

New Academic and Professional Challenges in Interior Design: Minimizing the Schism

Design d'intérieur : les nouveaux défis académiques et professionnels

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Abstract: The boundaries between creative thinking and business sense are thickening in the profession of interior design. We often find ourselves compromising one to the other. Such conflict is often accentuated by the increased emphasis in academic programs on abstract creativity without venues and connection to the real world. In reverse, practices are more and more inclined to practicality, flashiness and cost reduction.

This paper addresses the issues emanating from this conflict.

While academic programs lack coherence, interdisciplinary approaches and collaboration between various programs and industries, professionals are in desperate need for regulation and legislation. More than ever, the challenges that face both the academic and the professional world should come under scrutiny. However, this study will review and examine recent literature about the ongoing debate and critique found in various circles, which seek to minimize this schism.

Especially attention will be given, throughout this paper, to what students expect, and to what design process to adopt and most of all under what academic vision should all the above fall, in order to push research in that direction.

Keywords: Design ; Schism ; Collaboration ; Approach ; Research ; Preparation.

Résumé : Les frontières entre la pensée créative et le sens des affaires deviennent de plus en plus étanches dans la profession du design d'intérieur. Nous sommes fréquemment contraints de sacrifier l'une pour l'autre. Ces conflits sont souvent aggravés par la place grandissante que les programmes d'enseignement accordent à la créativité abstraite, sans rendez-vous ou connexion avec le monde réel. Par ailleurs, les pratiques sont de plus en plus orientées par l'aspect pratique, le tape-à-l'œil et la

réduction des coûts. Cet article est consacré aux problèmes qui émanent de ce conflit.

Alors que les programmes d'enseignement manquent de cohérence, les approches interdisciplinaires ainsi que la collaboration entre les divers programmes, l'industrie et les professionnels ont désespérément besoin d'être mieux réglementées. Plus que jamais, les défis qui se posent à la fois dans le monde de l'enseignement et dans le monde professionnel doivent être analysés. Cependant, cette étude se penchera sur les critiques et les débats actuels, qui, dans plusieurs milieux, tentent de réduire l'importance de ce schisme. Des exemples tirés du monde de l'enseignement, principalement les studios de design, sont comparés et analysés afin de relever les discordances entre la formation et les réalités de la pratique.

Une attention particulière et constante est accordée aux attentes que devraient avoir les étudiants, aux processus de design qui devraient être adoptés et, par-dessus tout, à la vision universitaire qui devrait les soutenir afin d'orienter la recherche dans cette direction.

Mots-clés : Design, schisme, collaboration, approche, recherche, préparation.

Introduction

It is often the case, in many recognized disciplines, where an education finds its natural embodiment in a professional framework. Instead, and while the interior design profession is continuously making efforts to gain recognition, whether for an academic accreditation, apprenticeship, licensure or self-regulation through professional associations (Anderson, Honey & Dudek 2007), fresh graduates are seldom recognized as part of a professional organization. In that sense, Sullivan defines a profession as “an occupation characterized by specialized training usually acquired by formal education and apprenticeship, public recognition on the part of the community of practitioners to regulate their own standards of practice, and a commitment to provide service to the public that goes beyond the economic welfare of the practitioner” (Sullivan 2004, p. 36). Without public recognition, and by this definition, one might ask if interior design is a true profession (Anderson, Honey & Dudek 2007).

Moreover the design world is changing. Designers and design firms in general are now experimenting in uncharted territory, transcending many disciplines, by using new techniques and approaches (Rodgers 2008). New types of design practices are emerging, and new interconnections and communication across domains are bringing together people from across art (Dykes, Rodgers & Smyth 2009). Current literature review

dwell into the ability to communicate across domains through exposure to outside disciplines; emerging designs labeled as multidisciplinary, crossdisciplinary, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary are some of the approaches that offer this type of communication between disciplines (Dykes, Rodgers & Smyth 2009) (Petts, Owens & Bulkeley 2008). In “Crossing the boundaries”, Klein claims that knowledge is increasingly interdisciplinary and that boundary crossing that stimulates interaction, interlanguages, hybrid communities as well as new institutional structures has become a defining characteristic of age (Klein 1996).

This paper argues that while boundaries between creative thinking and business sense are thickening in the profession of interior design, and emanating conflicts from academic programs and real world challenges are quite obvious, there is a need to establish a new framework for the interior design profession, starting from the academic level, to minimize the schism between both ends of the ladder, and meet the needs and desires of future generations. This new framework needs to strengthen its foundations on an academic level through research, collaboration and mental preparation, as well as on a professional level through legislation and public recognition. This paper will attempt to review recent literature regarding discrepancies between academic and practice, new design processes and different research techniques, whether in academia or in practice.

