DEFINING OURSELVES

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THE INTERESTING AND URGENT QUESTIONS RAISED BY THE INTERIOR DESIGN BODY OF KNOWLEDGE.
A hot topic in interior design circles is the body of knowledge.

A current initiative supported by the consortium of design organizations, the body of knowledge involves careful documentation of interior design skill sets gleaned from the Foundation for Interior Design Education Research (FIDER) standards, National Council for Interior Design Qualification (NCIDQ) criteria and legislative requirements. It essentially is a comprehensive assessment of skill sets across the career track.

While at some level the profession already knows what it does, the idea is to quantify this more specifically in order to verify the profession's legitimacy to the public and state legislators. This promises to enhance the industry's legislation efforts and dispel myths around design practice that still are all too prevalent.

THE CHALLENGES

In the effort to outline interior design's skill sets, some practitioners and academics are finding that a definition based on skill sets alone may be incomplete. In establishing its jurisdictional boundaries, any profession must not only define what it knows, but also define how that knowledge is distinct from other professional groups. It must define what interior designers do uniquely in addition to what they do specifically. This is particularly relevant for interior design. During its short history as a recognized profession – as its scope of work has expanded and the knowledge required to practice become more complex – interior design has increasingly crossed paths with other design professions (especially architecture) that claim to do the same work. A profession protects its turf first by defining it. But it also must define how that turf is unique.
Unfortunately, a list of specific skill sets doesn’t do this very well. The implication is that these skills are “owned” by interior design, when this really is not the case. In fact, much of the content knowledge listed in accreditation or testing standards is competently addressed by a variety of professionals educated outside the discipline. Interior designers turn to lighting consultants, materials specialists, code specialists, behaviorists, structural engineers, acousticians and others on a regular basis for specific expertise needed to complete a project.

In the same way, architects can and do stake a legitimate claim to this knowledge. The fundamental training for each is more similar than dissimilar. Both are grounded in basic visual literacy, computer and hand graphics, history, human factors, technology, theory and business practice – and in the life skills characterized by a liberal arts education. In this initial exposure to their future professional careers, the distinction between the disciplines is not substantial. This fact is further born out by the number of successful interior design practitioners educated as architects.

**THE SOLUTION**

Though an enumerated list of skills may be a viable way to begin defining the interior design profession, a truly accurate definition also must do two other things. It must describe the holistic nature of its design process, and it must carefully articulate its specialized knowledge of the interior scale.

Consider the act of drawing lines on paper to indicate a wall on a floor plan. In the interior designer’s mind, these lines are visualized as a three-dimensional object in space. The wall has structure and material qualities. It creates
meaning for those who will walk along it, see it and touch it. It mediates sound as well as light. It will need to meet fire code requirements and, together with other walls, egress requirements. It will be environmentally sustainable—or not. And it will be perceived, hopefully, as beautiful or innovative. This simple act of drawing lines actually is quite complex and requires that the designer evaluate the wall simultaneously against many different criteria. The wall is redrawn and reevaluated in an iterative process that hopefully will lead to the best solution.

It is this design process that defines the unique contribution of the interior designer. This process requires knowledge that is both uniquely broad and also not very pure in the sense that it intersects frequently with other disciplines. It is a knowledge based not on the parts and pieces but on the whole. By definition, this is what design is about. Only when the knowledge base is defined holistically can interior design be distinguished from the many competing, specialized professions with which it collaborates. While the lighting designer, textiles specialist and code expert may offer a depth of knowledge, none does what the interior designer does. None works as a generalist to synthesize the many constraints of a design problem.

None, of course, but the architect. The architect also is a generalist. The distinction here is in regards to scale. Interior designers apply their knowledge of design and the built environment to solving problems at the interior scale and at the level of direct human experience. Architects apply the same sorts of knowledge to solving

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problems at the architectural scale. While both professionals need to know about lighting, building materials, people, color and codes, this knowledge becomes distinct and specialized when applied to solving problems at the different scales. For example, both the interior designer and the architect need to gain a working knowledge of marble and granite, (as defined by accreditation and testing standards). But this knowledge is quite distinct when applied to either the specification of a stone countertop or to a high-rise curtain wall. Over the course of a professional career, the knowledge gained distinguishes the two practices even further. At some point, the countertop designer and curtain-wall designer will gladly respect the other’s unique knowledge and stay away.

The medical profession may be a model for how we think about this distinction. In medicine, the pediatrician and the brain surgeon do very different kinds of things. Their specialized knowledge certainly is different. But they are both medical doctors and they are linked together by core knowledge and a clear and defensible definition of the profession. They both are educated within a common discipline that allows for a high degree of specialization.

The design professions, on the other hand, are defined by splintered groups of generalists and specialists, with distinct academic paths, career tracks and levels of legal recognition.
architectural scales. Such a definition would acknowledge that one can’t separate a building from its interior. Yet it also would acknowledge that the design of interior environments requires specialized knowledge in today’s world. One could imagine that today’s professional organizations and regulatory agencies may not need to reinvent themselves. They would need only to communicate more.

These suggestions will seem intuitive and common sense to some and threatening to others. The direction of the body of knowledge – and of the profession itself – clearly is as much about politics as it is about ideology. Protectionist attitudes continue to stall any potential dialogue around an expanded career track that not only recognizes in-common core knowledge but also the specialized knowledge of the interior designer. While the various disciplines continue to posture and protect their turfs, there should exist a parallel strategy that is focused on establishing a dialogue and finding common ground.

Whatever the end result of the body of knowledge project, it’s not likely to affect the viability of the interior design industry. But it could affect its progress. The growth and continued establishment of interior design depends on a knowledge base that places itself within the context of allied design disciplines and specifically defines its relationship with architecture. The alternative, which circles the wagons around the profession and positions interior design as distinct and disconnected, promises to stall the dialogue that can bring it to a better place.

Interior design must move toward a definition of its knowledge base that places itself within the context of allied design disciplines and specifically defines its relationship with architecture.