The State of Interior Design Education

An in-depth look at how Interior Design education has evolved — and continues to evolve — from the eyes of those who know best: educators, practitioners, HR managers and recent graduates.

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During the last few years, Interior Design has experienced a rapid evolution. From a focus on sustainability to an increased reliance on technology to a growing demand for enhanced professionalism, Interior Design continues to progress despite bleak economic forces that seemed primed to stunt such growth.

But considering that the heart of the profession is education, have Interior Design programs at colleges and universities shifted accordingly?

They have, says Phil Bulone, IIDA, Dean of Education for the International Academy of Design & Technology in Tampa, Fla. Like design, knowledge is dynamic rather than static. So it’s natural for design education to respond to industry changes, says Bulone, who is also an IIDA Knowledge Center Advisor.

“Change is an inherent part of the field of design,” he says. “For example, national Interior Design education standards have gone through multiple major changes over the last four years alone in response to changes in the industry.”

But the current state of Interior Design education is not simply molded by changes in the profession. Educators should modify how they teach based on changes in the learner, says Jill Pable, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Interior Design at Florida State University and former Interior Design Educators Council (IDEC) President. And today’s learner, she says, is vastly different from the one of only a few years ago.

“Overall, today’s students] often have a different approach and attitude toward technology, with an expectation of quickly acquired knowledge,” Pable says. “At times, however, fast pace can threaten deep knowledge and critical thinking. Therefore, it is our responsibility to instill [the] value of in-depth knowledge in learners, as this is a key to complex problem-solving that today’s challenges require. Technology, in fact, can make deep knowledge acquisition very possible, if we take steps to direct it to do so.”

It’s clear that Interior Design education is shifting to meet the needs of today’s student and today’s design firm. But just what is the state of Interior Design education in 2010?

An Age of Technology

A defining factor of Interior Design education in 2010 is the integration of technology. “Technology has served as a significant catalyst for changing how educators and students not only share knowledge, but also how students think about design and how they communicate design ideas,” Bulone says.

This technological shift is echoed in hard data. The 2010 DesignIntelligence “America’s Best Architecture & Design Schools,” an annual survey on the state of Interior Design education, found that 52 percent of respondents say today’s course offerings are significantly more focused on technology integration.

Kristyn Ivey, Student IIDA, IIDA Student Task Force, witnessed this shift during her four years in Marymount University’s Interior Design Graduate Program, which she completed in May.

“The Technology in Interior Design course was incredibly beneficial since it’s crucial to understand the industry’s software today,” she says. “But I was lucky to even take the class since they didn’t begin offering it until my last semester.”

The next evolution on the technology front may be online Interior Design education. The Art Institute of Pittsburgh–Online Division recently launched an online Interior Design bachelors degree program, and many educators expect more schools to follow suit in the near future, Pable says.

“I don’t think we’ll be able to avoid it,” she says. “Like anything, online education is a tool, and it will need to be closely monitored and tweaked as necessary.”

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Given current students’ need for flexibility in their schedules and their deep understanding of technology and mobile devices, Bulone agrees that online education is an inevitable part of the future of Interior Design. “We’re still in a time of transition. Many Interior Design education programs are still evaluating the best methods of delivering the various components of design knowledge through online learning,” he says. “There are opportunities for online hybrid approaches, where students could choose to take certain courses online while taking others in a physical setting.”

There are, however, potential risks when it comes to Interior Design students’ reliance on technology, points out John Newland, Vice President of Architecture and Design for Herman Miller in Zeeland, Mich. Newland works closely with design firm interns through Herman Miller’s Design Summer program, which offers seminars on systems furniture basics, interview skills and more. “Students today are doing amazing things with technology in design. But with technology, you get to a solution and you’re done. You may miss some of the creative process,” he says. “Technology must be counter-balanced with being able to talk about the design. Sometimes communication skills aren’t there [in students].”

