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The Gaps Between Interior Design and Architecture

Henry Hildebrandt

"'Imaginary' universes are so much more beautiful than this stupidly constructed 'real' one," wrote English mathematician G. H. Hardy, more than 60 years ago.

Hardy was acknowledging the messy business of figuring out the complexity of the world we think we know and live in with the world we don't fully understand; a world of abstraction involved with the interrelationships of particle theory as the smallest component and seemingly ordered system of the cosmos. The dilemma of modern physics and the more disputed concepts of contemporary metaphysics in explaining our world is, in many ways, similar to the confusion between the terms *interior design* and *interior architecture.* Both imply the act of designing within either a building or a space and have been adopted to differentiate unique foci of work of the interior environment. But the free use of the terms and the casual interchangeability of them by both professionals and academics establish a confused state that creates ambivalence in the conceptual framework of this specialized design focus. This is a between and in-between situation producing a disparity of clearly defined roles and services for the comprehensive design of an interior environment; a complexity of space, human experiences, and comfort.

A critical need in both architecture and interior design is to realize that their roles, methodologies, and service expectations are continually evolving within a shifting social, economic, and political culture. As such, a *professional* stature develops within a dynamic state of examination and critical re-examination related to a professional culture, economic system, and contemporary social value system. This specialized status of professionalism is buttressed by an intellectual rigor and continual evaluation of its theory and process. Equally important is the fundamental requirement of ongoing examination to facilitate interrelated participants in a setting conducive to sharing and clarifying current issues that impact all design related professions and professionals dedicated to the environments that exist within and around the building shell and the particular architectural condition.

Traditionally, the disciplines of architecture and interior design view themselves as distinctive and singular; being both boundary-tied by professional legislation as well as seeing themselves as offering specialized service roles. This is reinforced by a protective "turf mentality" advanced and guarded by their respective professional and licensure organizations. While the line between services appears simplistically clear to the public—architecture is about mostly the outside of buildings, interior design directs itself to the inside—the complexity of an in-between 'interior architecture' obscures this view. What should be clear (and is to a small number of professionals, academics, and journalists) is there is a new set of circumstances in contemporary society that demands a shift in thinking: new problems require new approaches for creative solutions.

If we understand that the goal of design is to make our world better, disciplinary boundaries melt away and territorial squabbling dissolves. What emerges is a common core of design knowledge and a design methodology of problem solving geared toward analytical (problem definition) and outcome processes (problem solving) connected to human and environmental needs. This core is layered with communication skills sets that are both particular to individual design disciplines and shared between them. This common language provides for the transfer of abstract conceptual thought (and symbolic content) to a practical and applied language understood by practitioners and /or by the public on several levels. Legitimacy for each discipline is then validated on understanding of the broader parameters and the specific use-needs to be served. Architecture, interior architecture and interior design are now subsets together with graphic, industrial, landscape design, and so on—of an activity focused to solving problems for individuals and their collective societies to house, enhance, and prepare for a better future.

But the need for clarity on what differentiates interior design from interior architecture is a critical question to avoid confusion and misrepresentation in professional roles and academic curricula structures. Most importantly, this issue needs to be grounded in a forum to bring moral legitimacy to these design activities in separating their use from a serious, well guided use linked to finding optimal design solutions from a consumer marketing objective removed from the actual concept or service to be purchased.

The Question

ABOUT DESIGNINTELLIGENCE

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IN THIS ISSUE

Questions of shared and distinct content as well as professional services between interior architecture and interior design have received only minimal discussion. Often the term *Interior Architecture* is applied in a descriptive language in which the architectural design or architectural language is seen as a continuation or an extension of the exterior architecture to the inside of the structure in terms of detail, scale/proportion, spatial sequence and other such architectural components. Often, "an interior architecture" is applied to the inside of a building as design elements are carried to the exterior, distinguishing a "holistic creation." (Kurtich and Eakin, 1993) Many interior design profession organizations and a number of academics are occupied with developing a pure definition of interior design as a professional discipline structured on its own unique "body of knowledge" to distinguish interior design from other design professionals and practice. This position emerges as disconnected from a greater and more urgent need to critically examine a theoretical context linked to the culture of environmental design professionalism (architectural, interior design, landscape, etc. design professions). The term *Interior Architecture* must have an ensuing dialogue to secure an understood set of parameters equally applied in professional practice and within the academic setting.

Interior Architecture/ Interior Design

Different and often subtle conceptual constructs have emerged as conditional parameters to differentiate interior architecture from interior design. This involves architecture as being concerned with more than a mere building of practical and economical needs, and more than a mere structure of enclosure systems. Architecture as a discipline has always been engaged in the struggle to raise human and spiritual meaning to a higher purpose and a meaningful focus for at least three millenniums. An architectural structure is an expression of cultural principles and deliberate design choices based on current technology and understandings—its *meaning*. This is the essence of all architecture. These ideals are accomplished in the design process through a language of reduction. It is achieved through narrowing abstract notions of ideas and symbols or program to compose a unity of form, space, detail, materials, etc. in order to achieve a Vitruviius' dicta of firmness, commodity, and delight. Interior architecture is never removed from the architectural condition, and this reductionist ideal or a reductionism conceptual base. An interior architecture manifests itself as *the* meaning imbedded within the building inside as well as out, and as such must be housed within the practice of architecture and professional architectural services.

In addition, an interior architectural product is placed within the business of architectural practice. This is more than designing the outside condition along with interior components; it involves the contractual agreement of design services encompassing interior elements equally with shell and site conditions associated in building design. Consider the turn-of-the-19th-century architectural practice of California architects Greene and Greene. The 1909 Gamble house serves as good illustration. Better known for its interiors with its expression of peg and plank detail inside and out and the sensitive use of materials, the interiors are often presented as a large residential cabinetwork with fine wood details and articulated connections. An understanding of their professional practice displays an architecture/interior architecture fully realized as an agreement between designer and client. The open plan extends outward to porches and landscape. The fine and initiate detail has the same character in and out; all aspects of the design are brought together as a result of Greene and Greene's coordinated control of each element.

