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The Role of Strategic Planning in Client-Centred Interior Spaces

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Abstract: This study explores the pivotal role of strategic planning in shaping client-centred interior spaces, emphasising how structured design foresight enhances user satisfaction, functional coherence, and emotional resonance. Drawing on a qualitative research approach, the study synthesises insights from interviews, case analyses, and design literature to understand how planning processes align aesthetic aspirations with client needs and project constraints. The findings reveal that strategic planning functions as both a managerial and creative framework, facilitating participatory engagement, adaptive flexibility, and sustainable outcomes. By integrating digital tools, behavioural insights, and collaborative communication, designers can transform client visions into personalised spatial experiences. The theoretical framework, grounded in human-centred and reflective practice theories, underscores planning as an iterative, co-creative process linking empathy, innovation, and accountability. Ultimately, the research demonstrates that strategic planning is not merely procedural but transformative—bridging design intent and lived experience to produce spaces that embody both functionality and meaning. Recommendations highlight participatory design methods, emotional intelligence, and sustainability integration as key pathways for future practice.

Keywords: strategic planning, interior design, client-centred spaces, human-centred design, qualitative research.

1. Introduction

In contemporary interior design practice, the focus has shifted beyond aesthetic treatment to an emphasis on user experience, flexibility, and alignment with organisational or personal goals (IED, 2024). Human-centred interior design places occupants' physical, psychological, and emotional needs at the heart of design decisions, including elements such as lighting, acoustics, ergonomics, adaptability, and well-being.

However, translating these user-centred ambitions into built reality often calls for more than ad hoc interventions; it demands a coherent planning process that aligns client objectives, user needs, spatial constraints, and future change. Strategic planning in interior design—though less discussed than in urban planning or organisational strategy—is emerging as a key vehicle for aligning spatial outcomes with client and user imperatives (DC&T, 2023).

This article explores the role of strategic planning in creating client-centred interior spaces. By “client-centred,” we mean spaces designed in deliberate response to the client's functional needs, identity, and user-experience goals (and where “client” may be an organisation or individual). The research asks: How does strategic planning influence the design and delivery of client-centred interior spaces?

In answering this, the article develops a theoretical framework linking strategic planning theory (including visioning, stakeholder engagement, programming, and adaptation) and human-centred design

principles; it then uses a qualitative method to explore perceptions and practices among interior-design professionals and their clients. The results point to particular planning practices that contribute to enhanced outcomes in client-centred design. Finally, the article discusses practical implications and suggests directions for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Strategic Planning in the Design Context

Strategic planning, originally conceptualised in management and organisational studies, refers to the systematic process of defining long-term objectives, aligning resources, and developing actionable steps to achieve a shared vision (Bryson, 2018; Mintzberg, 1994). Within the built environment, strategic planning has evolved beyond administrative tools into dynamic design instruments that shape physical space according to user and client aspirations (Ackoff, 1981). In interior design, this approach integrates foresight, stakeholder collaboration, and adaptability to create functional, aesthetic, and human-centred spaces (Yousaf, 2024).

In contrast to traditional linear design models, strategic planning introduces an iterative and reflexive framework where data, user behaviour, and contextual factors guide spatial decisions (Tzortzopoulos & Cooper, 2007). Interior architects increasingly recognise that design outcomes are most effective when grounded in a structured planning process that connects the client's strategic vision with tangible spatial

interventions (Caan, 2011). For instance, in workplace design, strategic planning processes—such as workplace mapping and spatial programming—help designers align interior configurations with organisational culture, communication patterns, and performance goals (Vischer, 2008; Holland Design, 2023).

According to DC&T (2023), strategic design within interiors differs from traditional decoration-oriented practices because it synthesises business strategy, user needs, and operational efficiency. This integration helps organisations view interior environments not as passive settings but as strategic assets that communicate brand identity and influence productivity. Similarly, Gann and Salter (2000) argue that spatial strategies, when guided by structured planning, create measurable value for clients through operational efficiency, adaptability, and employee well-being. These insights position strategic planning as a bridge between managerial decision-making and the spatial design process, enhancing both user experience and long-term functionality.

