

# Chapter 1

## PRINCIPLES OF DESIGN

*We don't do art; we just do as well as we can.*

—anonymous sculptor, Bali

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### IN THIS CHAPTER

You will discover the basic principles for designing events and decorations for events.

#### Basic Principles of Event Design

- Focus
- Space
- Flow

#### Practical Aesthetic Principles

- Line
- Color
- Composition
- Texture

#### Design and Global Event Management

- Research
- Design
- Planning
- Coordination
- Evaluation

Traditionally, the art of design and decoration has been considered an intuitive activity, and in fact, there are people who seem to have an innate or “natural” talent for it. However, in the multi-billion-dollar business world of special events we can no longer, like the Balinese sculptor quoted at the beginning of the chapter, “just do it.” In an increasingly competitive field, professional practices and a planned design approach give the working decorator

an edge. Although designing and decorating may appear to be intuitive, they follow established principles that please the eye and achieve the desired effect. This chapter will present the elements of basic event design and basic aesthetic principles and show how they apply to special event production.

## DESIGN AND DECORATION IN EVENTS

In business and personal matters, for seasonal and marketing purposes, it appears that it is human nature to adorn and beautify our surroundings through art and design. Art in an event is achieved through design and decoration. **Event design** is the conception of a structure for an event, the expression of that concept verbally and visually, and, finally, the execution of the concept.

**Decoration** is the adornment and beautification of the event, the primary focus of this book. Decoration is a **multidisciplinary craft**, employing carpenters, artists, floral designers, seamstresses, lighting technicians, and many other craftpersons and specialists.

When the decoration and the design combine to advance the event, a form of synergy is achieved. **Synergy** happens when two or more elements combine to achieve an effect greater than the sum of their parts. In producing events, this will result in both art and measurable, practical success.

### Idea Portfolio

## DESIGN, DECORATION, AND SYNERGY

A gas pump hardware manufacturer decided to have a presence at a conference in Texas to promote brand awareness among the attending operations managers and purchasing agents. The company determined that it would host an evening reception with food, beverage, and entertainment. The event planner hired our firm to decorate the event.

We designed a western theme concept that was consistent with the conference location, using western storefronts incorporating brand identification signage. This was **design**. We presented our ideas to the client via verbal description, floor plans, and sketches; that was also part of the design process, the subject of Chapter 2.

The decorations that had been presented then were produced and installed. The production and installation of the props and other decorative items was the actual **decoration**. The ultimate product was both decoration and the embodiment of the design concept, which is also called the design.

Incorporating the company logos into the props and decorations was more effective than just hanging banners. Attention was attracted to the logos, and we heard comments about them being made by the guests. Designing the brand identification into the decorations created a form of **synergy** between logo presence and decorations.

## BASIC EVENT DESIGN

Determining the **goals and objectives of the event** and researching the material requirements and the expectations and demographics of the attendees are the first steps in basic event management and are preliminary to beginning the event design. After that, basic event design begins with focus, space, and flow.

### FOCUS

Just as determining the goals and objectives of the event is the first step for the event manager, determining the focus of the event décor is the first goal of the event designer. The best way to research this is to ask the client directly what is important in this event. Preliminary or additional research on the company or family can yield helpful information as well.

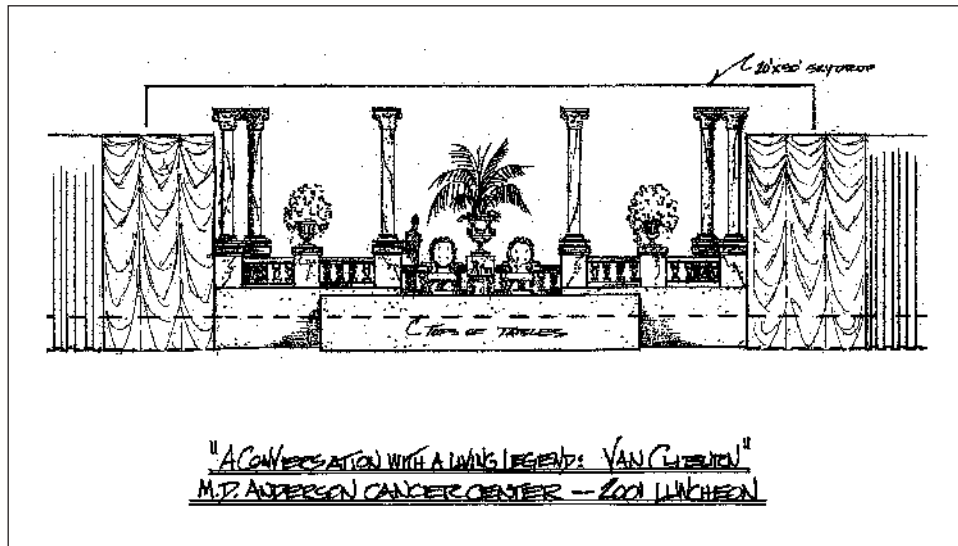
Some events have a natural focus. With award ceremonies, the focus is usually the honorees, and the reception will focus on the nominees; however, the ceremony may have a split focus, recognizing the nominees but also advancing the brand recognition of the corporation or association. In product rollout events, the focus is usually on the product, brand, or corporate identity being promoted.

