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CURTAIN CALL

Not just for windows, curtains are increasingly being used as dynamic, architectural devices.

Here, two pioneers of the textile trend tell Claudia Baillie why versatile drapes are their design tool of choice



Petra Blaisse's design firm, Inside Outside, changes the quality of a space with curtains in a private house near Amsterdam (left) and a French villa (right). Photos: Courtesy of Inside Outside

"The appeal for me lies in the drape of the cloth," says British-born Dutch designer Petra Blaisse, whose team at multidisciplinary studio Inside Outside are masters at using curtains as architectural tools. "How its character changes when in movement," she continues, "and the theatrical and technical effects that fabric can create." It's an area of expertise that her innovative practice has pioneered over the years and, as a result, its dynamic, site-specific work, designed to transform and reinvent the locations in which it sits, can be found in museums, theaters, offices, hotels, and a wealth of other public spaces around the globe.

Blaisse, a former collaborator of architect Rem Koolhaas and OMA (Office for Metropolitan Architecture) also works in residential homes, which, she says, require a specialist approach.



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"Smaller spaces, personal tastes, habits, privacy needs, and the views outward and in—there are many issues that influence the concept for a private place," she explains.

A case in point is the studio's latest residential project, located on a polder (a tract of land reclaimed from the sea) not far from Amsterdam. A new structure with glazed facades facing south and west, the studio was asked to provide light-regulating, area-defining curtains for the living, dining, and open kitchen spaces. The team installed two curtains, easily moved by hand, which when adjusted alter both the atmosphere and the layout. "The white taffeta has a reflective lining and isn't completely opaque, which creates a vibrant surface that plays with light," says Blaisse. "Every movement of the adjacent lake is reflected and every passerby casts a shadow." In contrast, a dark blue swathe of blackout-lined silk features a circular gauze window that frames the exterior landscape. Both are edged with a "frame" that mimics that of a painting.

Another designer for whom curtains are an invaluable device is London-based Hubert Zandberg, who cleverly integrates structured drapes into his smart, decorative projects. From sectioning hallways and covering front doors, French bistro style, to screening off kitchens, office nooks, and wardrobes—particularly in pied-à-terres where door swing space is limited—curtains are a versatile tool in his professional interior design kit.

"What I love is that they bridge the gap between architecture and interior design," he says. "Curtains create a sense of arrival, suspense, and discovery while adding color and pattern in a less overpowering way that wallpaper might. You can control how much pattern you see, depending on how open or closed they are, so curtains can also become quite abstract, with literally just two columns framing an opening. Then there's the softening of acoustics and with lower ceilings, an increased sense of height."

The feeling of luxury that fabric can bring, even via the most minimal of curtains, is something that Zandberg relishes, too. "You can completely change the mood of a room, which is really quite extraordinary," he continues. "Especially in a smaller space they create a glamorous, gift-box vibe, and the beauty is, if you decide to move, you can always take them with you."



From far left: The dining room of an Elgin Crescent townhouse, designed by Hubert Zandberg; Zandberg uses curtains to create a nook inside a Berlin apartment. Photos: Courtesy of Simon Upton