



Valuing the Intuitive: Reintroducing Design Into Interior Design Education

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Recently I observed a facilitated session with 15 invited participants representing interior design, structural engineering, architecture, industrial and product design, graphic design, lighting design, landscape architecture, design research, technology, construction management, and manufacturing who discussed the driving factors perceived as influencing collaboration across design-related professions. Although the discussion centered on collaboration, I noticed an interesting subtext emerging throughout the day: one which identified qualities, skills, and traits of strong, marketable interior design graduates. By the end of the session, two main key themes emerged, both of which could apply to graduates of almost any discipline. The first major theme was leadership. This included an understanding of business principles, facilitation skills, an ability to see the big picture, design with intelligence, and to communicate well. The second major theme focused on rational thinking. This included the ability to identify and frame problems, advance evidence-based design, show quantifiable benefits, and be current on the litany of prescriptive solutions for life safety, sustainability, ergonomics, and material science. By the end of the session, most participants agreed that they wanted to hire the impossibly accomplished graduate who met the aforementioned standards.

Both of these themes, leadership and rational thinking, are certainly valid and can be enhanced through a well-conceived curriculum and creative teaching. I believe that it is incredibly important to emerge from an undergraduate program with the ability to cultivate leadership skills and apply critical thinking. Yet many of the characteristics, traits, attributes, and skills identified within these themes may be best learned on the job via experience. It was, however, that which was largely omitted or only tangentially touched upon, that was a more telling and interesting theme: *nobody* mentioned the ability to design well, to have passion for design as foundation elements facilitating collaboration.

Are we developing the right mix of traits in our design students? Cultivating the ideal design student means balancing the largely prescriptive, vocationally skill-based criteria that act as a checklist of hireable traits and re-emphasizing the ability to think creatively and enhance visual awareness. This means placing more emphasis on the development of new models, questioning convention, and crafting an experience for the user. This also means exposing students to the breadth of creativity and the high level expectations of allied programs such as graphics, architecture, and industrial design. As an example, the often mediocre and naïve graphics associated with Interior Design education need to be replaced with the sophistication and polish demanded in allied professions both at the university and in the field (Figure 1).

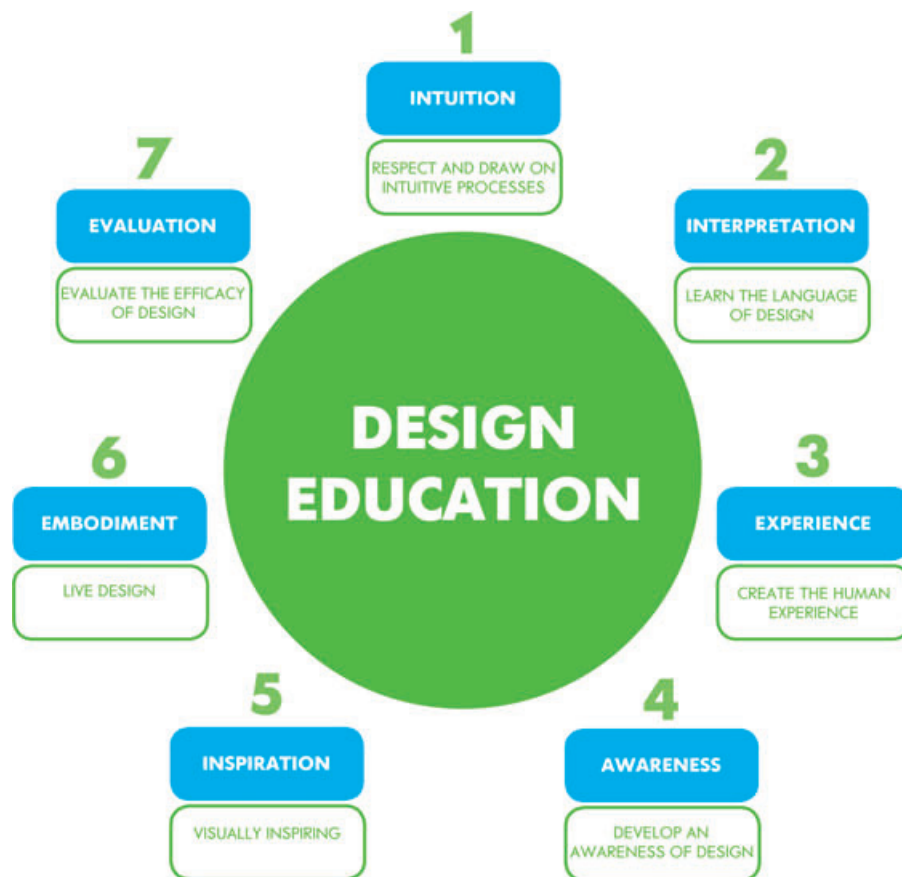
The Seven Most Important Attributes for Entry-Level Interior Designers