The event professional also needs to be on the lookout for hidden or secondary agendas that will not be spoken or be immediately evident. These agendas may be achieving personal goals for the vice president of marketing or advancing the stock price or reputation of the chief executive officer (CEO).

Having determined the focus of the event, the designer implements the design elements and aesthetic principles in a way that achieves that focus. When the guests enter the room, their eyes and attention are directed toward the desired object, logo, or person being featured. This can be achieved through line, composition, and color, directing and attracting attention to the focus. Notice in Figure 1-1 how the design focuses attention on center stage by framing the area and providing a predominant item dead center in that space.

Focus can be achieved with color by using bright primary and secondary colors at eye level around the focus object. Using pure color around the focus object or person and blending receding colors in the foreground and background will achieve the same effect in a more sophisticated way. The effect also can be achieved by means of repetition, putting the object of the desired focus in front of the attendees at numerous locations and places throughout the event.

Focus can be achieved in ways other than the purely visual. Audio design can create focus through **audioscaping**: the creation of an environment of sounds that enhance the visual décor and direct attention (focus) through the placement of speakers and careful manipulation of tone and volume controls. The environment can be designed to surround the guests with audio, tactile, taste, and olfactory elements with the same care that is used for the visual elements. All the senses fall within the design environment of the event



**Figure 1-1**

designer. We can, by design, direct the focus of the guests throughout the event.

## SPACE

Space is critical. From a practical point of view, the décor must fit within the physical confines of the space and its elements must fit through access doors and hallways.

Décor should not take up too much space when space is limited but can be used to cut down or fill up space when the hall is too large. Simply placing decorative items around the perimeter of the room a few feet from the walls can make a hall that otherwise would be too spacious nice and cozy.

Certain events require more space than others. People are comfortable in close proximity to one another when attending an event with theatrical or auditorium-style seating, but while eating, people need enough room to feel that they are not inconveniencing or encroaching on one another.

Too much space per person can ruin certain events. People naturally try to establish a certain comfort distance from strangers. If too much room is allowed, guests will achieve that distance and not have to interact with people they do not know. An example of this is a typical American Protestant wedding reception. Often seating is provided for everyone in a spacious environment. People separate into the family groups they know and sit down without interacting with other guests. Everybody eats, and after a while people get up and leave, with nobody having had a particularly good time.

## Idea Portfolio

### HOW WILL WE GET IT INTO THE ROOM?

A number of years ago, Gale Sliger and I were asked to meet with an event manager who was designing the grand opening of a hotel. The centerpiece of the décor for the opening was to be a life-size ice carving of a stagecoach with galloping horses in the ballroom. He was going to sculpt it in the basement and wanted us to provide the base on which it would sit.

As we discussed fabric for skirting the base and the drip pans that would have to be fabricated, I perused the construction drawings of the hotel. I asked him what the dimensions of the sculpture were and noted that there were no elevators big enough to

accommodate it and that the doors were too small to allow access out of the basement. He told us that that would be our problem. Not seeing a solution to this problem, we declined the project.

Several months later I watched a late-hour news program in which the humorous closing piece was about the grand opening of this hotel and the giant ice sculpture that no one could get out of the basement. The picture faded as the piece was being destroyed and tossed in the gutter to melt.

Remember to design with not only the end result in mind but the steps and spaces in between as well.

Let us consider simply the impact of space in this example; cultural and other elements are discussed in Chapter 15, *Wonderful Weddings*. A wedding is a celebration. The bride is the focus, and the intent is for the guests to have a good time and create a memorable experience of her day. Too much space can defeat this purpose by allowing people to stay too far apart. To correct this, one can design enough seating for half the people and provide standing tables for the rest. This will result in greater interaction. (This is the case when age demographics allow; a mature crowd requires a larger seating allowance of two-thirds or three-quarters of the total guests. A mature crowd will contain a larger number of people who cannot stand long because of physical impairments.) If the family insists on seating everyone, the reception needs to be a seated dinner with all the ritual and ceremony that a seated dinner entails (see Chapter 14).

If we put the reception in a space that is just big enough to house the number of people present, we are putting them in close proximity to one another and encouraging interaction. We can, by design, encourage people to interact with and get to know one another. This is an important element in the design of all events, social or corporate.