2.2. Human- and Client-Centred Interior Design

Human-centred design (HCD) emerged as a paradigm emphasising empathy, user participation, and iterative problem-solving (Norman, 2013; IDEO, 2015). In interior architecture, this translates to spaces that prioritise user comfort, accessibility, psychological well-being, and adaptability (Vischer & Zeisel, 2008). The International School of Design (IED, 2024) defines human-centred interior design as one that

integrates ergonomics, inclusivity, and sensory experience to produce environments that nurture emotional and cognitive health.

Client-centred design extends the HCD philosophy by positioning the client organisation or individual as a co-creator throughout the design process. Rather than imposing a top-down design solution, the process becomes dialogic—clients articulate needs, designers interpret and translate them into spatial form, and users provide feedback through iterative loops (Holland Design, 2023). Research by Poldma (2010) shows that when clients and designers collaborate in defining project goals and values early in the process, the resulting interiors exhibit stronger coherence between functional requirements and identity expression.

This participatory and iterative approach has also been associated with higher satisfaction and ownership among clients and end-users (Sanders & Stappers, 2014). For example, user-centred co-living environments designed through participatory workshops were shown to promote community cohesion, spatial flexibility, and inclusivity (Pardo & Del Bello, 2021). Similarly, retail and hospitality interiors that embody the client's brand ethos—achieved through collaborative briefing and strategic space planning—demonstrate increased customer engagement and loyalty (Spankie, 2018).

2.3. Intersections of Strategic Planning and Client-Centred Design

Despite parallel developments, few studies have directly examined how strategic planning mechanisms underpin client-

centred interior outcomes. The intersection of these concepts suggests a symbiotic relationship: strategic planning provides a process framework for achieving client-centred design goals, while client-centred design offers content and criteria for evaluating the success of planning decisions (Caan, 2011; Poldma, 2010).

Recent scholarship views the interior environment as a dynamic system where planning, design, and evaluation form an ongoing feedback loop (Vischer, 2008). Within this system, strategic visioning translates client goals into actionable spatial strategies; stakeholder engagement ensures alignment between users, designers, and investors; and post-occupancy evaluation provides data for future planning (Horgen et al., 1999). Studies of post-occupancy evaluation reveal that projects with structured planning phases show higher adaptability and user satisfaction over time (Preiser & Nasar, 2008).

Strategic planning in interiors also responds to global shifts such as hybrid work models, sustainability, and rapid technological change. Planning stages increasingly include scenario analysis and future-proofing strategies to ensure spaces remain flexible and responsive (Vischer & Zeisel, 2008; Holland Design, 2023). This anticipatory orientation aligns closely with Ackoff's (1981) principle of "interactive planning," which advocates designing systems that continuously learn and adapt.

In sum, literature across disciplines reveals that strategic planning and client-centred interior design converge in their shared focus

on visioning, participation, and adaptability. Yet, there remains a research gap concerning how these planning principles concretely translate into spatial and experiential outcomes. Addressing this gap provides both theoretical enrichment and practical insights for interior design professionals seeking to operationalise client-centred philosophies through structured planning mechanisms.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Conceptual Foundations

The theoretical framework guiding this study integrates Strategic Planning Theory and Human/Client-Centred Design Theory, viewing them as complementary lenses for understanding how design processes can systematically align with client and user needs.

3.2. Strategic Planning Theory

Strategic planning theory conceptualises design as an intentional, goal-oriented, and adaptive process. Ackoff's (1981) theory of interactive planning argues that successful systems must continuously learn, anticipate change, and align internal processes with external conditions. In the design context, this means envisioning the desired future environment, engaging key stakeholders, and developing mechanisms for ongoing feedback and adjustment (Bryson, 2018).

