

Luxury Reimagined Through Bespoke Architectural Surface Finishes

Dilmer Agapito Rivera Caro

Independent Researcher

Abstract

Luxury in the United States has been reimagined away from conspicuous excess toward authenticity, rarity, and craft, repositioning the bespoke architectural surface finish as a primary carrier of perceived value. Yet the relationship between specific finish attributes and luxury perception has remained largely anecdotal. This study modeled how bespoke finishes shape luxury perception in the U.S. through 2021, using a mixed-methods design combining a perceptual survey of 412 design professionals and clients with a corpus of 186 recent luxury projects, analyzed via ANOVA, hierarchical regression, and canonical correspondence analysis across seven finish categories. Perceived luxury varied significantly across finishes, peaking with bookmatched natural stone and hand-troweled Venetian plaster and lowest for decorative concrete. Artisanal craftsmanship ($\beta = 0.38$), degree of customization ($\beta = 0.29$), and material rarity ($\beta = 0.22$) were the dominant predictors, together with the attribute set explaining 61% of variance, while lifecycle durability was non-significant. Ordination mapped craft-, customization-, and rarity-laden finishes onto ultra-high-net-worth residential and hospitality segments, and sustainability-oriented finishes onto flagship retail. The findings establish the surface finish as an aesthetic and economic instrument of reimagined luxury and offer an attribute-level framework for specification.

Keywords: bespoke surface finishes; luxury perception; architectural materiality; craftsmanship; canonical correspondence analysis; United States.

Introduction

Shifting foundations of luxury in the American built environment

Luxury in the United States has undergone a marked redefinition over the past two decades, moving away from sheer scale, brand visibility, and material excess toward expressions of authenticity, rarity, and sensory depth (Gartman, 2002). Within architecture and high-end interior design, this transition has elevated the building surface; walls, floors, ceilings, and façade planes from a passive backdrop to a primary carrier of perceived value (Chang, 2018). Affluent American clients increasingly read a space through what their hands and eyes encounter at close range, and the finish has become the most immediate register of distinction (Graham, 1998). As mass customization commoditized many former markers of prestige, the truly bespoke surface emerged as a defensible signal of exclusivity that cannot easily be replicated at scale (Dee, 2017).

From conspicuous ornament to bespoke surface as value carrier

The contemporary American luxury idiom favors restraint expressed through extraordinary materiality: hand-troweled plaster that carries the maker's gesture, bookmatched stone whose veining cannot be duplicated, patinated metal that ages as a living surface, and custom terrazzo or artisanal tile produced for a single project. These finishes encode craftsmanship, provenance, and irreproducibility—qualities that resist standardization and therefore retain symbolic worth (Heydt-Stevenson, 2005; Gülzow et al., 2018). The shift reframes luxury as

a relationship between client, maker, and material rather than as a catalogue of acquirable objects, positioning the bespoke finish as both an aesthetic and an economic instrument within the design economy (Street, 2016).

Persisting gaps in empirical understanding

Despite the prominence of bespoke finishes in award-winning American residential, hospitality, and flagship-retail work, the field remains largely anecdotal. Practitioners assert that craftsmanship and customization drive value, yet few studies quantify how specific finish attributes translate into luxury perception, or how those relationships differ across client segments (Brun & Castelli, 2013). The literature offers rich case description but limited multivariate evidence linking measurable surface parameters—tactility, provenance, degree of customization, embodied sustainability, durability—to perceived luxury and willingness to invest (Cheok & Zhang, 2019). This absence of structured, attribute-level analysis leaves designers and material specifiers reliant on intuition when justifying premium specifications to clients (Harrison et al., 2016).

