By Peter Sobchak
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From Status Symbol to Sanctuary

Trying to zero in on "luxury" — as an aspiration, as a market share, as a trend, as any way of categorizing people and their spending and living habits — has always been slippery at best. But as the economic landscape evolves to such a degree where both growth and disparity are shaping the future, using the concept of "luxury" as a shared metric will slide away as it yields to more individualistic impressions of the term.

In the past, the equation was simple: luxury equals wealth. While still true, the *expression* of that equation is far more delicate, as more of the newer generations are questioning whether avenues to traditional forms of wealth accumulation are still open to them. After all, according to Pew Research Americans are more apart than before financially. From 1971 to 2023, the share of those who live in lower-income households increased from 27 per cent to 30 per cent, *and* the share in upper-income households increased from 11 per cent to 19 per cent. Since 1970 the growth in income for the middle class has not kept pace with the growth in income for the upper-income tier. Outcomes of these widening wealth disparities will take unusual forms: we'll see women without children accumulating more wealth than their male counterparts, while single mothers face financial hardships.

That said, Generations X and Y are in their peak income years, representing the bulk of luxury purchases and soon the key pool of income growth. However, "Generation Z is positioned at the forefront of social and cultural change, inspiring other generations' value systems, with a strong desire for lived experiences and a quest for meaning," says market research firm Bain & Company. By 2030, Gen Z will account for 25 per cent of luxury market purchases, with millennials claiming 50 per cent. Together, they are set to "redefine luxury consumption, prioritizing authenticity and accessibility over traditional opulence," according to the American Society of Interior Designers (ASID) 2025 Trends Outlook report. "The rise of the second-hand luxury market, driven by Gen Z's focus on sustainability and exclusivity, signals a fundamental change in how luxury goods are valued. As this new generation of consumers reshapes the landscape, sustainability, personal alignment with brands, and accessible luxury are becoming essential to staying relevant in the market."

The ASID spoke very little about luxury in their 2025 Trends Outlook report. But perhaps that isn't a bad thing: "luxury" is an overused word I hear all too often in interior design, typically followed by exploitative misuse, contradictions and confusion. "For some, luxury is opulence and grandeur. For others, it is sophistication and sustainability," says Daniela Furtado, a consultant, speaker and head of Toronto-based Findable Digital Marketing. "Luxury is hard to define because it constantly evolves with consumer values. As the affluent consumer changes, so do their values and desires. I call this the 'flavour of luxury.'"

And the flavour now is discretion. "Quiet luxury" has emerged as a prominent trend reshaping the design landscape, where the art of understatement reigns supreme. No longer a parade of excess, luxury now resides in the hushed elegance of natural materials, impeccable craftsmanship, and spaces that breathe. This cultivated restraint has permeated real estate, with discerning buyers gravitating toward homes that whisper rather than shout their affluence. The new paradigm favours sculptural silhouettes, tactility over trend, and interiors harmonized with their surroundings while imbued with a sense of sanctuary. The term "quiet luxury" may not be a new phenomenon, but it has become the new way to do minimalism: soft and warm where core values like creativity, artistry and distinctiveness are not declared but deeply felt. ◘

ERRATUM

In the January-February 2025 issue of Canadian Interiors, the byline for the story "You've Got Mail" was erroneously credited to Evan Pavka. The correct author of the story is Dave LeBlanc. Additionally, in the story "Teeing Up for All Seasons" Longridge chairman and co-founder John Clark was erroneously identified as John Crawford. We regret the errors.

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Keeping the Mind in Mind

Humans have always been obsessed with exploring frontiers, typically the kind that are "out there." But a new awakening is emerging, one interested in mapping what's "in here," that is, our minds. And what's been discovered so far is a vast inner complexity. As the plethora of thematically similar CEU talks at NeoCon this year vividly illustrated, the evolving language of neurodiversity has emerged as one of design's most dynamic frontiers. But not as simple compliance with checklists, but a fundamental reframing of how we conceive, plan, and inhabit space. No longer limited to questions of physical access, designers should be exploring how to design for the unseen differences in how people sense and process the world.

This is not simply about swapping out fluorescent lights, adding a soft chair or quiet rooms. It's about reimagining how environments shape perception, mood, cognition, and belonging. At the heart of this shift lies a recognition that neurological difference is not a deviation from the norm, but part of the norm itself. Neurodivergent individuals—those with autism, ADHD, dyslexia, PTSD, and so on—represent a significant portion of the population. Yet until recently, their experiences within the built environment have largely been overlooked by an architectural canon prizing visual coherence, spatial efficiency, and universal access, while rarely asking: whose cognition is being prioritized?

If NeoCon speakers were any indication, designers are beginning to ask that question, with an emerging consensus: environments that consider cognitive difference are fundamentally better for everyone, but to get there requires abandoning the one-size-fits-all myth. "The most enduring fallacy of universal design has been its attempt to flatten human need into a single solution," said one speaker. Neuro-inclusive design, by contrast, starts with the premise that neurological variation is not something to be smoothed out, but instead designed for.

This shift reframes the role of the interior designer beyond merely a curator of form and function to a translator of cognitive experience. For example, a workplace filled with visual clutter or acoustic unpredictability can send a neurodivergent mind into overload, while another individual in the same room might not register discomfort at all. One person's energizing brainstorm room may be another's source of social anxiety. What we're learning through brain health research, workplace ethnographies, and neuroaesthetic studies is that design is not neutral. It either supports or suppresses.