Mintzberg (1994) distinguishes between deliberate and emergent strategies, emphasising that design planning often involves balancing pre-defined client goals with flexible responses to evolving contexts. This iterative balance mirrors the creative

process in interior design, where initial strategic objectives must adapt to user feedback, budgetary shifts, and unforeseen spatial constraints.

In practice, strategic planning in interior projects involves six key phases (adapted from Tzortzopoulos & Cooper, 2007):

- Visioning and Goal Setting – clarifying the long-term purpose and identity the space should express.
- Stakeholder Engagement – involving clients, end-users, and interdisciplinary consultants to build shared ownership.
- Contextual Analysis – studying user behaviours, spatial flow, and environmental conditions.
- Functional Programming – translating abstract goals into spatial and operational requirements.
- Implementation and Adaptation – guiding materialisation, ensuring flexibility for change.
- Evaluation and Learning – assessing performance through post-occupancy evaluation and feedback loops.

This cyclical model of strategic planning aligns with the iterative ethos of design thinking and supports client-centred outcomes through continual reflection and adaptation (Horgen et al., 1999).

3.3. Human- and Client-Centred Design Theory

Human-centred design theory is grounded in empathy, co-creation, and iterative problem-solving (Norman, 2013; IDEO, 2015). In the context of interior architecture, it prioritises

user well-being, functionality, and experiential satisfaction. Central principles include:

- Understanding users' psychological, physiological, and emotional needs.
- Designing inclusively for diverse abilities and cultural contexts.
- Involving users and clients as partners in the design process.
- Ensuring flexibility for evolving needs and technological integration (Poldma, 2010; IED, 2024).

Client-centred theory extends these principles by recognising the organisational client—not just the end-user—as a key actor whose identity, strategy, and culture must be expressed spatially (Spankie, 2018). It asserts that the designer's role is to translate abstract client aspirations into tangible spatial narratives that communicate brand values and foster engagement.

3.4. Integrative Model

Bringing these theories together, the framework posits that strategic planning functions as a mediating mechanism that operationalises client-centred design principles. The relationship can be summarised as follows:

Client/User Imperatives → Strategic Planning Process → Design Implementation → Client-Centred Outcomes

In this model:

- Visioning and stakeholder engagement bridge client intentions and user needs.

- Programming and contextual analysis convert strategic goals into spatial logic.
- Implementation and evaluation ensure adaptability and continuous improvement.

The framework suggests that when strategic planning is conducted with participatory and human-centred methods, interior spaces become more adaptable, identity-driven, and satisfying for users. This integrated perspective extends both theories—demonstrating how strategic foresight and empathetic engagement together produce environments that are functionally efficient, emotionally resonant, and resilient to change.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design

Given the exploratory nature of the topic and emphasis on practitioner perspectives, a qualitative research design was selected. Qualitative methods allow for a rich, in-depth understanding of how strategic planning is actually undertaken and perceived, and how its influence is felt in client-centred design outcomes.

4.2 Sample and Sampling

A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit participants from two groups: (1) interior-design practitioners (designers, project leads) with experience in client-centred interior projects, and (2) clients/organisations who have commissioned interior design projects that emphasised user-experience and strategic planning. In total, 12 participants were

interviewed (8 practitioners, 4 clients). The selection criteria included a minimum of five years of experience/commissioning at least one major interior project.

4.3 Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted, each lasting approximately 45-60 minutes, either in person or via video call. The interview guide included questions on:

- The nature and scope of strategic planning undertaken in the project (visioning, stakeholder workshops, programming).
- How user needs and client identity were factored into planning.
- How the planning influenced design decisions (layout, flexibility, materials, systems).
- Perceived outcomes in terms of user satisfaction, adaptability, and alignment with identity.
- Challenges, barriers, and lessons learned in planning for client-centred interior spaces.

In addition, document analysis of project briefs, space-programming documents, and post-occupancy feedback (where available) complemented interview data.

4.4 Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim. A thematic analysis approach was adopted (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify recurring patterns relating to strategic-planning practices and client-centred outcomes. Coding was conducted in two cycles: first, open codes reflecting planning practices and outcomes; second, axial coding to relate

planning practices to outcomes, guided by the theoretical framework. Documentary material provided triangulation and context.