Looking back on this roundtable, I would have liked to have seen other areas emphasized more strongly as critical for beginning Interior Designers. These seven suggested areas provide the foundation for strong design upon which experience, additional skills, and continued learning can be layered. Naturally a young designer will find his or her strength as a leader, a conceptualist, a pragmatist, and/or a manager. But without respect for the power of design and an understanding of design as the core skill, no true design or collaboration with sister disciplines will emerge. My suggestions are as follows:

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1. Respect and Draw on Intuitive Processes
2. Learn the Language of Design
3. Create the Human Experience
4. Develop Design Awareness
5. Visually Inspire
6. Live Design
7. Evaluate the Efficacy of Design

Figure 1. Design Education Diagram.



Respect and Draw on Intuitive Processes

My colleague and CEO of Studios Architecture, Todd DeGarmo, understands the power of intuition and has developed a business and a culture around this notion. As designers, DeGarmo maintains, we must balance the rational with intuitive, but always with the understanding that intuitive learning and intuitive design is where our real value lies. Intuition is what allows us to circumvent the trap of linear thinking, sense when the human experience will be elevated, and invent new models for our clients.

Intuition allows us to invent the new, understand emotions and meaning, test combinations that may appear to have no logical means of being achieved, and generally inject spontaneity, fun, and surprise into the built environment. An example of moving away from the intuitive can be seen in the strong movement emerging in interior design toward design based on proof (evidence-based design). Although I respect the intent of those who embrace evidence-based design, I disagree with the term and interpretation of research eclipsing the value of design intuition. *Evidence-informed* design might be a more appropriate way of incorporating research into the design process as evidence is only one of many things that inspire or inform design. Furthermore, evidence-based design also implies precedent, which encourages adaptation over innovation. Without the intuitive to imagine new models, provide the unexpected by surprising the client, design risks devolving into a commodities-based practice, selling more or less what every other firm sells for lower and lower fees. If design is really based on one overarching principle, it should be the development of the human experience and not solely on what can be empirically evidenced, measured, or proven.

Learn the Language of Design

Entry-level Interior Designers need to have a solid understanding of allied disciplines to facilitate meaningful discourse. The designer that lacks this knowledge may risk being invisible on the project team and less likely to be thought of as a true professional. The best way to succeed is to have a working knowledge of the issues, terms, and value of complementary professions. Knowing how to talk to professional partners' signals respect, a willingness to learn, and an awareness of the design process. The language of design also extends to clients as well. An inability to communicate design in terms that a client can grasp and comprehend is what kills a lot of very good ideas. Interior Designers need to understand how best to verbally communicate appropriately to different audiences, all of whom have a stake in the design process.

With that said, design itself has a language for communicating the formal aspects of design (Figure 2). This is how architecture, interior design, graphic design, landscape design, and related design professions are able to communicate among themselves. Knowing the elements of design, the principles of color theory, and the design process, etc., need to be second nature to any designer. If these elements are not within the designer's grasp, it is unlikely that either the design process or the resulting design will have the necessary depth or rigor to be impactful.

Create the Human Experience

Imagining the human experience is not particularly a rational process. There are not many ways in which joy, exhilaration, and sense of well-being can be perfectly predicted or drawn from prescriptive measures. Certainly insightful research exists on the environment's ability to reduce stress, influence or suppress certain behaviors, and provide a sense of well being. But these findings alone cannot possibly explain the complexities and nuances of the human experience in the built environment (Figure 3).

As an example, Steve Orfield of Orfield Labs in Minnesota has certainly uncovered qualities of the built environment that elicit a powerful sense of spirituality in churches through his work with visual juries. Orfield (2004) states that, "Religious architecture is a noble practice of designing spiritual spaces, but often the architect and the client have very different feelings about the intent and results for very predictable reasons" (p. 6). His work, which uses perceptual modeling techniques, allow the observer to experience space types virtually, and is used to understand the impact of spatial qualities of churches and synagogues. The collection

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Figure 2. Study of Object, Form, Repetition.