Space is a major aesthetic as well as practical influence on all other design elements (see “Event Space Requirements” later in this chapter). Space is important in composition and in balancing the overall picture within the

environment. A decorative item or prop can look out of place if it is too small or too large for the event space. An 18-foot-tall tree, for example, may be in proportion in a ballroom with a 25-foot ceiling but can be cramped and look inappropriate when crammed into a room with a 16-foot ceiling. A prop that is too large can overwhelm the guests or obscure the view, whereas one that is too small for the space can look humorously out of place or simply not be noticed. In either case, it can be a waste of resources and a distraction from the purpose of the event.

The number of attendees must be known so that the appropriate space is available to accommodate them and the entertainment and activities desired within the floor plan. When one is planning a social function such as a wedding reception, the guest list needs to be made in advance of selecting a venue, or the venue will control the guest list. In doing a corporate reception as part of a conference or convention, it is often difficult to estimate the number of guests who will attend. It is important to make every effort to control attendance through invitations, tickets, or RSVs so that neither too many nor too few guests show up. Keeping an attendance history will be extremely valuable for future events.

## FLOW

Flow is the movement of the guests or attendees within the event environment. All events must allow entrance (ingress) and exit (egress) space. All events require enough space for efficient flow of the guests into the room and to and from the buffets, dance floor, rest rooms, and any other spaces for activities. The design of the flow can encourage or discourage access to each element, depending on the goals and objectives of the event and the needs and requirements of the guests.

### EVENT SPACE REQUIREMENTS

Note: The dimensions given here are a rule of thumb for preliminary site selection. The dimensions shown do not allow for buffets, dance floor and bandstand, special audiovisual requirements, or other special activities. They also do not take into account local, state, or national ordinances or codes.

Theatrical or auditorium-style seating	7–10 sq. ft. per person
Schoolroom-style seating (at 18" tables)	7–10 sq. ft. per person
Banquet-style seating (at 60" round tables)	10–12½ sq. ft. per person
(at 72" round tables)	12–14½ sq. ft. per person
(at 8' banquet tables)	10 sq. ft. per person
Cocktail receptions	10 sq. ft. per person
Trade shows and exhibit floors	160–200 sq. ft. per booth
Exhibit floors	Double total booth footage for aisles

Any event that includes an activity requires the design of traffic patterns that will enhance and encourage flow to and around that activity. For example, in a fund-raising event with a silent auction, the most effective place to put the display is in the paths between the tables to the bars and the tables to the rest rooms. This increases the exposure of the auction and encourages impulse bidding and buying.

Popular entertainment activities such as sketch artists and souvenir photo shoots require enough space for the activity, plus room to accommodate a line of people waiting to participate. Placement of the activity and identification (signs, props, a subfocus) will increase visibility and encourage participation. Also, there must be an exit route for people who have completed the activity.

Most people involved in events understand that it is a mistake to place the bars close to the entrance or the check-in tables, as that area becomes crowded and congested. If you want to move people into the room, place the bars or other attractive entertainment or giveaways far enough into the room to draw people in.

Flow is best planned through the use of scale floor plans or ground plans, which are discussed in detail in Chapter 2, *Design and Decoration Practices*. We can, by design, move people throughout an area for the duration of an event.

## BASIC AESTHETIC PRINCIPLES

We see a beautiful sunset or a majestic view of the Alps, and it pleases or awes us. A common and effective approach in designing events is to reproduce naturally pleasing scenes as either representational or abstract copies of the real world. Certain places, artifacts, and cultural icons can be replicated to inspire us, such as the Lincoln Memorial or a waving flag. Primal elements preceding civilized history may influence our aesthetics: fear of fire, survival, and sexual and emotional elements. Audio design can make use of rhythms ranging from the orgasmic pounding heartbeat to the soothing sounds of a sleeping baby's breathing.

Still, we largely learn our aesthetic values. In Western civilization these values are rooted in the Hellenic Greeks and the Italian Renaissance and flow from the great masters of painting and sculpture to the Impressionists and abstract expressionists. The masters and schools of fine arts provide inspiration and aesthetic direction for modern event decorators.

Current schools of design can provide aesthetic direction, inspiration, and contrainspiration. Popular styles of design spring from traditional schools or the current "in" designer of fashion, interiors, floral stylists, or architecture. It is common for a current fad to impact our sense of aesthetics in event design. All media relating to culture and lifestyle are a source for what is happening in design. Traditional or classical design elements are always in style, but

## Idea Portfolio

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## INSPIRATION FROM MASTERS

Master artists can also provide direct ideas and concepts. Sally Dillon, the noted textile artist, designed a wonderful modern art theme party in the 1970s for Bill Reed Decorations.

Among many modern art takeoffs was a replica of Wyeth's "Christina," a wonderful magic realism painting of a young, fragile girl lying on the ground, staring at her house on the horizon, only the back of her head and body visible in the yellow grass. It was painted

14 feet tall by 24 feet wide. The only difference from the original (other than the monumental size) was that the subject, Christina, was lying in the grass looking at a bottle of Coca-Cola rising on the horizon, thus combining Andrew Wyeth and Andy Warhol.