4.5 Ethical Considerations

Participants were provided with information sheets and consent forms; confidentiality and anonymity were assured. Projects discussed were anonymised (organisational identities removed), and no proprietary documents were shared publicly.

4.6 Trustworthiness

Measures to enhance credibility included member-checking (participants reviewed summaries of their interview transcripts), peer debriefing (researcher discussed emerging themes with a colleague), and triangulation of data sources (interview + documents). Transferability is addressed through a rich description of contexts; dependability is enhanced by an audit trail of coding decisions.

5. Findings

The following themes emerged from analysis of the qualitative data. While the sample is limited, the results provide insights into how strategic planning contributes to client-centred interior design.

Theme 1: Visioning and Stakeholder Engagement

Many practitioners emphasised that early visioning workshops, where clients and users co-create an overarching brief, set the tone for the entire project. One designer noted:

“When we facilitated a half-day workshop with the client team plus user-group representation, we discovered spatial needs and emotional triggers that were invisible in the standard brief.” (Designer A)

Clients reported that such sessions made them feel invested in the process and helped surface latent requirements (e.g., employees’ desire for ‘quiet focus zones’ in addition to open-plan collaboration). This early engagement correlated with smoother decision-making and fewer revisions downstream.

Hence, H1 (that stakeholder engagement leads to higher user satisfaction) appears supported in practitioner perception and client feedback.

Theme 2: Functional Programming and Behavioural Mapping

Another widely reported practice was functional programming combined with behavioural mapping: observing how people moved through existing spaces, identifying bottlenecks or underused zones. One project document described adjacency diagrams and “hot-path” mapping of users. This informed decisions such as locating storage near entry zones, clustering meeting pods adjacent to collaborative zones, and separating focus areas from high-traffic corridors.

Clients reported that the delivered space “just felt right” – furniture and zones were located intuitively. In one post-occupancy comment:

“It’s like the space knows what we do.” (Client C)

These practices aligned with the hypothesis H4.

Theme 3: Future-Proofing and Flexibility

Practitioners stressed that strategic planning included not just current requirements but the projection of future change (e.g., hybrid working, technology changes, organisation growth). This led to design features such as modular furniture, demountable partitions, and flexible power/data infrastructure. One firm described its “plug-and-play floorplate” approach.

Users reported that six months in, the space accommodated new team configurations with minimal disruption. That suggests H2 (planning for adaptability correlates with flexibility) is affirmed.

Theme 4: Identity Alignment and Brand Embodiment

Clients valued when the planning process explicitly translated organisational identity into spatial strategy: defining zones that reflect brand values (e.g., innovation, transparency), selection of materials, use of branding cues, and accent lighting. One client said:

“The moment you walk into the reception, you immediately recognise our culture and our brand.” (Client B)

Designers attributed this to strategic planning: the visioning stage included a brand workshop, and identity keywords were distilled into spatial principles (e.g., “open,

transparent, modular, vibrant”). Consequently, H3 is supported.

Theme 5: Challenges and Tensions

While benefits were many, practitioners also highlighted challenges: tight budgets that constrain early workshops, clients who prefer rapid design sketching over planning sessions, and organisational inertia resisting change despite planning. One designer observed:

“We ran the programming but stopped when we had to submit plans – the client reverted to the old footprint because they were anxious about change.”

Some clients admitted they “feel planning is costly and time-consuming” and prefer jumping directly to concept. But when planning was skipped, user complaints increased (e.g., limited power sockets, awkward furniture arrangement, lack of acoustic privacy).

Thus, the findings emphasise that although strategic planning is beneficial, its application is contingent on client buy-in, budget/time allocation, and organisational readiness.

6. Discussion

The discussion explores how strategic planning functions as a pivotal mechanism in creating client-centred interior spaces. By synthesising qualitative findings and theoretical perspectives, this section unpacks how design strategies align organisational vision, user psychology, sustainability goals, and spatial efficiency with client

expectations. It further contextualises the findings within broader interior architecture scholarship, emphasising the interdependence between design foresight, stakeholder engagement, and adaptive project management.

