Mythbusters

It’s been said that Interior Design educators exist in a bubble, separate from the “real world” of design. True? Perspective spoke with several successful professors to get the whole story behind this stereotype.

DeAnna Radaj was building a career in retail management when she decided to quit her job in order to become an Interior Designer. Her first step was to enroll in the Interior Design program at a rapid university in Milwaukee. Radaj wanted to follow her passion — eco-friendly and healthy home design — but the reception she received in school wasn’t quite what she expected.

As the green movement was gaining traction, she recalls, the coursework didn’t seem to be keeping up with the trend, and there was little talk of eco-friendly or universal design. “Thinking out of the box was really not encouraged,” she says. “I designed a dog-friendly hotel that I was told I should reconsider as it would be tacky.” Since then, green design has skyrocketed. The program did start offering green and eco-friendly design classes, and pet-friendly lodging has become a hot trend in hospitality, according to World Travel Guide.

Today, Radaj runs a Milwaukee-based business, Bante Design, LLC, where she focuses on designing healthy spaces — primarily residential — for clients who suffer from mental and physical disabilities and want to live a more eco-friendly lifestyle. But the experience left her with the impression that Interior Design educators aren’t as in touch with the practical side of design as they should be. Moreover, when hiring recent college grads, she feels they often lack basic business skills, contributing to this notion.

“Many programs have no business element to them,” Radaj says. In response, she has begun leading workshops for students, recent grads and seasoned designers alike on networking, marketing, business etiquette and presentation skills.

Unfortunately, Radaj isn’t alone in her beliefs on education. The opinion that many Interior Design students are shortened because programs — and some professors — are out of touch with the real world of design is shared by others like Stephanie Henley, Principal at Beasley & Henley Interior Design in Winter Park, Fla.

“We find that new grads don’t have a clear idea of how much paperwork and computer time is involved in Interior Design,” Henley says. “And they could all use an etiquette and personal presentation class.”

Most importantly, Radaj says, some educators fail to highlight the importance of communication skills in their programs. “You can create the most beautiful functional space, but if you can’t verbalize it or sell it to clients, it doesn’t matter,” she says.

Fair or not, Interior Design educators — like educators in all fields — struggle against accusations of ivory tower syndromes.

It’s more critical than ever for Interior Design educators to prove the stereotype wrong, says Michael Ancheta, Managing Director of Education Services and Programs for IIDA. “Especially now, if educators are living in an ivory tower, they’re going to lose contact with what they really should be teaching and lose sight of what they are as educators,” he says. “Their students will suffer and not be prepared for jobs when they graduate.”

But is the entire Interior Design education system in need of a complete overhaul? Or is the stereotype completely unfounded? When it all boils down, the truth lies somewhere in between.

Barriers to Bridge-Building

To be fair, nearly all Interior Design programs take steps to introduce the real world into the classroom through internships and studio practice. In addition, it’s common for educators to invite practitioners to speak to students, and many adjunct professors are also practicing designers.

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Making the Grade 

By Clare Curley
Negative stereotypes of professors probably also aren’t being helped by a new challenge to the profession: an overall shortage of educators.

Design professors to be out of tendencies of some Interior “I do think that there are inability for professionally qualified Interior high-quality educators as they could, the professors are causing the shortage. If some schools aren’t drawing as many grams and the aging population of educa- tors are causing the shortage. 

Michelle Carroll, Assoc. IIDA, LEED AP, a recent graduate of Illinois State University in Normal, Ill., says geography poses some limitations to the continuing development of educators. A design and sales assistant for a kitchen and bath design studio in Geneseo, Ill., she says, “I do think that there are tendencies of some Interior Design professors to be out of touch with the current industry. The Interior Design profession in Bloomington- Normal, Ill., is not quite as booming as that in Chicago.”

Negative stereotypes of professors probably also aren’t being helped by a new challenge to the profession: an overall shortage of educators. Denise A. Guerin, Ph.D., IIDA, FASID, FIDEC, a Distinguished Professor in the University of Minnesota’s Interior Design program in College Park, Md., also says that some Interior Design professors are out of touch with the current industry. “I do think that there are tendencies of some Interior Design professors to be out of touch with the current industry.”

That’s why many programs stay in touch by tapping the expertise of people like Eileen Jones, IIDA, AIGA, Principal and National Discipline Leader for Perkins+Will’s Branded Environments Group in Chicago. While leading research and design development for clients, Jones has taught design studios, juried class projects and presented at schools across the United States. In doing so, Jones doesn’t see educators as existing in bubbles, but as professionals who want to stay connected to the field. “I believe there is a growing understanding that the academy and the prac- tice are linked in their efforts to advance the profession,” she says.

Another way that some programs keep up with current trends is through the National Council for Interior Design Qualification (NCIDQ), which mandates both formal education and practical experience. In addition, an increasing number of schools are relying on adjunct profes- sors to help with the teaching load, especially in studios. According to a 2008 IDEC survey of its members, about two-thirds had more than 10 years of practical experience. Most planned to continue practicing on a part-time or consulting basis.

But many professors point out that practicing Interior Designers shouldn’t underestimate the significance of research in the role of educators. “We are much closer to the profession, to the ability to apply theoretical constructs to everyday problems, than in some areas of academia,” says Guerin, who spends much of her time analyzing evidence-based design — the practice of basing design decisions on credible research to achieve the best possible outcome — became the standard, thanks to the work of Interior Design scholars. Weigand says, “Interior Design is changing very quickly, and we need to teach stu- dents to adapt and to learn, not just teach them skills.”

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John Weigand, IIDA, professor and Chair of Architecture and Interior Design, Miami University, Oxford, Ohio

Michelle Carroll, Assoc. IIDA, LEED AP, President of Interior Design Educators Council (IDEC), says an expansion of pro- grams and the aging population of educa- tors are causing the shortage. If some schools aren’t drawing as many high-quality educators as they could, the institutions themselves may be partly to blame. A 2006 IDEC report highlighted “an inability for professionally qualified Interior Designers to pursue teaching opportunities” because, among other reasons, positions usually require at least a master’s degree. Some educators want to change the require- ments so practice counts for more in the hiring process.

And while in an ideal world, all educators would simultaneously remain part-time practicing designers, it’s simply not realistic. “When people like myself pursue a career in college teaching, we’re required to produce research or creative work in order to be tenured and promoted,” says John Weigand, IIDA, a professor and Chair of Architecture and Interior Design at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, who practiced for 30 years before entering aca- demia. “However, it’s very difficult to meet this requirement by continuing to practice, given the time this takes. So what we do is switch gears.”

That new gear usually involves writing, presenting at conferences and focusing on sub- jects other than designing interior spaces.

SCHOOLING THE DESIGNER

Educators also say that when it comes to preparing graduates for the real world of design, the relationship between aca- demia and practice is a two-way street.

“It is impossible to teach enough business or have students take enough business courses to be prepared for the business world. And it’s not business skills that we teach; it’s business knowledge,” says Guerin. “Practitioners need to consider that somewhere they must take responsi- bility for educating their entry-level design- ers in business, too.”

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