It will also be discussed throughout this paper, that on an academic level, design studios provide a great opportunity to convey the essence of research and collaboration through a more developed design process, while mental preparation, all along the learning process, is essential in providing fresh graduates with a great deal of understanding on what to expect from their future practices. Moreover, it will be discussed how legislation and public recognition on a professional level have a big role to play in boosting graduate's confidence and faith in today's practice.

Shifting practices

The changes that design faces at the moment can be witnessed on a professional, economical and technological level, by the blurring of traditional design disciplines, the transformation of funding and employment patterns and the introduction of new techniques (Rodgers 2008). In order to accompany those changes in contemporary creative design works, it is essential to review the existing disciplinary framework and propose alternative approaches that will facilitate innovative work through collaboration (Dykes, Rodgers & Smyth 2009).

While it is essential for designers to have extensive knowledge of building materials and finishes, to be familiar with building techniques, to be aware of costs, to have a great understanding of building regulations and laws; not withstanding a good understanding of the subject's history and current trends, a creative mind and the ability to produce high end interiors (Brooker & Stone 2010), they often find themselves struggling to gain acceptance as true professionals (Foti 2010). However Foti maintains that while interior designers seek to protect the health, safety and welfare of the public, it is critical and crucial to legislate the profession in order to differentiate the latter from those without the necessary expertise or credentials to maintain such values (Foti 2010). In an attempt to stimulate further conversation on the future of the profession, a scenario of four futures was introduced (Carll White 2009). In its first point, it was stated that interior design should become licensed in all states and should be identified as the sole profession dealing specifically with the interior environment. Only then a collaborative design community can flourish between architects and interior designers (Carll White 2009).

Furthermore the conflict between education and professional practice is perpetuated by the lack of identity and the fuzzy role of the interior designer in today's practice. Fresh interior design graduates are often asked to wear many hats at the same time, including the contractor's (Foti 2010). The evolution of the profession, from a time where clients relied on contractors for help to the current situation where professional interior services are being recognized as essential, the designer is becoming key in the collaboration process between architects and contractors. However the early involvement of the designer in the building process is still undervalued, and its influence on the space planning and project's concept is yet to be substantial (Foti 2010).

According to Martin, interior design has worked for the past 50-plus years to gain identity in three key areas: the workplace, the legal arena, and the public's opinion (Martin 2008). Martin maintains that in order to move from a practice to a profession, interior design has to meet several steps outlined in professionalization theory. These steps include: (1) name change (interior decoration to interior design; (2) education requirements; (3) comprehensive examination; (4) legal recognition/regulation; (5) professional organizations membership; (6) code of ethics; and (7) continuing education (Martin 2008). While these steps summarize the changes needed in order to bridge the gap between practice and profession, we have yet to achieve the last six steps.

Another way to bridge the gap between education and practice is through an extensive and complete apprenticeship process.

Apprenticeship is often disregarded as key in the shaping of the young designer. Often seen as a mandatory step for their inclusion in the professional world, it may well become their way to the top (Knackstedt 2013), designers look at apprenticeship as their last task in the educational process and a task to be as swift as possible. It is the role of both educators and employers to facilitate this task and thus making sure the shift between both worlds, that is the academic and the professional, to become a fruitful and successful one. One major problem fresh graduates face while conducting their apprenticeship process in various firms is the lack of responsibility they are given. They are often assigned to handling marginal design issues such as completing other designer's work or preparing presentations, and they are seldom put in charge of complete design projects and site supervision, even assisted. Apprenticeship should be a natural extension of an education and whatever students are taught in school they should be developing and mastering early in practice. It is a crucial part of their mental preparation and their development as fulfilled design individuals. Apprenticeship, even though crucial in the development process, can only be fruitful after fulfilling a thorough and revised scholarly curriculum, whether through major changes in the teaching process or punctual interventions such as design studios.

A time for scrutiny

When asked in a Perspective interview what job position would she create that hadn't existed previously in her firm, Angie Lee, Vice President of the firm SmithGroup JJR answered that there was a gap in the research department and job positions that would execute pre-move surveys to provide clients with proof of outcome were needed (Sokol 2013).

Current academic programs stress on abstract creativity as a tool for teaching future designers, it is especially notable in design studios where research is still confined to finding precedents. However in the CIDA professional standards for 2014, and as part of the design process standards, one of the program expectations is "the exposure of students to a range of design research and problem solving methods" that should lead in terms of student's expectations to "gather, evaluate, and apply appropriate and necessary information and research findings to solve the problem (pre-design investigation)" (CIDA 2013, p. 14).