6.1. Strategic Planning as the Bridge Between Vision and Experience

Strategic planning in interior design acts as a connective framework that translates abstract client visions into tangible spatial experiences (Lawson, 2019). This translation requires balancing aesthetic aspirations with pragmatic constraints such as budget, function, and site conditions. Designers who incorporate a systematic planning process—comprising client consultations, scenario mapping, and iterative prototyping—achieve higher satisfaction levels among users (Guerin & Corgiat, 2020). In this way, planning is not merely logistical but epistemological, as it structures how designers understand, predict, and deliver user needs.

The study's qualitative findings indicate that designers employing long-term strategic frameworks foster stronger emotional resonance between clients and spaces. For instance, iterative visioning sessions—where clients are invited to co-create design briefs—enhance ownership and trust (Norman, 2018). This aligns with human-centred design principles, emphasising empathy, co-creation, and contextual analysis (Brown & Katz, 2019). Thus, strategic planning operates as both a design

philosophy and a managerial technique that bridges creative intuition and client-oriented outcomes.

6.2. Client Participation and Stakeholder Integration

A core finding highlights that strategic planning facilitates inclusive collaboration among clients, designers, and contractors. In client-centred interiors, stakeholder involvement is essential not only for accurate needs assessment but also for sustaining adaptive flexibility throughout project phases (Pressman & Billington, 2021). The participatory dimension ensures that aesthetic preferences and functional requirements are iteratively re-evaluated, allowing for a dynamic refinement of design concepts.

In qualitative interviews, practitioners reported that clients who actively participate in early planning stages tend to perceive the final design as more reflective of their identity and lifestyle (Ulrich, 2020). The participatory design literature supports this outcome, asserting that engagement reduces post-occupancy dissatisfaction and enhances long-term space utilisation (Luck, 2018). Moreover, this collaboration reinforces transparency and accountability, reducing conflicts during the construction and furnishing phases.

However, excessive client involvement can sometimes compromise design coherence when professional judgment is overridden by subjective preferences (Vischer, 2019). Strategic planning thus requires a structured facilitation process that balances user empowerment with professional expertise.

Techniques such as decision matrices, mood boards, and digital visualisation tools help mediate this balance, ensuring that design remains both personalised and conceptually consistent.

6.3. Emotional and Psychological Dimensions of Client-Centred Spaces

Strategic planning extends beyond spatial logistics to encompass emotional and psychological well-being. Research in environmental psychology demonstrates that design decisions—such as lighting, colour, and material selection—profoundly influence user mood, comfort, and identity (Kang & Guerin, 2021). Strategic foresight in these areas helps designers anticipate the affective responses of clients, aligning spatial narratives with individual and cultural meanings (Zeisel, 2020).

The qualitative data revealed that designers who explicitly integrate emotional mapping and behavioural observation into their planning processes produce spaces perceived as more “authentic” and “comforting.” This finding resonates with human-centred theories emphasising the interplay between cognition, behaviour, and spatial perception (Bitner, 2021). Therefore, strategic planning functions as a psychological alignment tool that synchronises environmental stimuli with user expectations and emotional comfort.

6.4. Strategic Flexibility and Adaptive Design Thinking

In the dynamic field of interior design, strategic flexibility has emerged as a critical determinant of success. Designers must

accommodate evolving client needs, emerging technologies, and sustainability imperatives within a coherent planning framework (Norman, 2018). The qualitative insights suggest that adaptability—both in conceptualisation and implementation—is key to sustaining relevance and user satisfaction. This reflects Schön’s (2019) notion of the “reflective practitioner,” where designers continuously reinterpret challenges and opportunities within unfolding project realities.

Adaptive planning also ensures resilience against unforeseen disruptions such as budget revisions or material shortages. By embedding contingency strategies early in the design phase, planners maintain both creative agility and operational control (Gann & Salter, 2018). This adaptability reinforces client trust, as the project can evolve responsively without compromising aesthetic or functional integrity.

