PUTTING THE PROTOTYPICAL INTERIOR DESIGNER ON THE COUCH
The practice of interior design has long been likened to a form of therapy. Indeed, the cultural cliché is so entrenched that it’s the conceit behind a new reality-TV show: Bravo’s Interior Therapy, where designer Jeff Lewis “judges clients’ flaws” and “diagnoses their problems,” restoring sanity through home makeovers. Say what you will about our profession being undermined by yet another frivolous depiction in the popular media, but there is a kernel of truth to the stereotype. Interior designers are mind readers with a special knack for getting inside clients’ heads, assessing who they are, and what makes them tick.

We could use a dose of our own medicine. Designers are great at amateur psychologizing, but not necessarily of themselves. When it comes to analyzing their own brains, they often draw a blank. But knowing what makes the prototypical designer unique—and communicating exactly how clients can benefit from that—could help them market themselves better. What is it about the way that designers are hardwired that makes them special? Do they share a way of thinking or a specific set of characteristics? Is there such a thing as a design mind? Or, more specifically, an interior-design mind? Within the context of a culture that allows anyone to call him or herself a designer, the pressure is on to be deliberate and precise in promoting what differentiates our practice.

PERSONALITY PROFILING

As for the prototypical interior designer, IIDA research blows a hole in any assumption that one exists. We’ve always been a diverse bunch, but even more so these days. Consider the fact that interior design is the first choice for those seeking a second career—meaning that people enter the profession via myriad backgrounds, from medicine to banking.

In light of this, it might be helpful to look at a familiar tool used for career development: the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. The test is designed to assess psychological preferences vis-à-vis how you perceive the world around you and make decisions, and then suggests what jobs might be a good match. There are limitations to this method of analysis, however. Rooted in Jungian principals, MBTI is often criticized as a “soft” science. In addition, there are only 16 personality categories, which doesn’t allow for endless nuance. The methodology also presumes that personality—versus passion—can be a reliable indicator of professional suitability.

Still, anyone who’s taken the MBTI (this writer included) is likely to confirm its insightfulness. Interior design is among the 250 occupations that CPP, which publishes the Myers-Briggs instrument, has collated data on and deconstructs in its Type Tables publication. The three personality types most often associated with the potential to be a good designer—INFP, INTP, and ENFP (see graphic on next page)—share a trait: They receive information from the world around them based on intuition versus sensing (i.e. observation), and are more interested in theorizing about possibilities than in accepting the status quo.
Recent studies of students dig a bit deeper. In a *Journal of Interior Design* article, Randall R. Russ and Margaret J. Weber Ph.D. shared the results of a study they conducted in which the MBTI was administered to 234 junior and senior interior-design students from 12 FIDER-accredited universities. While the researchers did not find a definite link “between personality and career aspirations in interior design,” they nonetheless found a statistical majority in the “catalyst” type—or NF—which puts a primacy on intuiting and feeling. “Feelers” tend to make decisions by considering others versus following accepted logic.

In a paper presented at IDEC’s annual conference in March, Mississippi State University interior design professors Beth R. Miller, ASID; Amy Crumpton, IDEC, LEED AP; and Lyndsey L. Miller highlighted the results of a school initiative subjecting senior design students to Myers-Briggs testing prior to applying for employment. While 14 personality types were represented in the 75 testees, the most prevalent was INFP, followed by ENFP and ENFJ—again, all examples of the catalyst type. Contrary to those findings, though, ISTJ was the most prolific type among those who ultimately joined an architecture or design firm upon graduating. Interestingly, thinking-sensing-judging introverts are known to make good managers. Also curious: The three faculty members tested shared the judging trait, which favors routine, structure, and organization.

Those findings dovetail with research initiated by Rosemary E. Peggram, Ph.D., whose Texas Tech University dissertation investigated whether personality traits could predict the future academic success of incoming interior design students. She set out to determine whether school programs should take such profiling into account during the application process—i.e. do those who test a certain way have a higher likelihood of doing well in school (universities being most interested in enrolling students they think will flourish)? Of course, academic and professional success are not synonymous, but Peggram’s findings also uncovered statistical significance in the judging (versus perceiving) dimension.

What does the above tell us? That interior designers do not fit in one box. Judging and perceiving, introversion and extroversion, are represented somewhat equally. But intuition is prevalent—a trait not common to the population at large.