On the other hand, Rodgers highlights the issue of priority in the current learning process. He poses the question of intellectual capital versus craft ability and how in recent years there has been an emphasis placed on the former to the detriment of the latter (Rodgers 2008). While he maintains

that there should be awareness to prioritizing knowledge over craft (Rodgers 2008), it is the issue of the specialist versus the generalist nature of the designer that is being celebrated. On a similar note, designer Karim Rashid describes design as a political, creative and social act and admits that during his years of teaching, one of his greatest disappointments was the lack of theory and study of the world's bigger issues. He maintains that, "the more one is informed of the world, the better one is a designer" [Rashid in (Foti 2010)].

Moreover, current literature introduces some interesting approaches to the design process, such as evidence-based design and action research. Traditionally associated with healthcare architecture, evidence-based design (EBD) is making inroads into being part of the process for designing schools, office spaces, hotels, restaurants, museums, prisons and even residences. In short, EBD is when decisions about physical space are based on research and data (Whitemyer 2010). In current practice and according to Hamilton in "Evidence-Based Design: The Highest Form of Professionalism" (Martin & Guerin 2010), it is important, in order to conduct any evidence based design, to: identify the client's goals; identify the firm's goals; identify the top key design issues; convert design issues to research questions; gather information; develop a critical interpretation of the evidence; create evidence-based design concepts; develop hypotheses; and select measures.

Another tool to improving teaching is action research. It is a practical research methodology that usually is described as requiring three conditions to be met. First, its subject matter normally is situated in a social practice that needs to be changed; second, it is a participatory activity where the researchers work in equitable collaboration; and third, the project proceeds through a spiral of cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting in a systematic and documented study (Swann 2002). In other words, it is essential to highlight social issues to be changed, raise awareness to context problems and through participatory actions and collaboration, understand and observe in order to plan.

Knowledge and practice can only merge in an environment where social, economical, political, technological and sustainable issues are debated. Throughout the learning process in interior design, the studio is capable of providing that kind of environment.

The Studio

The design studio model in education has become, in its effectiveness, its resourceful and creative problem solving process, an inspiration for many other disciplines (Ankerson & Pable 2008). Its primary focus,

through topic based horizontal and vertical studios, is the development of a personal process of discovery leading towards a design solution; it also focuses on the analytical thinking, technical abilities and graphic and verbal presentation skills. Design studios are expected to push students to develop research inquiry, analysis, synthesis, criticism, collaboration and communication (Ankerson & Pable 2008).

As a design studio teacher, it has been always challenging to provide students with contemporary topics open for debate. As part of the design process, the students are asked, early in the studio, to research debatable topics, find relevant information, understand the proposed topics in order to set some rules and guidelines before developing their project. They are often asked to detach themselves from the physical project itself, the outcome, and focus primarily on the socio-economical and political aspects of the issues, position themselves in the debate and be straight forward with their ideas. In one particular studio, designing the optimal living space project was proposed, and debates that followed celebrated issues such as poverty, family, and ethics along with other design issues.

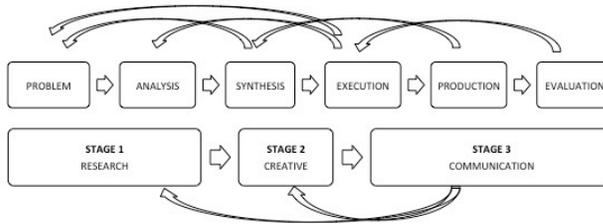
However, this model has its limitations. Zborowski in “Integrating Research into a Reflective Practice of Design” (Martin & Guerin 2010) states that research must be integrated further into interior design curriculum. She maintains that research should be incorporated in all studio classes and integrated into each project, helping students understand the application of research to improve their designs. Going back to the studio process, it was noted, as in many of the studios that I teach, that research at that stage was confined to finding precedents, difficulties were encountered while trying to broaden the debate subjects in order to arrive to strong and solid research hypothesis. Incorporating a more defined and conclusive research methodology in the design process can only enrich the process.

While other learning theories and teaching strategies such as Gardner’s Multiple Intelligence and Kolb’s Experiential Learning Theory (Ankerson & Pable 2008), attempt to shed light on the learning process, one model in particular serves as a base for a more complete studio process. Bloom’s Taxonomy model, a classification of intellectual behavior levels in learning, is based on cognitive learning. This model identifies levels of knowledge recall and intellectual skills, from the simple recognition of facts to the more complex mental level defined as evaluation (Ankerson & Pable 2008).