The classical and modern masters of fine art are a major resource for the event designer.

events are both current and transitory, and it may be appropriate to reflect a current trend or fad in event design.

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## PRACTICAL AESTHETIC PRINCIPLES

The aesthetic practices that influence design have been developed from experience, study, and history. The following is a rudimentary discussion of principles that work.

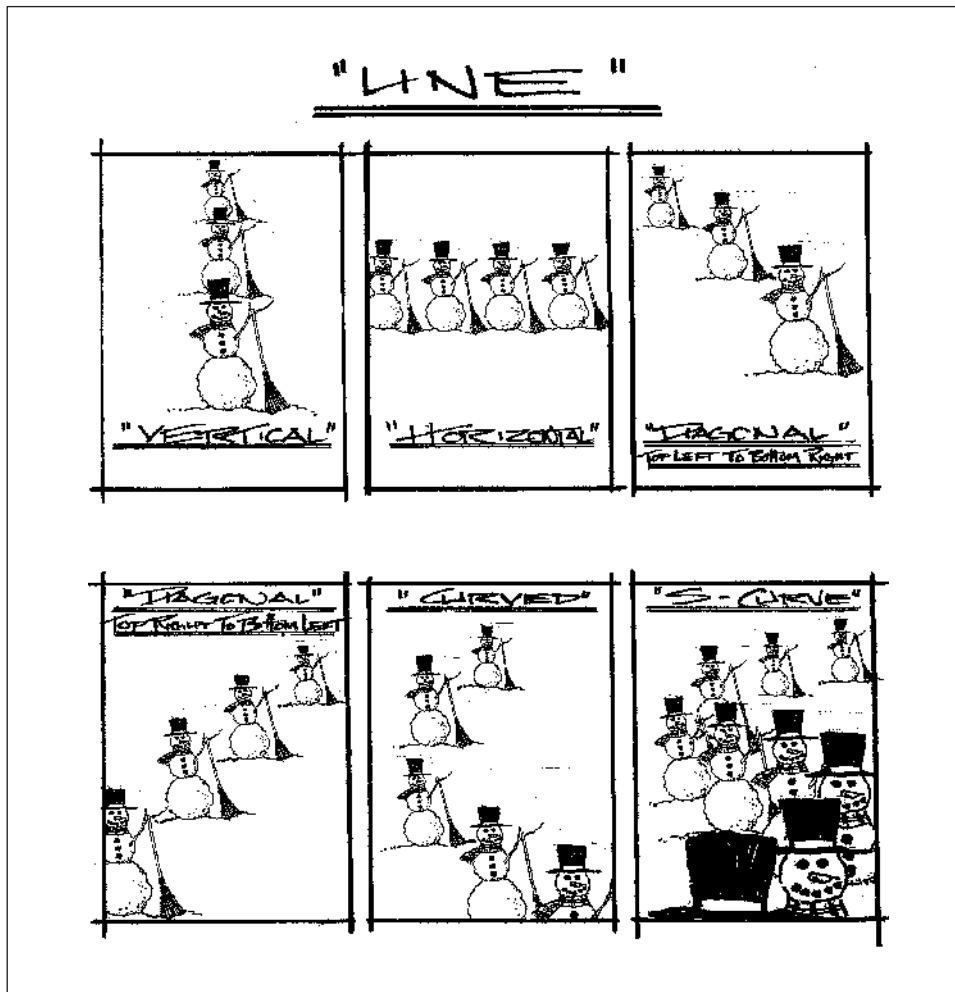
### LINE

**Line** is a basic element that can be used to reinforce a message, feeling, or atmosphere in the décor on a stage or at any focal point of a room or venue. Line is a two-dimensional representation of composition that is created by the placement of identical elements or, more subtly, through arrangement of different but dominant elements so that one can draw a line straight through them and see a vertical, horizontal, or **diagonal movement** or direction (see Figure 1-2).

A **vertical line** can be elegant or dominant, while a **horizontal line** tends to be calming and peaceful. A **diagonal line** tends to express dynamics or tension.

In traditional Western art, a line from upper left to lower right expresses a tension but feels proper, whereas a diagonal line from upper right to lower left creates an irritating tension.





**Figure 1-2**

Curved lines can commonly be used to increase tension or interest or to diffuse tension, depending on whether they form a convex curve (crescent) or a concave curve. A crescent from upper left to lower right has a calming effect, whereas a reverse curve from upper right, over the center, to lower left can be very “in your face.” An S curve generally softens the impact of the general line it follows but can add overall interest.

Any **visual picture**—of a stage, through a door or portal, or framed by architectural or natural boundaries—can be enhanced by attention to line (see Figure 1-3).