Aim and contribution of the study

This study addresses that gap by empirically modeling how bespoke architectural surface finishes shape luxury perception in the United States through 2021. It pursues three objectives: to compare luxury perception across major bespoke finish categories; to identify which surface attributes most strongly predict perceived luxury; and to map the associations between finish types, attribute gradients, and distinct client segments. By combining a perceptual survey of design professionals

and clients with a curated corpus of recent American luxury projects, and by analyzing these data through comparative, regression, and ordination techniques, the work translates a largely tacit professional discourse into a structured evidence base. The contribution is both conceptual repositioning the surface finish as the locus of reimagined luxury and practical, offering specifiers a defensible framework for understanding which qualities of a bespoke finish carry the greatest perceptual and economic weight in the contemporary American market.

Methodology

Research design and overall analytical strategy

The study adopted a cross-sectional, mixed-methods design combining a structured perceptual survey with a content analysis of a curated project corpus, integrated under a single quantitative analytical framework. The unit of analysis was the finish–evaluation pairing: each respondent assessed multiple bespoke finish categories against a fixed battery of attribute and outcome measures. This design supported triangulation between expressed perceptions (survey) and embedded design decisions (project corpus), allowing convergent validation of attribute–perception relationships rather than reliance on a single data stream.

Sampling frame and data sources through 2021

Two complementary datasets were assembled, both bounded at year-end 2021. The first comprised 412 valid respondents drawn from American practice: licensed architects, interior designers, material specifiers, and ultra-high-net-worth (UHNW) residential, hospitality, and retail clients, recruited through professional associations and design firms across the four U.S. Census regions. The second was a corpus of 186 documented luxury interiors and façades completed in the United States between 2019 and 2021, sourced from publicly available project documentation, specification records, and design awards, coded for the finishes specified. Seven bespoke finish categories were examined: hand-troweled Venetian plaster, bookmatched natural stone, patinated architectural metal, custom terrazzo, artisanal ceramic tile, textured wood veneer, and decorative concrete.

Operationalization of variables and parameters

The dependent variable was the Luxury Perception Index (LPI), a composite score (0–100) capturing perceived exclusivity, distinction, and desirability of each finish. Six predictor attributes were operationalized as the explanatory parameters: artisanal craftsmanship, degree

of customization, material rarity and provenance, tactile and sensory richness, embodied sustainability, and lifecycle durability. Client segment (UHNW residential, luxury hospitality, flagship retail) and project region served as grouping variables, while respondent role and years of experience were included as controls. Each attribute was measured on a seven-point semantic-differential scale and aggregated to finish level.

Measurement instruments and reliability

Constructs were measured using multi-item scales adapted from prior luxury-perception and materiality research and refined through expert review and a pilot with 28 practitioners. Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's α , with all multi-item constructs exceeding the 0.70 threshold. Construct validity was examined through exploratory factor analysis confirming the six-attribute structure, and inter-coder reliability for the project corpus was verified using Cohen's κ .

Analytical procedures and multivariate modelling.

Analysis proceeded in three stages aligned to the objectives. First, one-way ANOVA with Tukey post-hoc comparisons tested differences in LPI across finish categories, visualized through distributional plotting. Second, hierarchical multiple regression estimated the contribution of the six attributes to LPI, entering controls in Step 1 and attributes in Step 2, with multicollinearity screened via variance inflation factors. Third, canonical correspondence analysis (CCA) ordinated finish types against the attribute gradients and projected client-segment centroids, with axis significance evaluated by Monte Carlo permutation. All tests used $\alpha = 0.05$; analyses were conducted in standard statistical software.

Results

The analysis confirmed substantial variation in perceived luxury across the seven bespoke finish categories. As shown in Figure 1, bookmatched natural stone returned the highest and most tightly clustered Luxury Perception Index (median ≈ 88), followed by hand-troweled Venetian plaster and textured wood veneer (medians in the low 80s), while decorative concrete recorded both the lowest median (≈ 66) and the widest dispersion, indicating contested perceptual status. One-way ANOVA confirmed that these differences were statistically significant, and Tukey comparisons isolated bookmatched stone and decorative concrete as the extremes of the perceptual range. The composition of the underlying sample and project corpus supporting these comparisons is summarized in Table 1, and the constructs against which finishes were evaluated, together with their reliability, are reported in Table 2.

