

A Guide to Residence Hall Furniture Design

*Exploring the
Principles of Modern,
Contemporary, and
Mission Furniture Design*

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INTRODUCTION

Residence hall furniture design is one of our passions here at DCI. But not everybody understands the contours of furniture design.

Over the last century, the furniture industry experienced a creative explosion as furniture evolved through a variety of revolutionary styles.

From Mission, early and mid-century Modern to Contemporary styles, DCI offers several lines in each of these distinctive styles.

In this eBook, we'll explore some of the most influential furniture styles including Mission, [Modern](#), and Contemporary.

With each of these styles, we'll pan back and look at the historical context from which it emerged and then unpack it in relationship to particular [collections](#) and pieces of furniture.

Finally, it's important to note that our in-house team of experienced engineers can customize any piece of furniture. You're not bound to any single style. However, this eBook will give you a good overview and orientation to the most popular styles.

You can build from there.



THE EVOLUTION OF MODERN FURNITURE DESIGN

I love good design. For me, it's one of the most interesting and compelling parts of building residence hall furniture.

Design inspiration is so central to our creative process here at DCI that we want to share this design primer exploring the various styles and influences that inform our furniture.

Our furniture is built to last generations, so we are naturally drawn to the timeless elements of classic design. Every project has unique requirements, so our product lines provide a customizable canvas ranging from Traditional to Contemporary.

Modern Design Is Ideal For Residence Halls

I'm going to throw a wrench in the chronological works. We're going to start your design orientation in the middle and explore modern furniture.

Why?

Because it's my favorite. I'm especially inspired by modern furniture design. But that's just the beginning.

The core principles of modern design make it [ideal for residence halls](#). Functional but stylish, modern furniture minimizes bulk to make small spaces feel more open.

But when we refer to modern furniture design, what exactly are we talking about?

Because it's a big topic.

Modern design has a rich history that weaves through several cultural, philosophical, artistic, and architectural movements. So let's take a quick look at the history of modern design.

A Brief History Of Modern Furniture Design

He said only that the form of a building must follow its function; that the structure of a building is the key to its beauty.
-The Fountainhead

In the early 1900's, a revolutionary new style of furniture design emerged.

One of the progenitors of this style, the pre-eminent Swiss architect, and designer Le Corbusier described it this [way](#), "A great epoch has begun. There exists a new spirit."

What was this new spirit and why was it revolutionary?



A New Design Paradigm

Until this point in history, the value of a piece of furniture was judged based on how much time the artisan spent on it and how ornate it was.

Truly valuable furniture *was* ornate, and artisans imbued their work with a sense of lineage and legacy. These fashioners of furniture endeavored to convey millennia of tradition through their designs.

Accordingly, the furniture had the literal and figurative weight of history behind it. The materials and the visual footprint were heavy and dark.

With modern design, we see the first definitive break with [history](#).

...the modern movement sought newness, originality, technical innovation, and ultimately the message that it conveyed spoke of the present and the future, rather than of what had gone before it."

Casting off the baggage of history, modern furniture was designed to be light in both form and color. The structure of modern furniture was transparent and featured clean geometric lines and planes.

And maybe for the first time, the very structure of the furniture—rather than the ornament—represented the essence of design.

In the context of this new functional design paradigm, the materials reflected the industrial age and its processes: polished steel, glass, molded plywood, and plastics.



Art And Design Made By The Machine

Indeed, the modernizing forces of industry played a major role in this emergent design. The idea of [mass production](#) was huge. It meant that modern furniture design should be available to all, not just the elite.

Functional and economical was the ideal.

"It was felt that art and design must reflect society and that modern society was characterized by the new technology. This resulted in a 'machine aesthetic': art and design made by the machine, expressing the machine age in its materials and shapes, and echoing the machine in its standardization, repetition, and anonymity."

Furthermore, lineage and tradition yielded the world wars and designers were traumatized and repulsed by those cataclysms.



They wanted a break from tradition and sought a forward-looking design esthetic.

Modern design rejected the progressivism and cultural evolution that inspired those wars. Instead, it forged “an art and design form that was distinct and original from all that came before.”

This new spirit signified great changes happening in the world. There were previously unthinkable new technologies emerging. The world was growing smaller and more interconnected.

New philosophies followed these changes as technology changed the way humans saw their place in the world.

Soon this new spirit, with its minimalist principles, was reflected in art, architecture, and countless fields of human endeavor and thinking.



Key Influences On Modern Design

Modern furniture design was heavily influenced by the German Werkbund and Bauhaus schools. These schools were all about “making good design more accessible to the masses.”

