



image conscious

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The interior design profession deserves **respect**, a **symbiosis** with its fellow professions and true recognition from the end user. **BY KATRIEL COSTELLO**

the need for a

cohesive working relationship between architects and designers has never been greater. “The industry is changing,” says Arthur Gensler Jr., Chairman and CEO of Gensler. “Clients are seeking more one-stop shopping. They are asking firms to provide more complete services – from conceptual design and strategic planning all the way through facilities management. There has been a larger emphasis on interior design during the last 20 years as a part of the profession.”

The structure of these professions is changing, as professionals realize there’s more to gain by working together. The shared influence between the disciplines can’t be denied, and attitudes are changing, albeit slowly. “My education was about space and light and less about style,” says Aurel Aebi, Interior Designer-Architect at Atelier Oi-SA in Switzerland. “It was similar to an architect’s in that we build spaces. Now, architects are being inspired by interior designs.”

The fact that U.K. architect Norman Foster has turned his hand to bathroom design and French product designer Phillipe Starck has designed houses signifies a new pluralism. “It’s important to create spaces for humans,” Aebi says. “People change, and it’s not possible for professions not to change. There are other structures in families – second marriages, step-children – and we must find interior spaces that change with the culture of the person. Interior designers build a new way of living.”

THE BORED HOUSEWIFE

Cultural factors are forcing change – for the good and the bad. Certain interior designers have tarnished the profession’s image by making the job look shallow and simple, according to Paul Zara, Architect and Director for Conran & Partners, London. “The TV shows that make it look as though it’s something that can be done in a day with a pot of paint and some [medium density fiberboard] – this increases the lack of respect,” she says.

The trend for design showrooms to sell to the general public has contributed to the idea that anyone can be a designer, blurring the distinction between designer and decorator. People don’t realize the experience, knowledge and research interior design professionals lend to a space. “You also find the bored housewife who gets herself a resale license and decides to help all her neighbors and takes them into the design center,” says Nan Rosenblatt, Interior Designer and Director of Interior Architecture at the Academy of Art University, San Francisco.

One way to elevate the profession is to extend the length and breadth of study at college. “The world is more complex in what we know and in what we need to know. Environments cannot be designed by just one profession,” says Denise Guerin, Ph.D., IIDA, ASID, FIDEC, Morse-Alumni Professor Interior Design, University of Minnesota. “It is difficult for designers to learn that information in four years. A master’s degree will give us better prepared designers with greater depths of knowledge and better consumers of research. It will teach designers to become good consumers of research so that they will look for evidence-based design criteria to use in their design solutions.”

A revamped approach to education could include integrating architecture students into interior design classes and vice versa. Lynn Chalmers, Interior Designer and Head of Interior Design, University of Manitoba, Canada, agrees: “We must stop navel-gazing and begin to look beyond our profession for answers to complex problems. We need to build our profession through discourse with others. We constantly sell ourselves short – is this due to modesty or defensiveness?”

Educators believe one way to change the educational system is to involve people from other professions, as well as researchers and educators from other disciplines. Guerin calls for “interdisciplinary dialogue” between interior designers, graphic designers, engineers, architects, urban planners and landscape architects. This way of talking and

working would develop designers who design at the intersection of the disciplines because that is where human and designed environment problems are solved,” Guerin says.

In fact, designers often find opportunities to collaborate only by entering competitions or working on special projects, based on 1,115 responses to *Metropolis Magazine’s School Survey: 2004*. Students and educators see language use (professional jargon), skills and commitments of team members, and differences in work ethic as obstacles to collaboration.

With the awareness that environments impact a person’s psychological well-being will

community, the end-user also must be educated, according to Marci L Zimmerman, IIDA, Senior Interior Designer for the URS Corp., Cleveland. She believes in reaching outside the confines of the industry and showing the benefits of design in the real world. “Trying to explain to someone that you’re doing something for aesthetic reasons, a sense of scale or because of the psychological impact of color can be difficult. It makes it hard for us to sell our ideas.”

At the very least, corporate consumers are beginning to see value in bringing designers into the boardroom as trusted advisors. Bas Berck, Coordinator of Cultural and Commercial Affairs



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come the understanding that the interior design industry should be afforded the respect of a doctor or a lawyer. “You go to a doctor because you don’t feel good, and you know they can make you feel better,” says Judy Pesek, IIDA, Interior Designer and Managing Director for Gensler, Dallas. “A great space can make you feel better every day. Frankly, I think architects deserve more respect than even they get.”

On the positive side, the gap between education and practice has closed in recent years. More interior design professors also are successful design practitioners. And, in turn, the research they come across or carry out as educators is used in the practice of interior design – both by themselves and by their graduate students.

While exposing the practitioners to different ways of thinking would benefit the professional

at the Design Academy Eindhoven in Holland, sees more interior designers being invited to become part of think tanks to determine strategies and corporate policies. The creative person is as valid as the marketing person and financial person.

INTROSPECTION

Rethinking a design firm’s philosophy and setting the standards so clients embrace them from the outset is radical thinking, but it could be key to how others perceive the profession. Aebi applies lateral thinking when it comes to operations. “We work ‘between the disciplines’ – which we refer to as ‘non-disciplinary’ rather than ‘interdisciplinary’ – and our aim is to test out the various disciplines to see what they have to offer. We sometimes transfer well-proven architectural methods to interior design and vice versa. Instead of covering the



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problem over and hoping it will go away, we try to create a workable interface where the conflict would normally arise. There isn't just one way of doing interior design. It's like music, which can have 10 different influences – this gives color to the work.”

Although perceptions shape how quickly practitioners advance, true professionalism comes from within. Instead of lamenting the state of professionalism, practitioners who behave like professionals will have a greater chance of achieving expert standing. “Show your education and training, and use it,” Zimmerman says. “Explain your thought processes to your client, architect or engineer. What we do is somewhat subjective, and you can become egotistical in your own ideas. You should be able to share and bend, to know when to push and when to step back. Also, advance the project beyond the client's expectations.”

Go the extra mile on a project and carry out the work in such a way and with an attitude that invites respect. Zara says his team earns respect from his commercial clients by treating an interior design project the same way as an architectural project: by coming up with a strong philosophy behind the design.

The end-user, or the public, is a different beast. It's difficult to get the public's appreciation of the profession and for them to understand the value. But they need to know that their environment impacts them, at work and at play. As Pesek points out: “People spend a high percentage of their lives at work – the interior can have a big impact on productivity. One of the ways we have built credibility is by adding value. We've worked with many

notable world-class architects designing buildings from the inside out. Doing building analysis to make it work from the inside makes a better building interior.”

For commercial projects, perhaps it's time employers started shouting about the fabulous environments they are paying interior designers to create for their employees and pointing out the benefits that those interiors have on their employees' well-being.

PROMISE

If we look at where architects were a couple of decades ago, we can guess how the future will be for interior design. Architecture didn't always have its current status, and the interior design profession too is in the midst of a maturing process. “Licensure of architects only began in the late 20th century,” says Scott Ageloff, AIA, ASID, IDEC, Interior Designer and Dean of the New York School of Interior Design. “Fifty years from now, the respect for the field and the need for licensure will be so commonly accepted that it will be hard to imagine a time when it was not.”

At the very least, external demands will force change, for there is much change ahead. Berck issues a stark warning: “Architects beware. Consumers are staying at home in their own environments, which have become increasingly important. The public gathering is happening much more on a consumer level inside. Museums, restaurants, bars and clubs – these interior design developments are huge. Interior design is at a critical point and gaining the attention of professionals and consumers. There's a lot to do in the field of interior design.” 📌