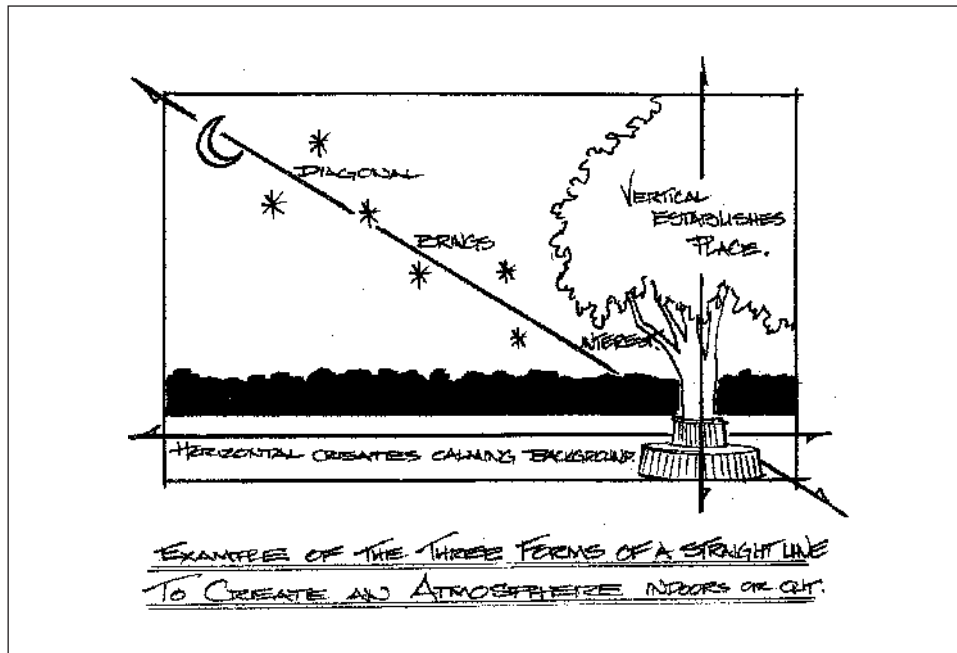


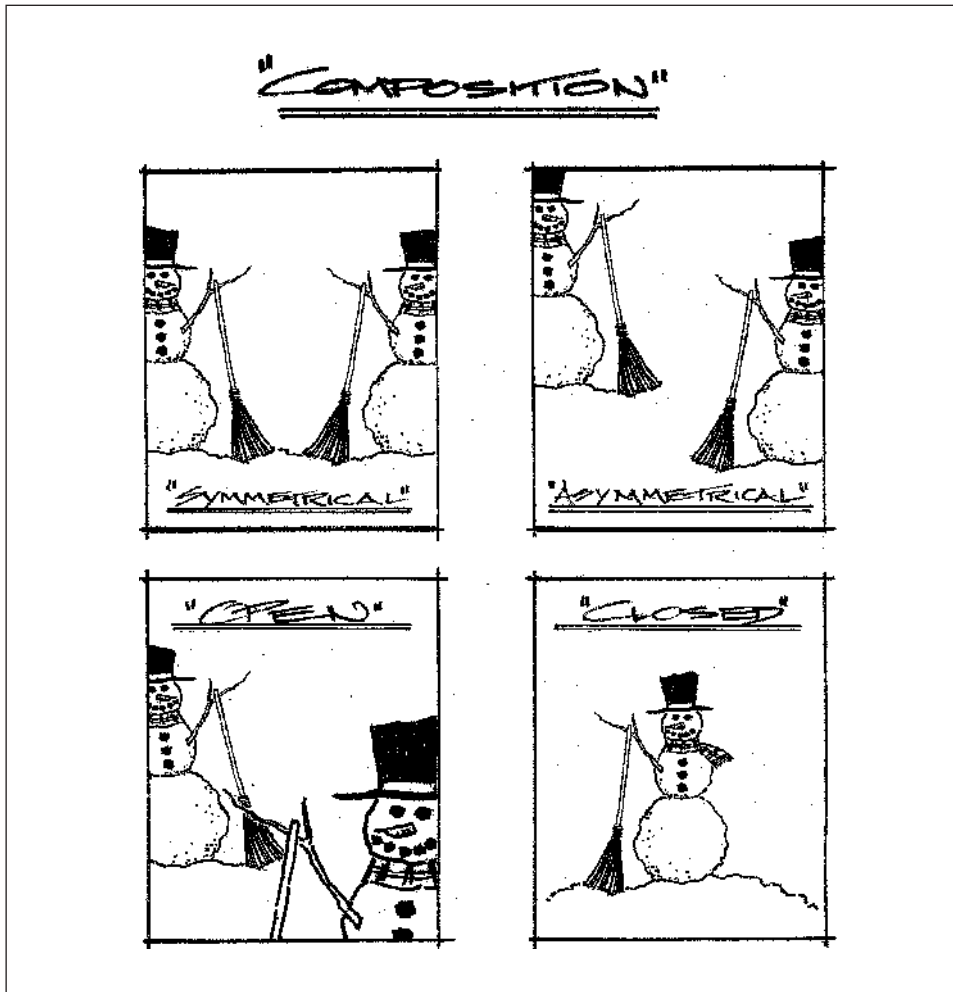
Figure 1-3

## COMPOSITION

**Composition** is the placement or arrangement of items and elements within a field of vision to create an artistic whole. The basic forms of composition are **symmetrical** and **asymmetrical**, **open** and **closed**, as illustrated in Figure 1-4. In symmetrical composition, the elements are balanced equally, left to right and top to bottom. This tends to evoke harmonious, relaxing feelings. In asymmetrical composition, one area is loaded with an impact element balancing against the rest of the entire visual picture. The image is off balance, and the result is dynamic, creating a tension between the elements. This generates interest and can be emotionally unsettling.