In 1925 Marcel Breuer, a former cabinet-maker and a member of the Bauhaus school designed one of the most iconic pieces of modern furniture called the Wassily Chair.

It was named after the influential artist Wassily Kandinsky and was revolutionary for its use of polished tubular steel and leather straps with a minimal symmetrical design.

Asian and African design also had a big impact on modern furniture designers for a few reasons.

For one, Japan changed its trade policy and isolationist approach to foreigners. Suddenly Japanese culture, art, and design were finding their way into Western culture.

Artists and designers were inspired and compelled by the zen-like elegance, beauty, and functional simplicity of Japanese furniture, which featured solid colors and little ornament.

Key Designers and Their Iconic Furniture

I recommend checking out [this infographic](#). It chronicles the evolution of modern furniture with some of the most notable and influential designers and their iconic creations.

I hope you enjoyed this very brief and



broad strokes tour through the evolution of modern furniture design. Of course, there's much more to this topic, and if you're interested, you can see examples of modern furniture design in our [Paseo and Martinez collections](#) (seen on pages 9 and 10).

For a definitive history of modern design, you should pick up David Raizman's text on the [History of Modern Design](#).

Now let's explore the principle of modern furniture design in detail through the lens of our own modern collections.

WHY MODERN DESIGN IS PERFECT FOR RESIDENCE HALLS

You can find a lot of modern design influence in our furniture. But we have two collections that are designed explicitly as modern lines of furniture: [Paseo and Martinez](#).

As such, they feature a number of modern design hallmarks. What are those elements? Here's a quick recap.

The Essence of Modern Furniture Design

In the early 20th Century, modern design made a clean break from the heavy, ornate, and history-laden furniture design paradigms of the past and highlighted functionality, lightness in form, and geometrical lines and planes.

In essence, the form of the furniture emerged as the no-frills heart of the

design. Form followed function.

As DCI Vice President Amos Kober describes it:

The core principles of this style make it ideal for residence halls, minimizing bulk to make small spaces feel more open. It allows us to mix materials and finishes while creating the clean lines of elegant beauty found in our Martinez and Paseo collections.

Modern Design at DCI

So how do we integrate these themes into our residence hall furniture? Here are some photos from recent projects which feature furniture from our Paseo and Martinez collections as well as a few others.

University of Pennsylvania

At the University of Pennsylvania, the architecture of their state-of-the-art New College House residence hall is super modern.



Notice the geometric shape of the building with its angular overhanging roof, jutting support beams, and towering panes of glass with overlapping light-deflecting metal grid.

You can appreciate how the vertical panes of glass and the metal beams holding them in place are the design itself—clean, sleek, and functional. Likewise for the giant horizontal wooden support beams.

These keystones of the building design are almost solely functional. There's little to no ornament. And yet they make for a breathtaking design.

Similarly, the study desk we installed at Penn is functional and stylish. It rests on two metal legs with no modesty panel behind it.

The design is functional and transparent with a small visual footprint that emphasizes the space under the desk. The top of the desk is a slim rectangular solid wood box sitting on the metal legs to create a “floating” effect. That floating effect is trademark modern design.

The Martinez Collection

The Martinez Collection (page 9) is a distinctly modern line of furniture with a special focus on the desk.

Like the desk above, this one has no modesty panel, immediately maximizing space in the room and minimizing the visual and formal footprint.

The rectangular steel legs undergird a thin rectangular box desktop creating that floating effect like the Penn desk.

And again, note the purposeful simplicity



of the steel legs. The functionality itself, like the beams of a modern building, is a core design element.

Also, the Martinez desk features an overhanging top to emphasize space rather than bulk.

The Paseo Collection

The Paseo Collection (page 10) emerged directly out of work with UCLA and Studios Architectural firm. There are several modern motifs to note in this line.

First, notice how the desk, side table, and dresser are all sitting on metal legs. The idea is to lighten—literally and figuratively—the footprint of the furniture.

In keeping with this effect, the desk has a floating pedestal, which means that the drawers hover above the ground to give it a floating look.

With the bed, we've extended the lines of the furniture to create less bulk and more empty space.



THE MARTINEZ COLLECTION

Bed, desk, 3-drawer chest, dresser
Natural Maple



THE PASEO COLLECTION

Bed, nightstand, desk, nesting tables
Natural White Oak



Finally, the solid wood side tables at the base of the bed play off the now-classic [Bauhaus Nesting Side Tables](#) designed by Joseph Albers in 1926.

Designed to work “independently and interdependently” of each other, they’re a living, functional embodiment of experimentation with geometry and form.