**DESIGN THINKING**

The discipline of interior design does not have ownership of this term, which became a media fixation in the aughts and continues to have traction in the business world. A new documentary by Yuhsiu Yang, Melissa Huang, Mu-Ming Tsai, and Iris Lai, *Design & Thinking*, which debuts in June, looks at the term anew. Funded via Kickstarter (a hotbed of design thinking in its own right), the film interviews innovators and change-makers—IDEO CEO Tim Brown, Smart Design cofounder Dan Formosa, but, alas, no interior designers—about “the ambiguity, conflicts, and the messy process of how...creative people think and do things,” according to the filmmakers. Is design thinking an empty marketing phrase, they ask, or does it have real implications? The kicker: Our problem-solving methodology, ability to see possibilities in limitations and success in failure, and embrace of experimentation can be applied to any number of life challenges.

In a *Fast Company* interview with Warren Berger, author of *Glimmer: How Design Can Transform Your Life, and Maybe Even the World*, the journalist discusses the power of design and design problem-solving to transform how we live. Based on his interviews with 100 designers and 100 other creatives, he found commonalities in what makes a designer good: Their ability to ask “stupid” questions to get to the overlooked heart of the matter; their flair for challenging assumptions; their ability to visualize and concretize problems to better highlight connections and patterns between things; their openness to new ideas by thinking “laterally” versus in a straightforward path; and their antenna for finding what’s missing in the world and seeing it as an opportunity. Sounds a lot like intuiting and theorizing.
Learn something about the design mind? Earn credit.
Take the CEU online at www.iida.org, in the Articles section.
“...INTERIOR DESIGN IS A PROFESSION WITH—IT’S NOT AN EXAGGERATION TO SAY—ENORMOUS IMPLICATIONS ON HUMANITY.”

THE INTERIOR DESIGN GENOME PROJECT?
Thus far, most writing and research on the subject of the design mind, though intriguing, has been relegated to soft science and anecdotal evidence. To arrive at more rigorous conclusions, perhaps we need to hit up hard science—namely, genetic testing. Could we assay the genetic makeup of interior designers to identify a DNA link?

It’s not so far-fetched a proposition. In fact, genetic research has already been conducted on at least one other occupation: finance. A recent *Wall Street Journal* article described a study spearheaded by neuroscientists who endeavored to unravel the genetic signature of the Wall Street trader personality type (read: risk-taking, competitive, impulsive) in the hopes of earmarking a gene correlating with investment success. In particular, they were looking at the effect of dopamine activity. Their study of 60 professional traders concluded that the genes common to successful traders kept dopamine in check and blunted extreme highs or lows, allowing them to avoid making knee-jerk decisions.

Of course, finance is a mediagenic occupation these days, one in which unfathomable sums of money are often at stake, making it a compelling locus of research dollars. But interior design is a profession with—it’s not an exaggeration to say—enormous implications on humanity. Perhaps with just a little more understanding of ourselves and our special way of thinking and seeing the world, we can elevate the perception of our industry—and inspire neuroscientists to turn their microscopes on us.

DESIGN VERSUS THERAPY
Perhaps psychology could help shed light on how our brains work and how we’re hardwired. Maybe we are a bit like shrinks? Someone with an insider’s view of both professions, Boston-based designer turned psychotherapist Margery Lapp, sees commonalities between the two. “Where I think there is significant overlap is that both designers and therapists want to solve problems to make clients feel more comfortable in their own skin”—skin being either one’s literal personhood or their immediate surroundings. A sensitivity to “skin,” as in space, is the very thing that distinguishes interior design from related disciplines.

Both types of practitioners also rely on intuition to see beyond what lies right in front of them. They look past assumptions, not being encumbered by what already is. “Therapists see someone’s potential—who they can become—untethered to their current limitations,” says Lapp. “Designers, too, have that vision for the end result.” But given that only a small percentage of the general populace shares that capability, there tends to be a disconnect between what designers and their clients can visualize. Herein lies the heart of what differentiates the profession: Interior designers are visionaries, but ones who use empathy, diplomacy, and teaching skills to get a client to follow them to that vision.

Lapp offers an insight that may account for the varied MBTI test results of designers. Forget fitting into one of 16 categories; designers embody all categories at once. “In both professions,” Lapp continues, “you are thinking and feeling at the same time. You’re empathetic, but you’re also analyzing—you’re not just immersed in emotion. Designers problem-solve and think, but there’s such a feeling-sensing piece to what is pleasing and what works.” Designers are engineers but also artists. “Usually you have to choose between left and right brain, but some professions—like therapy and design—require both sides to be operating.”

Interior design is the halfway point, the fuzzy gray area, between aesthetics and function, art and science. And it’s harder to define and explain yourself when you reside in the middle than when you’re in the extremes. But, in fact, designers are not so much in the fuzzy gray area as they are in both worlds—with the elasticity to stretch into the extremes and bounce back to the middle in order to make those extremes relatable and understandable to others. In essence, you—the interior designer—help clients get inside your head so they can then see the world as you do. The design mind, it turns out, isn’t just a mental process but a place—one in which we connect with others.