Whether a composition is symmetrical or asymmetrical, the eye is drawn to the top. In Western cultures, where reading is typically from left to right, the upper left corner is where the eye begins. (Asiatic cultures, where reading is from right to left, frequently start at the upper right.) Traditional composition in Western art is structured from the upper left and tends to incorporate horizontal rather than vertical separations. A horizon is a natural example.

*Closed composition* includes all the compositional elements within the framework of the picture, whereas in *open composition* the visual picture spills out of those boundaries. Open composition is the original “out of the



**Figure 1-4**

box” design element. Closed composition, like symmetrical composition, is settled and solid; open composition extends the viewers’ imagination beyond the current moment.

## COLOR

Of all of the elements of design, the most has been written and discussed regarding color. The average human eye can discern the differences between 250,000 different hues, and some people with particularly good color definition can distinguish up to 600,000. This makes the verbal description of colors a daunting task.

In simplistic terms, colors are characterized as **primary** and **secondary colors**, **complimentary** and **contrasting colors**, **pure** and **blended colors**, and **warm** and **cool colors**. The relationships between primary and secondary colors are represented sometimes by a color wheel and sometimes by a triangle. The triangle comes closer to their actual relationship on a graph of the spectrum (see Figure 1-5).

The primary colors are red, yellow, and blue. They can be blended to create the secondary colors: red and yellow create orange, blue and red create purple, blue and yellow create green. Colors opposite to one another in Figure 1-5 are called contrasting colors; colors adjacent to one another are called complimentary. Contrasting colors provide dramatic attention, creating impact, whereas complimentary colors generally elicit peaceful, harmonious responses.

Pure colors are basic and generate basic responses from viewers and guests, such as happy laughter. Blended colors mix two or more colors to achieve a more subdued color that is more likely to be appropriate for serious corporate events.

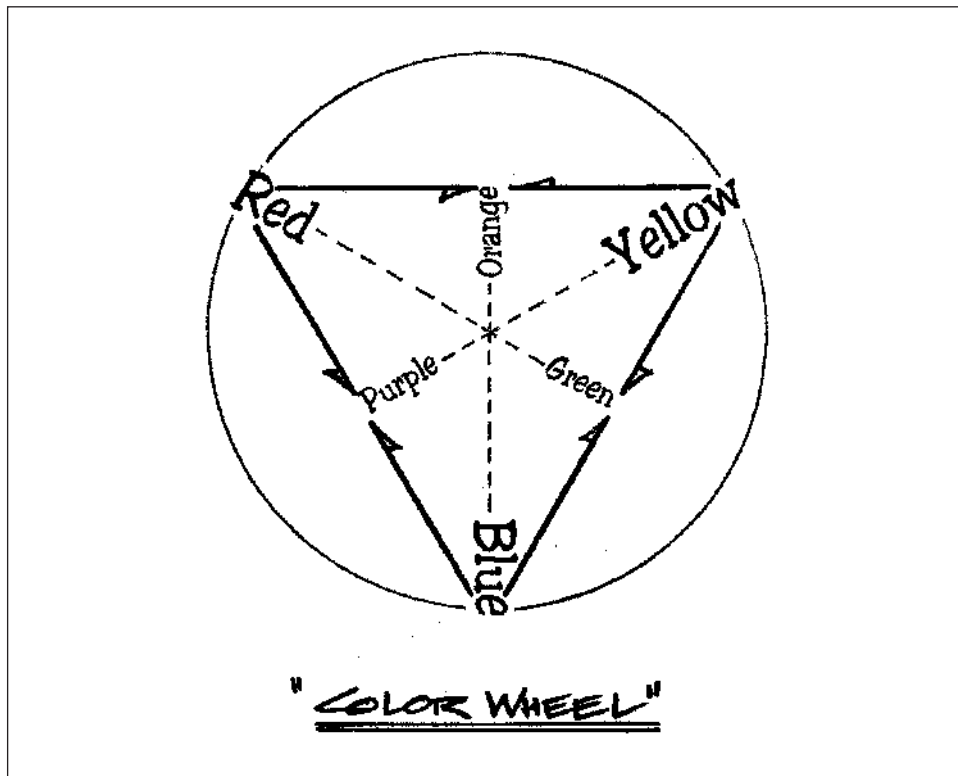


Figure 1-5

Warm and cool colors are so basic that everybody knows that the cools are the blues and greens and the warm colors are red, yellow, and orange. Their emotional impact is equally well understood, whether this is cultural or is created by species or environmental conditions. Different colors have a different emotional impact in different cultures: White, for example, is the color of funerals in India, and red is the color of Joy in China.