It's A Breeze

Although our Breeze Collection (page 12) is not one of our signature modern design lines, it is still spare, elegant, and simple with some classic modern design motifs.

The side table and coffee table feature a transparent box with two open ends floating on a light metal geometric base. Although the boxes are sturdy solid hardwood, the effect is one of transparency and lightness.

This was just a quick overview of our modern designs here at DCI. In the next chapter we'll explore contemporary style in depth.



WHAT IS CONTEMPORARY FURNITURE DESIGN?

What is contemporary furniture design and how does it relate to its predecessor, modern design? At DCI, we build many styles of furniture, and contemporary is a popular one.

But what actually defines contemporary furniture?

A lot of folks use the words contemporary and modern interchangeably when referring to furniture design, but that's a mistake. There's a real difference between the two.

Modern vs. Contemporary Design

Most articles exploring the difference between modern and contemporary style start with a clear definition of terms. So let's start there.

[Modern design](#) belongs to a set period in time from the late 1800s to the mid-1900's. Modern furniture design, which was heavily influenced by the modern art movement, is defined by that period of time and it will never happen again.

Furthermore, modern furniture design adheres to an explicit and strict set of stylistic principles.

[Contemporary](#), on the other hand, means *of the moment* or *current*. It's happening right now, and it will always happen right now. And that's what defines a style as contemporary.

Unlike modern design, contemporary



THE BREEZE COLLECTION

Bed, nightstand, desk, nesting tables
Natural Maple



design is always evolving. It draws from (and is a response to) a variety of historical styles, and it has the benefit of integrating emergent technologies and materials.

The fact that contemporary design pulls from so many different styles is one reason why people confuse modern and contemporary styles.

That is to say that the modern aesthetic is popular *right now* and has influenced some of the core tenets of contemporary design. In particular, contemporary furniture design focuses on a modern adherence to minimalism.

According to [Homedit.com](https://www.homedit.com) founder Stefan:

Clean-lined furniture is perhaps one of the most apparent places where today's contemporary style merges with the popular modern style. Basic forms, clean lines, beautiful yet simple shapes, and a focus on comfort all blend together in today's contemporary furniture styles.

Contemporary Style In Furniture

From a certain point of view, the very thing that makes contemporary furniture what it is—of the moment—also makes it tricky to pin down at times. Why? Because it's always changing. By definition.

So let's map out a few of the qualities that are, for the moment, decidedly contemporary.

Sustainability

First of all, sustainability is in fashion. [Climate change](#) is a serious issue on a lot of people's minds, and they want to tailor

their furniture choices to reflect a more sustainable ethic.

This is a big difference from modern furniture, which was produced when sustainability wasn't even a thing, and commodification was taking off. But now sustainability is popular, and it's a value that infuses architecture as well.

Consequently, it trickles down to furniture design.

At DCI, all our FSC-certified solid hardwood furniture meets the highest sustainability standards. We produce it in a [zero-waste](#) manufacturing facility. And we often reuse and [up-cycle](#) old furniture parts from previous installations as internal components in new furniture.

Comfort and Clean Lines

What are some other elements of contemporary style? One furniture purveyor, referring to the understated and urban appeal of contemporary style had [this](#) to say about it:

Contemporary furniture has clean lines with soft edges. Chair legs and arms are simple, either square or round. Upholstery fabrics are either one solid color or have a subtle pattern. Contemporary tables have little if any ornate carvings. Inlaid patterns, if used, are geometric. Upholstered furniture is low to the ground with squared arms.

Whereas modern design can at times verge on feeling sterile or overly stark—consider it's minimal, machine-inspired aesthetic—contemporary design responds to that with softer edges and a focus on chic comfort.



When it comes to contemporary cabinets and dressers, according to [HGTV](#), look for wood doors, simple handles, hidden hinges, and clean lines.

Flexibility

At DCI, we cater to contemporary style and customize our flexible product lines to different styles. This formal flexibility is a hallmark of contemporary style. And more specifically, it allows our core products to reflect and integrate current design trends.

For example, our online [Product Customizer](#) tool allows you to handpick the elements that work best with your design intention and project specifics.

So that's a very brief tour of contemporary furniture design. In our next Chapter, we'll explore some of DCI's most contemporary furniture.

HOW TO CUSTOMIZE YOUR CONTEMPORARY FURNITURE DESIGN

Contemporary furniture design is chimeric. It takes on new forms over time, evolving as trends and preferences change. As a result, it's tricky to define.