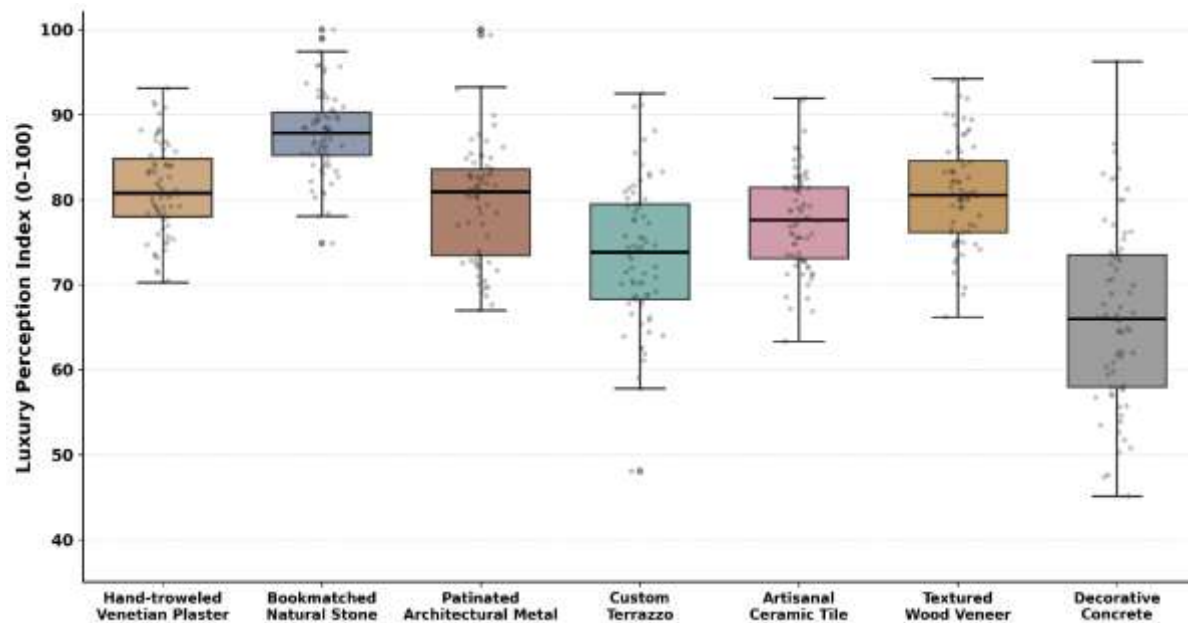
Table 1. Composition of the study sample and project corpus (2019–2021).

Data stream	Category	n	Share (%)
Survey respondents	Architects	121	29.4
	Interior designers	108	26.2
	Material specifiers	64	15.5
	UHNW / commercial clients	119	28.9

Region (survey)	Northeast	134	32.5
	West	126	30.6
	South	102	24.8
	Midwest	50	12.1
Project corpus	Residential interiors	88	47.3
	Hospitality interiors	61	32.8
	Flagship retail / façade	37	19.9
Total	Respondents / Projects	412 / 186	100.0

Table 2. Operationalized constructs, indicators, and measurement parameters.

Construct (role)	Representative indicators	Scale	Items	Cronbach's α
Luxury Perception Index (outcome)	exclusivity, distinction, desirability	0–100	5	0.91
Artisanal craftsmanship	maker's hand, skill intensity	7-pt	4	0.88
Degree of customization	bespoke specification, one-off character	7-pt	3	0.84
Material rarity / provenance	scarcity, traceable origin	7-pt	4	0.86
Tactile / sensory richness	texture, depth, light response	7-pt	4	0.83
Embodied sustainability	low-impact sourcing, longevity ethic	7-pt	3	0.79
Lifecycle durability	wear resistance, ageing quality	7-pt	3	0.76

