770*
Millennials	1981-1996	\$770*
Generation Z	1997-2012	\$430

*Generation X and Millennials represent highest spending cohorts

Note. Data from U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Consumer Expenditure Survey (2023) and Home Furnishings Association (2024).

These trends in spending show that Generation X and Millennials are the largest spending groups in furniture market with an average of 770 USD/year, which is by far higher than the spending of Baby Boomers (679) and Generation Z (430). The reduced expenditure of the generation Z can be explained by their youth and low purchasing power as well as moderate expenditure of Baby Boomers by their

status as empty-nest and with furnishing needs already taken care of. The high spending of generation X and Millennials is in line with their life stages, which require the purchase of homes, family building, and space optimization.

Multigenerational Living Demographics

Multigenerational living is one of the most important trends in interior design practice due to its revival. Table 2 shows the development trend of multigenerational households in the United States in 1971 and 2021 indicating a fourfold increase of this population group.

Table 2

Growth of Multigenerational Households in the United States (1971-2021)

Year	Population (millions)	% of U.S. Population	Growth Factor
1971	14.5	7%	Baseline
1980	—	12%	—
2019	58.4	—	4.0x
2021	59.7	18%	4.1x

Note. Data from Pew Research Center analysis of U.S. Census Bureau Current Population Survey (2022). Multigenerational households defined as including two or more adult generations or grandparents with grandchildren under 25.

The data have shown that the population of multigenerational household increased fourfold, as in 1971 multigenerational household population amounted to 14.5 million (7% of the population) whereas in 2021 it is 59.7 million (18%). This trend has increased in the face of the Great Recession of 2007-2009 and has since that time, this trend has been on an upward trajectory, which has been propelled by the financial pressures, care giving needs and the evolving demographics. Adults aged 25-29 are already living in multigenerational family arrangements with young men (37) far more likely to live in this type of household than their female counterparts (26).

Technology Integration and Social Media Influence

Generational differences in technology adoption and social media influence on design decisions represent critical factors for understanding contemporary consumer behavior. Table 3 synthesizes data from multiple sources regarding technology integration and social media's role in design inspiration and purchasing decisions.

Table 3

Social Media Influence on Interior Design Decisions by Generation

Generation	Social Media Influenced Purchases	Primary Inspiration Sources	Impulse Buying Tendency
Baby Boomers	Low	Traditional media, In-store	36%
Generation X	Moderate	Mixed sources	53%

Millennials	68%	Instagram (69%), Pinterest, Social media	64%
Generation Z	84%	Instagram (57%), Pinterest (55%), TikTok (25%)	64%

Note. Data compiled from PartyLite Consumer Survey (2021), Home Furnishings Association (2024), and ThinkLab Design Research (2024). Percentages represent proportion of generation reporting each characteristic.

The data demonstrate progressive increases in social media influence across younger generations, with Generation Z (84%) and Millennials (68%) substantially exceeding older cohorts. Instagram emerges as the dominant platform for Millennials (69% using for inspiration), while Generation Z distributes attention across Instagram (57%), Pinterest (55%), and TikTok (25%). Impulse buying tendencies escalate from Baby Boomers (36%) to Generation X (53%) and plateau at 64% for both Millennials and Generation Z, suggesting that younger cohorts view shopping as social and leisurely activities rather than purely utilitarian transactions.

Comparative Design Preferences Across Generations

Table 4 presents a comprehensive synthesis of design preferences across generations, consolidating findings from multiple sources to illustrate systematic variations in aesthetic sensibilities, spatial organization, and material selections.