Previously, we explored the essence of what defines contemporary furniture design today. Still heavily influenced by the elegant minimalism of mid-century modern, contemporary furniture features clean lines and soft edges.

At the same time, it responds to the spartan asceticism of modernism's

machine-inspired aesthetic with urban chic-infused comfort.

In this chapter, let's explore how these principles of contemporary design inform different pieces of DCI furniture.

We'll also take a look at DCI's product customizer, an online tool that enables residence halls to stay up to date with changes in contemporary design.

The Product Customizer

Let's start with our evolutionary tool: the [product customizer](#).

We're committed to staying abreast of emerging iterations in style, and we've developed an online tool to help you do that.

We call it our product customizer. It allows you to update a number of our core products with new elements like finish and style.

Let me explain.

Our base design is core contemporary. A



minimal look with strong modern influences.

To embrace the true essence of contemporary design—an evolving esthetic to be sure—we developed a product customizer that features a menu of modern style options that you can configure to achieve your desired aesthetic.

In essence, to embrace the ever-evolving nature of [contemporary furniture](#), the customizer serves as a platform to integrate new styles, design trends, materials, and looks.

The result is that you're afforded incredible freedom of choice to tailor your furniture to match different spaces and contexts. It provides you with room for interpretation.

And the beautiful thing is that we can continually upgrade the customizer. As styles change, we can modify the options to keep it continually current with the latest trends in the market.

So let's take a look at a few examples of contemporary furniture through the fluid lens of the product customizer.

Three Variations, One Chest

We start by taking a look at one of our most popular products. It's called the Campus 3-Drawer Chest.

This chest is made from sustainable [FSC-COC](#) certified hardwood and features an attractive wood grain with subtle horizontal and vertical lines.

We're going to apply three different stains and fittings to the chest to give you a sense of the versatility of the furniture, as we look at it in three different styles.

1. Dark Stain with Berkeley Pull

We begin by applying a dark stain. Darker stains are one of the latest trends in design.

Then we add the minimalist brushed metal Berkeley pull to create a very distinctive and contemporary look.



2. Oak Stain with Crescent Drawer Pull

Oak is a timeless favorite. And we're not talking about that caramel-colored oak that screams 1975. This oak finish highlights amazing and distinguished grain patterns.

The recessed crescent pull is as minimal as it gets and adds an elegant and subtle compliment, highlighting the oak finish.



3. Maple Stain with Milan Drawer Pull

Similar to the crescent pull in the previous example, the Milan pull adds economic style to the idea of the recessed drawer pull by combining the middle drawer with the top and bottom drawers.

And notice the profound effect of the maple finish, which combines the solid hardwood strength of maple with visual brightness and levity.



Upholstered Furniture

I also want to feature another great contemporary item of furniture. It's part of our Martinez line (page 9), which we installed at UC Berkeley.

You can appreciate the modern influences in the Martinez with its minimalist bent plywood arms and legs, which give it a floating, look.

This sectional couch with chair also features a subtle vertical striated background pattern reminiscent of The Matrix.

At the same time, it's got a deep firm cushion to add plenty of comfort for the student looking to study or relax.

That's a super quick look at contemporary style in the design of our residence hall furniture. If you want to explore more products and pieces, I encourage you to visit our [product customizer page](#) and start experimenting.

Testing the different styles can help you develop your own vision. And if you already have a clear vision, the product customizer will help you zero in on the furniture you need to make that vision a reality.

Now, let's take a look at the last style we want to feature in the design primer.

WHAT IS MISSION FURNITURE AND WHY IS IT GREAT FOR RESIDENCE HALLS

Let's wrap up our design survey by taking a look at Mission Furniture.

What is mission style furniture?

Simple, durable, and functional, mission furniture emerged in the late 19th century and enjoyed a surge in popularity from about 1900-1915.

It came back into vogue in the 1980's and remains popular today thanks to its sturdy elegance.

Mission style was pioneered by the architect, publisher, and furniture maker [Gustav Stickley](#). His inspiration came from the furniture he observed in turn of the century California Franciscan missions.

But the name also reflects Stickley's be-



lief that all furniture should have a clear purpose.

Mission style, which is sometimes referred to as Craftsman style, is well suited to life in residence halls for a number of reasons. And we'll explore those reasons below. But first, let's back up for a brief tour of the history and character of mission furniture.

A Brief History of Mission Furniture

Mission style furniture was a reaction against both the stylistic excesses of the Victorian age and the cheap, mediocre quality of mass-produced furniture that was spawned by the industrial revolution.

It also dovetailed stylistically with the [arts and crafts movement](#), which sought to dignify and celebrate the superior work and artifacts of the individual craftsman.