But Ginny B. Baxter, IIDA, is optimistic that this balance is starting to be achieved in design schools. The ecologically focused design programs of the ’60s and ’70s gave way to an intense focus on technology in the ’80s, says Baxter. Individual at Work Network Lead, Applied Knowledge, Herman Miller, Zeeland, Mich. But today, educators — who were a product of ’60s and ’70s design schools — are bringing back the focus on human ecology, helping to create a more holistic skill set in students. “I’m starting to see a very healthy and whole approach that balances technical skills and the ability to communicate to a client what happens to a person in a space,” Baxter says. “Students must get both focuses, rather than one or the other.”

Seeing the Big Picture
In recent years, Interior Design education has experienced a deep philosophical shift, from a philosophy of knowledge isolation to one of knowledge integration. Previously, it was an accepted practice to investigate issues only within distinct disciplines, rarely crossing the lines into other ways of thinking. But not today, says Amy Dahm, IIDA, Assistant Professor of Interior Design at Texas Christian University (TCU) in Fort Worth, Texas. “Interior Design education now faces the challenge of providing both excellence in design thinking and processes, in addition to building skill sets required for successful practice in a highly competitive, technology-driven global economy,” she says. “These skill sets include rigor and clarity in written, verbal and visual communications; cultural awareness and sensitivity; seeking and

Facts + Figures
The numbers don’t lie. Here’s a closer look at some of the most recent Interior Design education and job-seeker statistics.

Of the 441 IDA Student Members who recently responded to a survey:

- **74%** plan to concentrate on commercial design
- **91%** think their education has prepared them for their future career
- **62%** of those who have graduated and are not working in a position they anticipated
- **57%** say getting an interview is the most challenging part of finding a job
- **76%** would still choose Interior Design as their career path, if they knew then what they know now about the current economy

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Associate Professor at Florida University
Design Ph.D., her search for full-time employment in Interior Design.
student's role within the extended team."

Interior Design schools, like that of TCU, are addressing this growing need through innovative interdisciplinary programs.

In the DesignIntelligence survey, 44 percent of respondents stated that a significant change in course offerings in the past five years has been more of an emphasis on interdisciplinary collaboration and integrated practice.

This focus on collaboration and integration is helping produce Interior Design graduates who are able to see the big picture. Jan Harmon, Human Resources Manager for HOK in Los Angeles, says recent graduates passing through the global design firm's doors in search of employment have a more holistic view of the profession.

"One change I've observed over the past five years is that a number of Interior Design students are coming out of school with more than an Interior Design degree. They have been exposed to — or purposely studied — other related areas, such as lighting design, business, planning, sustainable design, and have sometimes taken classes with architecture students."

Butlane agrees. He, too, has noticed that Interior Design students today have a better understanding of the profession and its place in society.

"Students continue to express their fascination with the emotional and experiential aspects of design, and they see Interior Design as a means to affect social change," he says. "Additionally, many students are aware of the current social, economic and political realities that affect the Interior Design profession."

A Thick Skin

Job preparedness seems to be lacking in Interior Design education, says key, adding that it would have been invaluable in her search for full-time employment in Interior Design.

In the DesignIntelligence survey, only 14 percent of respondents said more of an emphasis has been placed on professional practice in course offerings over the last five years.

The effects of that missing component are even more hard-felt during difficult economic times like these. "Our challenge hasn’t been in finding talented emerging designers, but an inability to hire them because of the realities of the current project workload,” says Nicole Johnson, Human Resources Manager for HOK in Atlanta. "It's very disappointing."

What’s promising, however, is the increased involvement between schools, Interior Design firms, practicing designers and even manufacturers – a critical part of curriculum development.

"Senior designers are teaching classes while running design firms. They may only teach one night a week, but they’re involved and educating future employees,” Newland says. "Manufacturers are sponsoring design competitions and working closely with design firm interns. We’re all helping students understand the practicality and the real world.” Herman Miller, for example, partners with Interior Design programs to help them conduct research to inform real-world projects, and conducts mock interviews and portfolio reviews with students.

Of all the courses key took in her four years as a graduate student, the most beneficial were those that incorporated in-person critiques from the professionals her professors brought into class.

"It gave me a sense of confidence that some of my designs might actually fly in the real world,” she says. "It also taught me that I need to be able to defend my work and to have a thick skin."

And of all the tools an Interior Design school can instill in its students, these are perhaps some of the most important.