6.5. Integration of Technology and Data in Strategic Design

Digital technologies now amplify the role of strategic planning in client-centred design. Tools like Building Information Modelling (BIM), virtual reality walkthroughs, and user experience analytics allow designers to visualise, simulate, and evaluate spatial decisions before implementation (Ambrose & Aouad, 2020). These tools provide a quantitative dimension to qualitative planning, enhancing accuracy and personalisation.

For example, virtual mockups enable clients to experience proposed interiors immersively, leading to more informed

feedback and reduced post-construction changes (Kalay, 2021). Moreover, data-driven analysis—such as monitoring spatial ergonomics and user interaction patterns—enhances predictive planning (Park, 2020). The integration of technology thus strengthens the iterative relationship between design intent and client perception, fostering transparency and efficiency.

6.6. Sustainability and Ethical Dimensions of Strategic Planning

Sustainability has become a moral and strategic imperative in contemporary design practice. Client-centred interiors increasingly reflect eco-conscious values, demanding materials and layouts that minimise environmental impact while maximising human comfort (Leaman & Bordass, 2020). Strategic planning embeds sustainability within the early stages of project conceptualisation, aligning ecological responsibility with user values and lifestyle aspirations.

The findings suggest that when designers communicate sustainability as an aesthetic and ethical narrative—rather than a technical constraint—clients engage more meaningfully with green choices (Bonda & Sosnowchik, 2019). This integration enhances the perceived integrity of the design and reinforces a shared sense of responsibility between designers and users. Ethical considerations also extend to inclusivity, ensuring that designs accommodate diverse physical, cultural, and sensory needs.

6.7. Synthesis: Strategic Planning as a Multi-Dimensional Framework

The overall discussion underscores that strategic planning in client-centred interior design is a multi-dimensional process encompassing cognitive, emotional, managerial, and ethical dimensions. It structures collaboration, mediates creativity, and anchors design within real-world constraints. By situating strategic planning at the intersection of human experience and professional execution, interior designers transform spatial design into a participatory dialogue rather than a top-down process (Lawson, 2019).

Ultimately, the discussion reveals that successful client-centred interiors emerge from a symbiotic relationship between strategic foresight and empathetic engagement. The designer's role evolves from that of an artistic visionary to a facilitator of shared meaning-making, ensuring that spaces embody both functional precision and emotional resonance.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

Strategic planning serves as the cornerstone of client-centred interior design, enabling designers to navigate the complexities of user expectations, functionality, and aesthetic coherence. The qualitative analysis demonstrated that strategic planning transforms interior design from a purely artistic endeavour into an evidence-based, participatory, and adaptive process. Through iterative collaboration, emotional mapping, and technological integration, designers

create spaces that authentically reflect client identities while maintaining professional rigour.

The research also highlighted that the strength of client-centred outcomes depends on the quality of early-stage planning—specifically, how effectively designers facilitate stakeholder dialogue and integrate feedback loops. Ethical and sustainable considerations further expand the planning framework, aligning it with broader social and environmental goals. In this sense, strategic planning not only enhances spatial quality but also contributes to responsible design practice.

Recommendations

- Institutionalise participatory planning protocols within design firms to formalise client engagement and feedback at multiple project stages.
- Adopt digital visualisation tools (e.g., BIM, VR) to enhance communication and minimize misinterpretation between clients and designers.
- Integrate sustainability frameworks such as LEED or WELL standards early in strategic planning to ensure holistic design integrity.
- Provide training in emotional intelligence and behavioural design, equipping designers to better interpret client needs beyond verbal articulation.
- Encourage reflective practice through post-occupancy evaluations, ensuring that insights from completed projects inform future planning strategies.

By embedding these recommendations, interior design practice can move toward a more strategic, inclusive, and human-centred model that balances creativity with accountability—ultimately redefining the meaning of client-centred spaces in the 21st century.

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