In essence, that arts and crafts movement was a reaction against the inhumanity of the burgeoning industrial complex, which turned the craftsman into a mere cog in the wheel of mass production.

The influence of this movement on mission style furniture is summarized well in this comparison between [mission and shaker styles](#):

The rise of the arts and crafts movement impacted mission style furniture. It meant that workers didn't feel bogged down in a factory. They could take some pride in a handmade product. Since this concept of a craftsman rose during the time that mission furniture became popular, these pieces while still plain and functional were exceptionally well-made.



That's why Gustav Stickley sometimes referred to mission furniture as craftsman style. And in fact, he published a magazine called [The Craftsman](#) where he marketed his furniture and promoted the mission style.

According to history writer Troy Segal reporting from [The Spruce](#):

In the debut issue of The Craftsman, Stickley wrote: "The aim of good design (and, in fact, of the entire Arts and Crafts movement) was "to substitute the luxury of taste for the luxury of costliness; to teach that beauty does not imply elaboration or ornament; to employ only those forms and materials which make for simplicity, individually and dignity of effect."



What Are The Traits of Mission Style?

So what does mission furniture look like and what are some key traits of this popular style?

Straight horizontal and vertical lines are defining elements as well as flat planes and panels that highlight the natural grain of the wood.

As you may have already deduced, there is very little ornamentation. The beauty is reflected in the elegant and spare simplicity of style.

Vertical and parallel slats, called stiles, were a common feature of mission furniture. This lent the furniture the appearance of strength. At the same time, this styling created the subtle illusion of lightness, which balanced its masculine and heavy appearance. Another important highlight of mission furniture is the exposed mortise-and-tenon joints, which add tremendous strength and durability to any piece of furniture. It's also just a beautiful feature of the furniture.

Segal [speaks](#) to this and to Stickley's original approach to manufacturing mission furniture.

Although Stickley's furniture was machine-made, it had a handcrafted air – an effect it accomplished by emphasizing the details of its construction: visible tenons (ends of pieces of wood), exposed joints and the use of pins and pegs – never nails or glue – as fasteners. These techniques, many of which dated back to medieval times, gave the furniture an artisanal, pre-Industrial Revo-

lution look. But its factory manufacture made it more affordable than any actual handmade work could be.

Why Mission Style is Great for Residence Halls

So why is mission furniture such a good fit for residence halls? I'm guessing it's probably obvious to you already.

Sturdy

To put it simply, this furniture is built to last a lifetime (or two!). It's incredibly sturdy.

Consequently, it easily weathers the heavy wear of life in a college residence hall. As in any institutional setting, the furniture can take a beating. And students aren't always the gentlest lot.

That's why the strength and simplicity of this furniture is such a good fit for residence halls.

Authentic

But there's more. The furniture also brings an authentic feel with it. As Stickley intended, it dignifies its surrounding and lends a subtle sense of style to any environment.

Sustainable

And finally, in line with Stickley's missionary zeal, locally sourced and manufactured solid hardwood furniture is [sustainable](#) to the core. Students love this!

Wood is a renewable resource, and it's the most [climate-friendly](#) carbon neutral furniture material you can buy. In fact, long-lasting hardwood furniture serves as a [carbon sink](#).



And the [miracle of wood](#) is that it's like a cat and can live many lives. It's easy to give solid wood furniture fresh life through refinishing, recycling, reusing, or [upcycling](#) the original piece.

DCI's Mission Lounge Set

One of our more popular collections at DCI is our [mission style lounge set](#). It's made from sustainable [FSC-Certified](#) solid oak and features a beautiful medium stain to highlight the rich wood grain.

This elegant set includes a sofa, end table, coffee table, and chair all stylistically tied together with strong vertical slats. Despite the strong, stable legs and square angles, this open slat style also transmits a visual impression of lightness.

If you're interested in a line of sustainable, sturdy, and elegant furniture for your residence hall lounge, look no further.

Mission Style at Duke University

We recently concluded an installation at Duke University's Trinity house residence hall. Duke already had an established design spec, and it was mission style to the core.

Renderings and pictures of the collection and from the Duke project can be found on the next page.

Conclusion

That concludes our brief tour of residential furniture styles and design. The truth is, there's a lot more to say. But this Ebook is just a primer.

Please feel free to be in touch with any of our client representatives to explore these or any other furniture styles. We welcome the opportunity to chat with you.



THE MISSION COLLECTION

Sofa, coffee table, end table, chair
Natural Oak





Sustainable | Hardwood | Furniture

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