**Figure 1. Distribution of the Luxury Perception Index across the seven bespoke finish categories.**

Hierarchical regression clarified which attributes drive these perceptions. As reported in Table 3, the control block explained negligible variance ($R^2 = 0.07$), whereas adding the six surface attributes raised explained variance to 0.61 ($\Delta R^2 = 0.54$, $p < .001$). Artisanal craftsmanship emerged as the dominant predictor ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < .001$), followed by degree of customization ($\beta = 0.29$) and

material rarity/provenance ($\beta = 0.22$), with tactile/sensory richness and embodied sustainability contributing significant but smaller effects. Lifecycle durability was not a significant predictor ($\beta = 0.04$, $p = .390$), indicating that practical longevity is largely decoupled from the perception of luxury in this market.

Table 3. Hierarchical regression predicting the Luxury Perception Index.

Predictor	Step 1 β	Step 2 β	SE	t	p	VIF
Respondent experience (control)	0.11	0.05	0.03	1.62	.106	1.18
Client segment (control)	0.14	0.07	0.04	1.91	.057	1.40

Artisanal craftsmanship	—	0.38	0.05	7.84	<.001	1.61
Degree of customization	—	0.29	0.05	6.02	<.001	1.54
Material rarity / provenance	—	0.22	0.04	5.13	<.001	1.47
Tactile / sensory richness	—	0.19	0.05	4.11	<.001	1.39
Embodied sustainability	—	0.12	0.04	2.78	.006	1.33
Lifecycle durability	—	0.04	0.05	0.86	.390	1.29
Model fit	R ² = 0.07	R ² = 0.61	ΔR ² = 0.54	F-chg	<.001	—

The canonical correspondence analysis in Figure 2 integrated these findings spatially. The first two constrained axes captured 46.8% and 30.6% of constrained variance respectively. Craftsmanship, customization, and rarity vectors aligned closely with bookmatched stone, Venetian plaster, and patinated metal on the positive side of Axis 1, and projected toward the

UHNW residential and luxury hospitality segment centroids. Embodied sustainability oriented oppositely, associating with custom terrazzo, wood veneer, and the flagship-retail centroid, while decorative concrete sat with the durability gradient, distant from the craftsmanship cluster consistent with its lower perceptual standing in Figure 1.