Table 4

Summary of Interior Design Preferences by Generation

Design Element	Baby Boomers	Generation X	Millennials	Generation Z
Color Palette	Soft neutrals (beige), Deep accent colors	Warm beige, Taupe, Eclectic accents	Gray neutrals, Navy, Sage green	Vibrant colors, Mixed patterns, Pastels
Style Aesthetic	Traditional, Classic, Formal	Eclectic, Farmhouse, Practical	Mid-century modern, Minimalist, Scandinavian	Maximalist, Cottagecore, Y2K revival
Spatial Organization	Formal rooms, Compartmentalized	Multi-purpose, Flexible spaces	Open-concept, Organized	Personalized zones, Creative spaces
Key Priority	Comfort, Quality, Tradition	Functionality, Durability	Organization, Sustainability	Self-expression, Authenticity
Technology Integration	Limited, Gradual adoption	Selective, Balanced	Seamless, Multi-room	Integrated + Digital detox spaces

Note. Synthesized from multiple sources including Refloor (2024), Home Accents Today (2024), Boo Lighting (2024), Bob Lucido Team (2024), and Jacobs & Dalton (2024).

Such a comparative analysis shows the systematic generational changes of design preferences. Color casts change as the warmth of traditional neutrals of the Baby Boomers, the utilitarianism of Generation X to the subdued grays of the Millennials to the intense palette of the Generation Z. Fashion styles change between formal traditionalism and eclectic pragmatism to minimalist efficiency and lastly maximalist self-expression. The preferences towards spatial organization are moved to compartmentalized formality to flexible multipurpose arrangement, to structured open concepts to personalized creative areas. These trends are both a result of development stage factors as well as experiences unique to a cohort of culture making their way into design sensibility.

Conclusion

This paper discussed the impact of generational differences on interior design methods and point of view using secondary analysis of various data materials such as demographic surveys, consumer surveys, research papers, and industry reports. Results prove that Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z exhibit systematic differences in the design preference regarding their unique formative experiences, value systems, economic conditions, and life periods. These generational differences are empirically supported by the quantitative data in Tables 1-4 which reveal differences in consumer spending trends, multigenerational living trends, social media use, and design preferences among several others.

Such trends of the generations are not limited to the aesthetic tastes, but also to ultimate styles of approach to the organization of space, psychology of color, incorporation of technologies, and environmental sustainability. The practical significance of interpreting generations design differences to develop effective, gratifying joint settings can be actively underlined by the fact that the number of multigenerational families increased dramatically four times as 14.5 million (1971) to 59.7 million (2021). The consumer spending statistics that show that both Generation X and Millennials spend 770 annually on furniture (as opposed to 430 and 679 of Generation Z and Baby Boomers respectively) illustrate the intersection of economic capacity and the level of life to form design markets.

The impact of social media on design choices has become a societal generational point of difference, as 84% of Generation Z and 68% of Millennials claimed to make purchases based on social media impact versus little impact by Baby Boomers. This shift of designing inspiration and choices to the digital realm, requires interior design professionals to acquire skills in communications using the Internet, representing their portfolios on the Internet, and conducting marketing through social media in order to reach younger client groups without compromising the conventional consultation methods which are more significant to older generations.

Practical implications involve the requirement of the designers to engage the generational factors in the consultation work with the clients, to create the designing solutions which would allow embracing the preferences of the various age groups and the constraints inherent in the economic factors which would determine the choices. Design education needs to change towards better equipping professionals to handle more age-diverse client populations and multigenerational project demands. Builders, product manufacturers, and policymakers in the industry should respond to the realized market needs of multigenerational housing by developing innovative products in the building industry, flexible floor plan designs, and enabling regulatory policies.

Future studies should go beyond residential settings studied in literature to research on generational design preference in work, healthcare, education, and business settings. Longitudinal research following the changes in preferences throughout cohort-age would help understand whether the perceived differences are because of the persistent impact of generations or the life stage variation. International and cross-cultural studies on the nature of generational design patterns in various global settings would put a limit on generalizability of findings based mainly on populations of the United States. With the continued demographic aging process and the growing diversity in generations of most developed societies, the study of age-based design preferences gains even greater significance in the development of inclusive, useful, and fulfilling built environmental services to most diverse groups of people throughout the human lifespan.

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