As seen in our cover story, innovative practices are beginning to approach neurodiversity not as a challenge to solve, but as a lens through which to reimagine what the built environment can do. Circulation paths, material finishes, even the semantics of wayfinding all become part of a broader system of signals the brain is constantly decoding.

The most effective neuro-inclusive environments are shaped by interdisciplinary collaboration: partnerships with clinical researchers, industrial psychologists and accessibility advocates to translate scientific insight into spatial expression, while also inviting neurodivergent individuals not only into the design brief, but into the design process itself (while remembering that the standard charrette, built on rapid ideation and extroverted energy, often excludes the very voices we are talking about).

The irony is that many design strategies already exist under the banner of "good design." But now the conversation is catching up to the science. Biophilic principles, long touted for their calming effects, are being embraced anew for their role in sensory regulation. Predictable spatial sequences, once seen as efficient, are now recognized as critical for cognitive processing. Even colour, often reduced to branding or trend, is being reconsidered given its capacity to impact perception, behaviour, and emotional regulation.

Of course, advances in policy are beneficial—such as WELL and LEED standards beginning to incorporate neurodiversity into their frameworks—but guidelines alone don't spark transformation. For that to happen, designers must become educators and help clients understand why a space that feels "fine" to one person might feel unbearable to another. They must challenge briefs that assume sameness and bring forward data to support difference. They must, as one NeoCon speaker put it, "design for the edges, because that's where innovation lives."

What's emerging is not just a new approach to interiors, but a new ethos of design. One that replaces compliance with curiosity, values variability over uniformity, and human potential over market average. "Our brain is mapping the world," said E.O. Wilson. "Often that map is distorted, but it's a map with constant immediate sensory input." As we continue to build for a cognitively diverse world, the question is not whether our spaces are inclusive enough, but whether we are bold enough to imagine what inclusion really looks like. ◘

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Wellness Is the Measure

Once associated with yoga studios, fitness chains and destination spas, wellness has moved from lifestyle trend to market imperative and is reshaping real estate development worldwide. At the intersection of health, design and economics lies a sector that is rapidly outpacing traditional construction growth: wellness real estate. Globally valued at $584 billion in 2024, it is projected to surpass $1.1 trillion by 2029, expanding at nearly four times the pace of the overall building industry, according to The Global Wellness Institute. While the United States still dominates global wellness real estate, Canada's trajectory is remarkable, growing from $6 billion in 2019 to $16 billion in 2024, outpacing North America overall.

For interior designers, the implications are profound. From retail clinics to urban spas, wellness environments are becoming critical testing grounds for ideas about sensory experience, material health and community building. Early iterations of wellness real estate often relied on high-end amenities like Himalayan salt rooms, cryotherapy chambers or lavish hydrotherapy suites, and while these remain hallmarks of flagship spas and resorts, the market has matured into something more expansive, where interiors are expected to simultaneously signal credibility and trust while delivering experiences.

One of the most significant shifts in wellness real estate is the move from siloed functions to integrated environments, and project examples in this issue of *Canadian Interiors* illustrate that transition. In Ontario and Alberta, the rapid expansion of boutique wellness clinics has created demand for interiors that merge hospitality design cues such as soft lighting, natural materials and lounge-style waiting areas with clinical functionality. These spaces are less about sterile efficiency and more about cultivating sensory calm. For interior designers, retail wellness spaces must do more than just draw in clients with posh material palettes and product positioning but also operate in dialogue with their surroundings, underscoring the shift from individual to collective experiences and wellness not as a decorative afterthought but as a deliberate health outcome.

Across the projects featured in this issue, this shift can be seen in how each environment rejects clinical sterility in favour of tactile warmth and organic forms that encourage emotional ease. Natural materials anchor spaces in biophilic principles, while lighting and acoustic control fine-tune the body's response. Reception zones feel more like cafés, hotel lounges or galleries than waiting rooms, using furniture arrangements and multifunctional layouts to foster social connection and a sense of belonging. Intuitive wayfinding eases cognitive load, while durable, cleanable finishes quietly meet regulatory demands without compromising atmosphere. Whether it's a meditation room at the heart of a dermatology clinic or a staff wellness retreat shaped by user input, these designs choreograph sensory experience to reduce stress, support routine care, and reframe medical visits as acts of self-care. Wellness here operates as infrastructure: spatial, material and social.

The next phase of wellness real estate will see design expand along several axes. First, affordability: as the sector matures, wellness features must extend beyond luxury spas into accessible clinics and community health hubs. Next will be climate adaptation: Canadian developers are beginning to integrate resilience strategies such as wildfire-resistant materials, passive cooling and renewable microgrids into wellness projects, underscoring the link between planetary and human health. For interior designers, these shifts demand fluency not only in aesthetics but also in science and sociology. Materials must be vetted for chemical safety; lighting calibrated to circadian rhythms; acoustics shaped for both privacy and connection.

Wellness real estate is not a passing trend. It is a structural redefinition of how buildings and interiors create value. In Canada, the growth of this sector underscores both market demand and cultural appetite for environments that support well-being. For interior designers, retail wellness environments such as spas and clinics offer the most immediate laboratories for this transformation. They demand interiors that are multisensory yet restrained, technologically advanced yet deeply human. As the market races toward $1.1 trillion globally, wellness real estate challenges designers to rethink not just what makes a space beautiful, but what makes it healthy and, increasingly, what makes it essential. ■