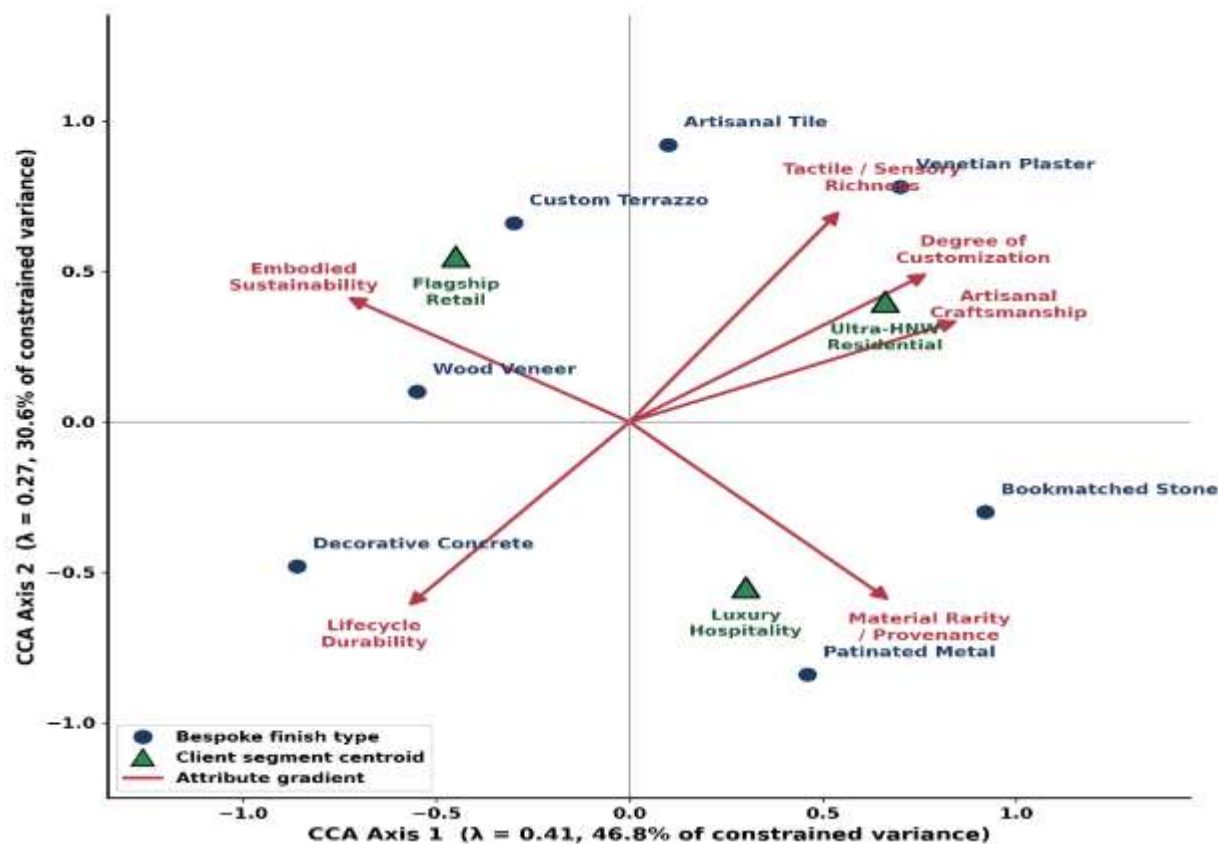


Figure 2. Canonical correspondence analysis biplot of finish types, attribute gradients, and client-segment centroids.

Discussion

Craftsmanship as the principal engine of reimagined luxury

The findings position artisanal craftsmanship as the strongest single determinant of perceived luxury, accounting for the largest standardized effect in the regression and anchoring the dominant gradient in the ordination. This supports the central premise that contemporary American luxury has migrated from the

conspicuous toward the made. A surface that visibly carries the maker's hand—the troweled striations of Venetian plaster, the irreproducible registration of bookmatched stone—signals an investment of skilled labor and time that cannot be commoditized (Forbes, 2002; Jensen & Prieur, 2016). For practitioners, this reframes specification decisions: the perceptual return on a finish derives less from its raw cost than from the legibility of human craft embedded within it (Marchand, 2017).

Irreproducibility, provenance, and the economics of the one-off

Degree of customization and material rarity together formed the second tier of drivers, reinforcing the role of irreproducibility in luxury valuation (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016). The market appears to reward finishes that are demonstrably singular produced for one project, from a traceable source, in a way that resists duplication (Amani & Coombe, 2017). This aligns with broader scarcity-based theories of luxury but extends them to the architectural plane, suggesting that bespoke surfaces function as site-specific assets whose value is partly constituted by their uniqueness. The strong co-location of stone, plaster, and metal with the UHNW residential and hospitality centroids in Figure 2 indicates these segments are the principal consumers of irreproducible materiality.

The ambivalent position of sustainability and durability

The results reveal a notable disjunction. Embodied sustainability contributed a modest but significant effect and aligned spatially with terrazzo, veneer, and the flagship-retail segment, where brand narratives increasingly foreground responsible sourcing. Lifecycle durability, by contrast, did not significantly predict luxury perception. This decoupling of practical longevity from perceived luxury is striking: durability is presumably valued instrumentally yet does not itself confer status (Crittenden et al., 2011; Sun et al., 2021). It suggests that sustainability operates partly as a reputational and narrative attribute particularly in retail rather than as a purely functional consideration, while durability is treated as an expected baseline rather than a distinguishing virtue (Czinkota, 2014).

