



Studying and even isolating the desires that can often spur new trends in design, Genty Marshall looks closely at the social factors that are shaping our personal spaces and inspiring our designers today. As she explains, a shared table is enough to explore how communities and personal relationships are challenging old conventions, offering a new sense of charm in simple solutions. It's a fresh cultural perspective in design, but the origins are of olden times.



Nostalgia. Shine Shine (fabrics) shot in the context of cultural inspiration. Styled and distributed by Emily Ziz (Australia).

WE ARE FAMILY

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It is predicted that within the next 20 years, over 30 percent of homes within Australia will be single-person households. Amazing and odd as that might sound, the reality is this startling shift, already underway, is having profound effects on our built environment – both interiors and exteriors – and on the social cohesion of our cities and suburbs.

In this sort of context, asking the question, “who is family?” becomes increasingly difficult to answer with a simple, or single, definition.

The nuclear family, the single-parent family and the extended family are being augmented by the idea of families of friends, shared homes, cohabiters and community clusters. Typically seen as an option only for students, single adults of all ages are beginning to opt for the social, practical and economical benefits of a more communal-style living environment.

As a result, our daily routines and the allocation of tasks are open for discussion as traditional roles of gender, familial hierarchy and cultural rituals are negotiated in these open and shared spaces. Urbanism gurus and interior architects are now rising to the challenge to meet the personal, societal and environmental demands of these new collectives. More importantly, the demand reflects a fundamental desire of the human being: a sense of place and welcomed embrace.

Flexibility and customisation are not new in this case – they've been imperatives in design for a number of years as these needs have emerged – but what we're seeing now is a new requirement for personalisation within the home as a shared and common space for not just one but several people. The

need for the acknowledgement of moments of personal or family significance must find new expression through new rituals. It is here that we see examples such as the revival and personal adaptation of non-religious ceremonies such as ‘high tea’.

There is a sense of security that comes with personal ritual and personal place, from having your special things: a plate as a child (Bunnykins in my case) to the simple pleasure of enjoying the same café and sitting in the same seat. We might even take things a bit further and put ourselves in the place of another human being, and what their sense of place is. Imagine that. Are there common elements? Call it monotony, but it's our habitual nature as humans to want this sort of comfort with the things that surround us, and to share it with others.

As designers aim to address this human need, a striking trend is seen in the production of ‘families’ of objects: sets of chairs, glassware, ornamental décor and general household items that both unite and distinguish at the same time.

In a country where mixed-faith and multicultural partnerships are common, cultural traditions are often transformed to suit new relationships. It is important to each of us that our rituals of faith – whether they be personal or that of organised religion – do not erode completely. As a result, the personal interpretation of traditions, symbolism, manners and meanings are creating a variable patchwork of personal styles and influences and can be seen in both what we celebrate and how we do so. The revival of the ‘Biergarten’ concept (increasingly becoming ubiquitous outside of Bavaria), for example, reflects a social trend of humility, yet colourful and playful at the same time.



Brother Baba Budan on Little Bourke Street (Melbourne).
Photo by Mark Chew.

Collective families are starting new rituals, hybrids of what remains significant to them, sometimes from nostalgia but more often to express values they believe are worth celebrating for this day and age.

Fascinated by both our similarities and differences, many designers are finding ways to explore this contradiction. In her work for Shine Shine, textile designer Heidi Chisholm draws upon events and icons of commemorative, political and religious significance in a positive celebration of contemporary Africa.

Objects are a familiar aid in the sharing of stories and we have seen a number of pieces emerge that reference an event and popular narrative, as well as some nostalgic associations. Taking this a step further, contemporary designers are also embodying this in the very way their work is conceived and created.

In the furniture range 'Seating For Eating' (designed by StudioIlse), Ilse Crawford has designed a collection of casual dining furniture that seems to not only consider but actually directly responds to this desire, if we wish to call it a trend, for social connection. The furniture is not just flexible to variable family structures and events, but calls for interaction through its very design. The seating chosen for the series (benches, settles and stools) does away with formal arrangements and forces interaction as people leave and join the table.

In contrast to the traditional chair, which has been the classic object of choice for many contemporary designers (from Alessandro Mendini to Tord Boontje) – which is technically for a sole occupant by definition – the table is a shared space, and a suitable metaphor for the social and personal changes that are clearly upon us.

The work of StudioIlse is part of a movement within design that is drawing upon the language of traditional furniture. This

understanding of how people connect and interact with each other in relation to the objects around them can be seen most through the rise in popularity of the shared table.

Cafés were one of the first and most logical places to have embraced the continuous long table. From ABC Home in New York to 1001 in Brick Lane, accidental encounters are endorsed. Having become so used to it in just a few years, it is easy to forget how recent this movement is.

Using the traditional kitchen table as a way to encourage natural interaction has also spilled out into all areas of design. Beyond hospitality, interior designers are using this piece of furniture in projects ranging from corporate workplace environments to cancer resource centres. No matter what the project is, the common aims are to make those who are alone feel less conspicuous and to enable people to connect and interact.

In the home, the shared table symbolises the heart of the family. And as the family is redefined, this silent witness to our celebrations, conversations and intimate moments, the common table is more important than ever. Around it we are defined by our contribution rather than our formally implied roles. As we gather and collect our ideas, sharing our concerns and the uniqueness of our own stories, the modern family (however you wish to define it) is accepted and celebrated in this charming, old-fashion way. Join us. **(inside)**

A Shared Table seminar and exhibition was presented by design analyst and forecaster, Genty Marshall, for Decoration + Design, Sydney 2011.

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