Applying Bloom’s Taxonomy model to the design process makes way for a more descriptive model that integrates research into the design

process can thus be summarized in three stages (Figure 1): research, creative thinking and communication (Swann 2002). Here the design process becomes a research process and “the action of designing is the same as the moment of synthesis that occurs in all forms of research, when the various parts of the data and analysis begin to make sense” (Swann 2002, p. 55).

Figure 1: The Design Process



Source 1: Adapted by author from (Swann 2002)

For a better quality of life

Through years of study and few months of apprenticeship, armed with optimism and faith in the industry, students are eager to face the challenges of the profession. One would expect from students after such journey, to have a clear vision of their future as professionals, it is often not the case. Much of the questions I get asked right after their graduation and through their job search process revolves around the nature of the work they will be performing; should it be a routine technical job or a creative reflection on interior design issues, as if today’s job market status allowed such luxury in choice.

In the US, and according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), breaking into the interior design field can happen through different jobs such as interior design assistant, CAD drafter, sales associate, or interior designer (United States Department of Labor 2010).

Unfortunately in Lebanon there are no reliable statistics regarding that field but one would assume from the echoes amongst graduating students and practicing colleagues that most entry-level interior designers are offered jobs that rely on technical drafting, at least for the first three years. In itself, the assumption is not dramatic, it is rather realistic, but how are our students technically prepared to face these tasks and most importantly how mentally prepared are they to face such reality?

It has been stated earlier, that mental preparation paves its way on an academic level and strengthens throughout the apprenticeship process.

Our students need to be prepared for more diverse job opportunities. Greater collaboration between the profession and the world of academia is needed in order to establish better understanding of working practices in both research and professional practice (Swann 2002). Through interdisciplinary approaches and collaboration, various design fields are available for scrutiny, and fresh graduates, through masters programs and extended studies, need to enhance their belief in creating better environments. It is after all the quintessence of the interior design profession to provide the public with a better quality of life.

Conclusion

A new disciplinary framework for a new academic vision

It was argued throughout this paper that in order to bridge the gap between practice and profession, there is a need to establish a new framework for the interior design profession. For that to be achieved, several steps are needed, whether on an academic level or on a professional level.

It was discussed that throughout the introduction of research early in the design process, a better understanding of the world's bigger issues can be achieved. Whether through evidence-based design or action research, it will be important to identify certain goals regarding clients, firms and key design issues. In order to select appropriate design measures it will be needed to ask questions, gather information, develop critical interpretation and create evidence-based designs. In order to plan, and through participatory actions and collaboration, social practices need to be changed and awareness to contextual problems should be raised.

We have seen that greater collaboration within the profession and between the profession and the world of academia is needed in order to establish a better understanding of working practices in both research and professional practice. Through interdisciplinary approaches, interaction between different disciplines will be stimulated; hybrid communities will emerge; thus blurring the traditional design disciplines making way for more creative contemporary designs. Collaboration should also be enhanced on an academic level by implementing a more flexible design process that allows students to go back in forth between research, creativity and communication. Studios provide exemplary environments to favor such interactions.

Through revised curriculum and more in depth apprenticeship, a solid mental preparation for fresh graduates can be achieved. New job perspectives, better preparation and a stronger belief in changing the

public's quality of life are essential to the development of the profession. Extended studies and pin-pointing master's programs are also valid and recommended options for students wishing to pursue a more developed research oriented paths, bridging thus a vital gap between academia and practice.

On the other hand, graduates often find themselves struggling to gain acceptance as true professionals and while interior designers seek to protect the health, safety and welfare of the public, it is critical and crucial to legislate the profession in order to differentiate the latter from those without the necessary expertise or credentials to maintain such values. Legislation and professional organization membership are crucial in framing the profession and creating for graduates a sense of belonging in a community.

Interior design has become hybrid and public recognition and true understanding of the profession by others is key to its development. Shaping public perception of our value and strengthening our image as a profession, seems of utmost importance. Gaining identity in the public's opinion should be the next step after gaining identity in the workplace and in the legal arena.

This paper has addressed the issue of conflicts between education and practice, and through current literature review and studio teaching experience, has attempted to shed some light into today's academic expectations and the proposed professional field. One might ask if we wish to go down the path of the specialist or should we celebrate the generalist nature of designers? While academic programs are trying to follow current trends by updating their curriculum, in order to assist the shifts in the profession, the question remains whether our image and perception of the profession will eventually impose ethical practice guidelines, solid legal identity and long awaited public recognition?

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