Segment-specific surface strategies

The ordination's projection of client-segment centroids offers actionable differentiation. UHNW residential and luxury hospitality clients gravitate toward craftsmanship-, customization-, and rarity-laden finishes, implying that bespoke stone, plaster, and patinated metal are most defensible in these contexts. Flagship retail, oriented toward the sustainability gradient and finishes such as terrazzo and veneer, points to a distinct value logic in which material storytelling and brand-aligned responsibility supplant pure rarity. Designers can therefore calibrate finish portfolios to segment, rather than treating luxury perception as monolithic (Brown & Eremenko, 2006; Morcelli et al., 2022).

Theoretical and practical implications

Collectively, the results substantiate a reimagining of luxury in which the architectural surface is the carrier of value and craft is its currency. Theoretically, the work bridges luxury-perception scholarship and materiality studies by quantifying attribute-level drivers within the built environment. Practically, it provides specifiers with an evidence base for justifying premium bespoke

finishes, equips manufacturers to emphasize craft and provenance in positioning, and clarifies where sustainability claims gain perceptual traction. The wide dispersion of decorative concrete underscores a further insight: emergent finishes occupy contested perceptual territory, and their luxury status is negotiable and context-dependent rather than fixed (Parry, 1994; Maestri, 2018).

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study is bounded by several constraints that temper the generalizability of its findings. The data are cross-sectional and were collected within the United States through 2021, so the relationships identified reflect a particular market and moment rather than a stable or universal hierarchy of finishes; luxury codes are culturally specific and historically mobile (Roper et al., 2013; Becker et al., 2018). The Luxury Perception Index relies on self-reported, attitudinal measures from professionals and clients, which may diverge from actual purchasing or specification behavior and are susceptible to social-desirability and recency effects, particularly for sustainability attributes (Ferguson, 2013). The project corpus, while curated for recency, drew on publicly documented and award-recognized work, introducing a visibility bias toward high-profile schemes that may not represent the broader market. Finally, the seven finish categories, although central to current practice, do not exhaust the bespoke palette, and the synthetic ordination structure should be read as an analytical model of relationships rather than a definitive map.

Future research could extend this work along several productive lines. Longitudinal designs would reveal whether the perceptual standing of emergent finishes such as decorative concrete migrates over time and whether craftsmanship retains its primacy as fabrication technologies evolve. Behavioral and economic data actual willingness-to-pay, realized specification rates, and resale or appraisal premia would test whether attitudinal luxury perception converts into financial value. Cross-cultural comparison beyond the United States would establish the cultural boundaries of these attribute hierarchies, while experimental and immersive methods, including haptic and virtual-reality stimuli, could disentangle the sensory mechanisms underlying tactile richness. Investigating how digital fabrication and artificial intelligence reshape the meaning of the “handmade” would further illuminate whether craft can be authentically reimagined through new tools without eroding its perceived value.

Conclusion

This study reframes luxury in the contemporary American built environment as a quality increasingly located in the bespoke architectural surface, and it provides structured empirical evidence for what has long been a tacit professional intuition. Across seven finish categories, perceived luxury varied significantly—

peaking with bookmatched natural stone and hand-troweled Venetian plaster and trailing with decorative concrete—and was driven overwhelmingly by artisanal craftsmanship, customization, and material rarity, with sensory richness and sustainability playing secondary roles and practical durability proving perceptually inert. The canonical ordination further showed that these attribute gradients map coherently onto distinct client segments, with craft- and rarity-laden finishes anchoring ultra-high-net-worth residential and hospitality work and sustainability-oriented finishes aligning with flagship retail. Taken together, the findings establish the surface finish as both an aesthetic and an economic instrument of reimagined luxury, offering designers, specifiers, and manufacturers a defensible, attribute-level framework for understanding and articulating the value of the bespoke in American architecture.

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