A poorly understood aspect of color differences is that the human eye is focused on the red end of the spectrum and has trouble focusing clearly on blue. Add to that the fact that blue pigments are more difficult to create and have lower light transmission and reflectance coefficients, and the cool end of the spectrum can be hard to achieve effectively.

## TEXTURE

In many cases, what separates professional design and decoration from amateur attempts is attention to **texture**. Viewed texture can produce a pleasing finished look by replicating surfaces found in the real world. Fabric texture can elicit feelings, such as the hard smooth texture of satin made rich by falling in folds or the inherently rich texture of velour giving a warm ambience to the environment.

Texture, or modeling the surface of decorations, can be “real” or “faux.” Real texturing can be natural to the surface (wood grain) or added to the surface (plaster texture). Oblique lighting (from the side, bottom, or top) enhances the effects of real texture by casting shadows on the surface. Faux texturing uses any number of scene painter or mural artist techniques. These techniques include faux wood graining, sponge painting, spattering, and even texturing with a feather duster.

### Idea Portfolio

## NOT BLUE ENOUGH!

Many years ago, when I was lighting the *Nutcracker* ballet for the Fort Worth Ballet, the artistic director complained that the opening of the second act was not blue enough. Between rehearsals, more, higher-wattage lights with darker blue gel were added, but he would not be pleased.

During the second rehearsal a miscue resulted in pink side lighting being added to the

stage picture. “That’s it!” the director shouted. “That’s perfect!”

To achieve a feeling of cool blue, it was necessary to add a warm accent to relieve the eye and provide a counterpoint to the blue wash.

## Idea Portfolio

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## UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL

The texture of the linens, drapes, and other environmental elements that the guests touch and interact with has a big impact on their perception and experience of the event. Never order linens without sitting at a table and experiencing your bodily interaction with them.

Most tablecloths will profit from a table pad, and some absolutely require it.

Never order napkins without having one in hand and trying it out on the lips. Some vi-

sually beautiful napkins have an unappealing texture. White linen napkins are always acceptable.

Never order drapes, draping, or skirting material without having it in hand to see how it drapes and experience its visual and tactile texture. Look at it under the simulated lighting of the event.

The texture must be appropriate to the setting, season, and occasion.

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## DESIGN AND GLOBAL EVENT MANAGEMENT

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“All successful events have five critical stages in common to ensure their consistent effectiveness. These five phases or steps of successful event management are *research, design, planning, coordination* and *evaluation*.” This is stated in *Special Events: Event Leadership for a New World* by Dr. Joe Goldblatt. He calls this the Guideline for Effective Event Production. This guideline relates directly to the effective design and decoration of events. A brief discussion of these five steps as they relate to design and decoration follows.

### RESEARCH

The goals and objectives of the event are determined through research, as are the needs and expectations of the **stakeholders**. Major research is properly the realm of the event manager and often involves a needs assessment and an extensive analysis. The research required and the best methods for implementing it vary widely, depending on the event type, style, and client requirements (see Chapter 4, *Resources*).

For the design process, interviewing the client or event manager may provide enough information, but researching the company or the social status or cultural background of the client can yield valuable results.

### DESIGN

Design is the creation of the environment to satisfy the needs of the stakeholders and attendees, meeting the goals and achieving the objectives of the event. Design and decoration are the topic of this book, along with where

the event designer fits most appropriately into the process of effective event production.

## PLANNING

The planning phase of event management follows design and deals with managing historically limited resources, including finances, time, and human resources (see Figure 1-6).

The design must fit within the budget that has been allotted, or the budget must be revised and additional finances secured. Time directly affects the design, as limited production and **I&D (installation and dismantle)** time will limit what can be done. Staff is ultimately the most important resource: the talents and abilities of the event management and design team.

## COORDINATION

Coordination is the execution of the event management plan. Interpreting the design through the decorations is properly a function of coordination. Design and decorations are closely related and rarely are developed totally separately.