In contrast, interior design is grounded in the condition of additive assemblies and separate contracted services. While the design processes of architecture and interior design share the same procedural sequence and a core discipline vocabulary, interior design, both as a discipline and in its product, is (or can be) free of the weight of the architecture. Additive assemblies within the 'interior' may establish an independent language, often very different and removed from the architecture that houses it. Materials, finishes, details, stylistic motifs, architectural elements, and spaces may be free from the architectural language of the building. Both the work of interior architecture and interior design carry the ethical and legal responsibility of health, safety, and welfare as well as special needs and sustainability. But tenant or retail space development in a shopping mall or mixed-use complex, for example, almost never engages the surrounding architecture, and is intentionally conceptually and contractually removed from the building shell.

Several precedents help further illustrate these conceptual parameters of interior architecture and interior design. Louis Kahn's Yale Center for British Art and British Studies of 1969 typifies a beautiful balance between the exterior and interior. Kahn's work exhibits a high level of accomplishment of interior architectural work in form, materials, and space. The concrete structural frame is in-fill with stainless steel on the exterior and white oak within the gallery spaces. The exterior is understated in fronting the hard-edged commercial street on the edge of Yale's campus. But the interior softens because of the natural oak panels detailed to recall the concrete structure but not focusing on it. The interior is bathed in natural light fed by specially designed skylights in the roof which extend two and three story public spaces. This is interior architecture at its best; the interior materials, assemblies, proportioned spaces and lighting all are choreographed to reflect an inward architectural program and manage to minimize the urban context.

Thematically shifting to the unlikely interior design projects of Adolf Loos, a clear interior design approach can be observed. Loos' elaborate interior work, particularly before his 1910 Stiener House, such as the Karntner Bar (American Bar) 1907, Manz bookstore, and Knize clothing store of 1909, display his classical understanding and ability to craft an interior design solution removed from the architectural shell. Loos added elements to the architectural shell, removing the engagement of the architectural vocabulary from the design of the interiors. Even though Loos, as Reyner Banham notes, acknowledges his belief in an "undecorated style" his interior work in many ways references an admiration of Karl Friedrich Schinkel and his work.

In Schinkel's Schoss Charlottenhof (1824 –29), the Tent Room (after 1830) was set up originally as a kind of stage set for ladies-in-waiting and appears as a seemingly decorative approach to finishing an interior space. However, as Schinkel would have it, the Tent Room is an individually designed space structurally tied to 18th-century Prussian austerity and high culture but removed from the formal neo-classical compositional language imbedded within both the architectural shell, landscaping, and the interior architecture of the plan and the furnishing in other adjacent spaces. Schinkel's Charlottenhof represents a masterfully unified composition, shifting from a coherent formal language between landscape, architecture, and interior architecture to the finite interior design solution of the Tent Room. The Tent Room conceptually and in application denies the existence of the building and the interior architecture of the adjacent spaces.

The connection between Loos and Schinkel is important in considering the conflict for Loos given his Please see next pagepolemic stance between *adding* interior elements to the inside of architecture as an appliqué without a formal connection to the exterior. But while the Tent Room at Charlottenhof is an interior design approach in additive assemblies—the 'tent' structures over the beds for example—Loos understood (and we should) Schinkel's ability to distilled neo-Classical geometry, pattern, and detail equally on the exterior and on the interior and yet independently add elements free from the building shell. Thus, one can witness in Charlottenhof the unity between the inside and the outside while keeping the architectural language separate from the interior of the Tent Room. Charlottenhof represents a duality; interior architecture at one level acknowledging the interior program and a highly articulated interior design solution with the design treatment of the Tent Room.

Articulating the conceptual relationship of interior architecture and interior design idea may appear overly complex as a reduction/additive thought process , but it is this *foundational* or conceptual relationship of using the architectural language of reduction to define interior architectural ideals and the additive assembling concepts to distinguish interior design. The point is that from a conceptual position through the completed project, interior architecture requires the architecture to be acknowledged, embraced and used. An interior design work is free to subvert the architecture and the architectural condition. Interior design may or may not acknowledge the architecture that provides the enclosure system; it is a process that operates on several levels and in collaboration with many disciplines. The legitimacy of interior design as a profession or discipline is not in question when understanding the broad and specific needs of facilitating our contemporary society in the built environment, inside and out.
—Henry Hildebrandt

Hildebrandt is associate director of undergraduate programs within the School of Architecture and Interior Design in the College of Design, Architecture and Planning at the University of Cincinnati. He has been a faculty member since 1986. In the 2003 *Almanac of Architecture & Design/DesignIntelligence*
annual practitioners' survey of which schools best prepare students for professional practice, the University of Cincinnati again ranked no. 1 for interiors programs, a position the school has held for the past five years. Hildebrandt last wrote for *DesignIntelligence* in November 2003.

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Posted by Nitesh 01/12/05

we looking for infrastructure for special needs school for orphanage childrens

(i mean to say exactly designs for the special needs school)

Posted by Fairhurst 01/14/05

Thank you for this well researched and very thoughtful article. We are experiencing differences between our architects and interior designers. We'll circulate these ideas and appreciate the perspectives.

Posted by Vancouver Club 02/03/05

Ed,
Can you explain why many of the best design firms have yet to figure out a good way to integrate interior design and architecture in their firms. You say this attitude is born in schools but what about the new leadership? What can a firm principal do to shake up these old habit patterns?

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