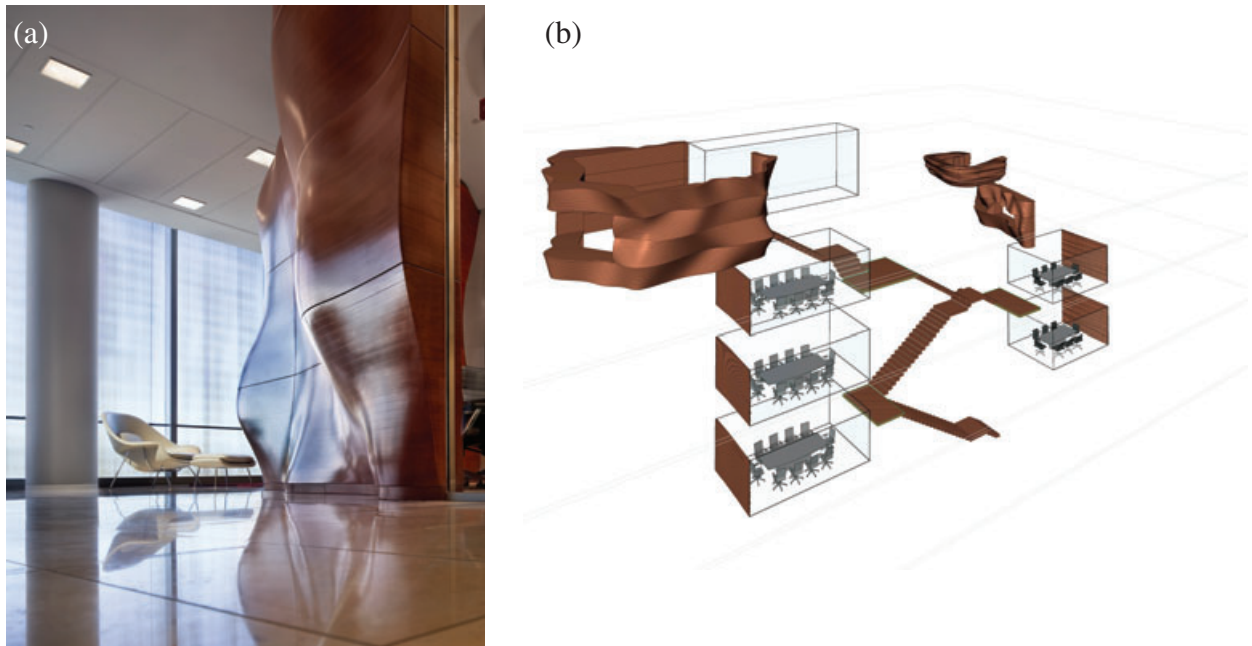


Figure 3. Designing an Experience versus an Object.



of spatial attributes that are perceived to have such qualities as spiritual, inspiring, and calm are very different from those who experience a model and those that are elicited without a perceptual model for reference. Certainly designers can be informed by this research. However, this research and other studies alone will not result in the creation of the novel, the new or the imagined turned into reality. Interior Designers are in the position to create a better world. No one enters the profession to churn out uninspired drack or blindly accept prevailing models. In the best sense, design intuition encompasses empathy, emotional intelligence, cultural

literacy, and simple curiosity to create a better experience for the occupant. These “intelligences,” while not directly called intuition, appeared to be common ground upon which the work-session participants appeared fairly unified in their recommendations for improvement.

Develop Design Awareness

From my position at the interview table, it sometimes seems to me as if Interior Design students are in eminent danger of being insular. How can design educators help instill in these students a sense of curiosity about great design and an understanding of precedent? One of the best educators I know, Professor Jan Jennings of Cornell University, has a remarkable way of creating this awareness as part of the design process. Her teaching techniques make current design and design history accessible and relevant. Often experiential, she leads students to understand the importance of design by linking design with purpose to create a holistic interior and cultural experience for her students. For example, in the history course students learn about traditional fifteenth-century tea house design as small space mediation and ritual circulation by participating in a Japanese tea ceremony. In the studio they interpret the fifteenth-century elongated path by designing their own in their studio space and building it in full-scale using current materials. Jennings’ students have a greater understanding between design, ritual, message, and outcome through experiential learning. This progressive pedagogical approach links the evolution of design and the development of new models with influence, function, and appeal.

Visually Inspire

Some of the best songwriters cannot read music. Some highly innovative designers cannot draw well using conventional media. However, an inability to draw fluidly is not an excuse for students not producing strong, visuals to illustrate their concepts. This is the primary means by which an idea is communicated. Interior Design is, after all, a visually based, experiential field (Figure 4). Graphics and renderings must be strong even if the designer cannot produce them alone. Clearly digital media has opened up doors for people who would not have the hand skills necessary even 20 years ago. Whatever the media, all visuals should be strong, inspiring, and communicate the experience. Even today I find students presenting personalized material boards, rendered floor plans, and illogical perspectives that fail to communicate the experience. It is critically

Figure 4. Elevate the Human Experience.