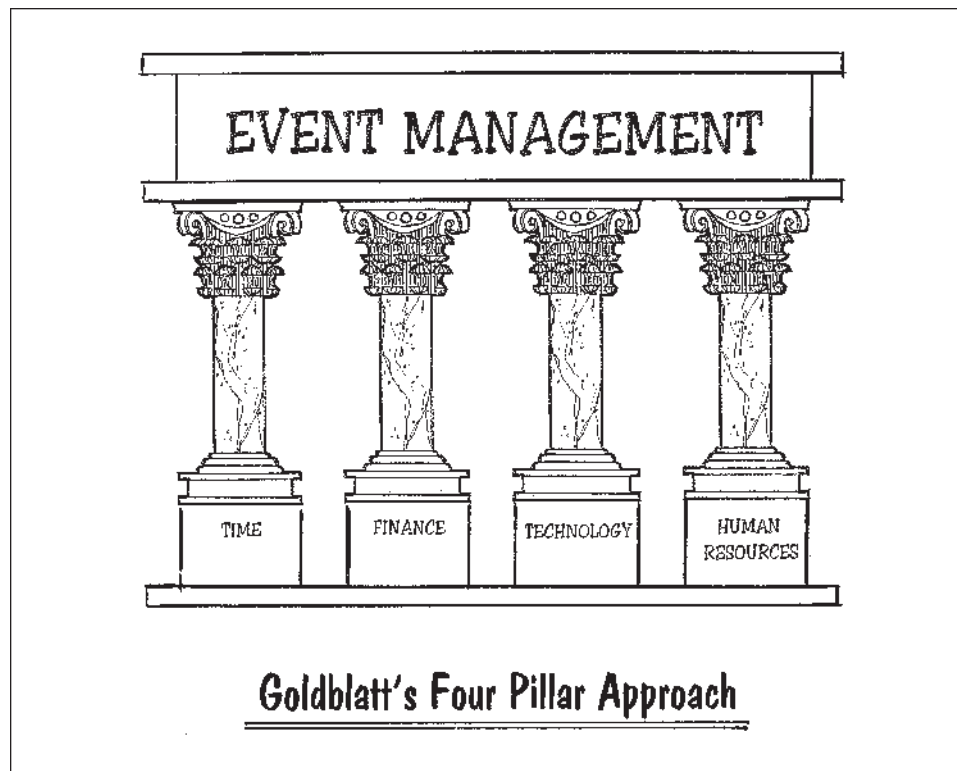


Figure 1-6

True synergy is most often achieved as the design concept is executed in the physical manifestation of the decorations, including props, flowers, fabric, and lighting. These functional components are discussed in practical detail in Part Two, *The Decorative Elements*.

## EVALUATION

One of the primary resources the event designer and decorator have is history and experience. Post-cons (the after-event wrap-up meeting), surveys, and other evaluation tools that are critical to the success of the design and decoration of future special events will be discussed in Chapter 2, *Design and Decoration Practices*.

## FINISHING TOUCHES

The tips, aesthetic guidelines, and rules discussed in this chapter really work; their success is objective and measurable. However, in practice they can be successfully and effectively ignored or violated. That is one of the reasons designing events is so much fun.

I do not know a single professional designer who sits down when doing every event and follows the Guideline for Effective Event Production number by number. However, I know a couple who would do a better job for their clients if they did, and this is a reliable approach for the beginning or the volunteer event designer. As I studied event design as a discipline, years into a successful professional career, I discovered that our company usually follows this procedure. We evolved into following these steps naturally because it is the right way to manage an event.

## DESIGN VOCABULARY

Terms appear below in the order in which they first occur in this chapter.

Event design	Visual picture
Decoration	Composition
Multidisciplinary craft	Symmetrical composition
Synergy	Asymmetrical composition
Goals and objectives of the event	Open composition
Audioscaping	Closed composition
Line	Primary colors
Diagonal movement	Secondary colors
Vertical line	Complimentary colors
Horizontal line	Contrasting colors
Diagonal line	Pure colors



Blended colors  
Warm colors  
Cool colors

Texture  
Stakeholders  
I&D (installation and dismantle)

## STUDIO WORK

1. In an art book of your choosing, select reproductions of paintings or photos and with tracing paper draw the line you see in each image.
2. In an art book of your choosing, locate reproductions of paintings or photos and pick examples of open composition and closed composition.
3. In a short (one-page) essay, describe your understanding of how space and flow can effect focus in an event.

## RECOMMENDED READINGS AND RESEARCH SITES

Eiseman, Leatrice, *PANTONE Guide to Communicating with Color*, Design Books International, 2000.

Goldblatt, Joe, *Special Events: Event Leadership for a New World*, John Wiley & Sons, 2004.

Riley, Noel, ed., *Elements of Design: A Practical Encyclopedia of the Decorative Renaissance to the Present*, Simon & Schuster, 2003.

Tansey, Richard G., Fred S. Kleiner, and Christin J. Mamiya, *Gardner's Art through the Ages*, Harcourt, 2001.

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The Alphabet of Art: The Robert J. McKnight Memorial Web Site, by Robert J. McKnight and Jack Massa  
[www.guidancecom.com/alphabet/authors.htm](http://www.guidancecom.com/alphabet/authors.htm)

Composition and Design: Elements and Principles, by Marvin Bartel  
[www.goshen.edu/art/ed/Compose.htm](http://www.goshen.edu/art/ed/Compose.htm)