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important that students understand the power of visual communication and that this is an essential element of the field to which they are entering. Often, the ideas behind the work are strong but the presentation ruins that message.

Live Design

As a junior designer I once interviewed with the uber-talented Deborah Lehman-Smith of Lehman Smith McLeish, based in Washington, DC. She explained that a good designer lived design and that everything they touched, everything they saw got scrutinized from a design perspective because design has to be one's passion. That truth remains with me to this day. I believe that good design is not about elitism but about the universal quest for innovation, beauty, and desire for self-expression. If the Interior Design student is not passionate and not immersed in the world of design, their life as a designer will be less rewarding.

Recently I spoke to a group of Interior Design students and I was struck by how little they seemed to reflect on their passion for design in their presentations. It occurred to me that they did not seem to live design and this became the topic of conversation. As I looked at the curriculum, the instructors, student work, and the environment, I realized that nothing was truly design oriented and nothing was truly inspiring. Clearly the program was self-selecting. A student should not come out of a 4-year accredited program without having begun forming a personal design philosophy. Although this philosophy will no doubt change and evolve, the discipline and passion to understand design should naturally lead one to form a framework and perspective for design decisions.

Imagine the joy when one interviews a bright, young interior design student whose curiosity and passion for design is evident. These people exist, of course, but not in the quantities one would expect for the number of graduates and the number of programs. It is thrilling and exciting when this happens.

Evaluate the Efficacy of Design

Clearly we are not saying that design should be disconnected from the rational outcome. The efficacy of design is found in leveraging the intuitive to increase the value of the outcome beyond that which can rationally be derived. Here is where understanding the outcome in terms of performance can be evaluated utilizing multiple means of evaluation from anecdote to empirical research. We need to understand perceptions, emotions, and attitudes as well as those which can be quantifiably measured.

Every day interior designers are tasked with specific outcomes be that the creation of an inspiring workspace, an enhancement of healing or learning processes, an increase human interaction, or to merely inspire. This provides a great opportunity for evidence-informed design and the ability to learn from precedent. Without learning from the impact of previous interventions, we ignore rational evaluation and are not informed by previous iterations. At the same time, performance-based models should only propel us to identify new models and intensify our passion to positively influence the world around us.

Conclusion

Despite my observations about the omission of recognizing design as a core competency in the workshop, nonetheless, the discussion about leadership skills was riveting. I believe that the seven areas discussed above,

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combined with design leadership, reflect the future of Interior Design. Because we know that leadership skills in any industry are highly coveted, one can only imagine where design leadership could take us.

I understand the limitations facing educators today include ever- expanding curriculum expectations, restrictive standards, and declining institutional resources. However, I would urge Interior Design educators to work on cultivating inspiration in their students as they focus on the building of core design attributes, skills, and traits outlined above. However, these attributes, skills, and traits are not so much about a change in curriculum as they are about change in attitude, personal focus, and expectations. Design education simply must embrace intuitive processes without having to apologize for them. Full-time educators and part-time instructors simply must live design and convey the commitment and passion to the visual world that their students need to emulate. Above all, programs are self-selecting. If Interior Design becomes a space where one lives and breaths true design and the expectations for performance are high, this will certainly curtail the uninspired or dispassionate. Together educators and practitioners can shape the future. What would happen if Interior Design became a space where one lives and breaths true design and the expectations for performance are high? This is the true marriage of the rational and the intuitive, and the promise that they hold when valued together.

Reference

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Christopher Budd is a Principal at STUDIOS Architecture. He has a BFA in Interior Design from University of Kansas and a Master's degree in Design and Environmental Analysis from Cornell University. As a Principal with STUDIOS Architecture, his work focuses primarily on workplace strategies that link human behavior and experience to the built environment. His work is based on understanding mental models, the set of values, assumptions, and beliefs that guide our perceptions of space. Budd's projects are highly varied, ranging from developing innovative workplaces to more rarified design problems such as the development of healing spaces for the severely wounded returning from war. Recent projects include modeling of the urban landscape that allow law enforcement professionals to practice maneuvers in a scaled environment, and branded environments for sales and marketing facilities. He has just completed the interior renovation of tenant space in the Pentagon, the world's largest contiguous office space, where he developed and implemented a new planning model that provides a high degree of adaptability at near zero cost and minimal effort. Working as a consultant to the GSA to develop and test workplace strategies for government agencies, Budd also sits on the standards committee of the Council for Interior Design Accreditation, and lectures extensively. His clients include Accenture, Nokia, The World Bank, the USO, and the Pentagon.

