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Growing a Profession

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Some historians of interior design believe that the profession really started in 1965, when Cornell University-educated architect Art Gensler opened a small firm in San Francisco that focused on corporate office design. An entrepreneur by nature, Gensler saw that the demand for interior design services among corporate clients (and those catering to them, such as the owners of office buildings) vastly outstripped the supply of firms prepared to provide these services competently. Although others, such as Skidmore, Owings & Merrill's Davis Allen, did specialize in corporate office interiors, Gensler went beyond them in organizing his small architecture and design firm around this market.

In doing so, he helped to separate interior design from architecture and interior decoration—and to establish its identity among the design professions. As this new handbook on interior design practice demonstrates, the process that Art Gensler helped set in motion succeeded in creating a new profession. Even now, however, interior designers are struggling to gain official sanction for its title and practice and to define their boundaries. This struggle often pits them against architects and residential interior decorators, both of whom claim—with some legitimacy—to practice interior design.

To put the situation in perspective, consider that it took centuries for the architecture profession to define itself, secure its boundaries, and finally obtain public sanction for its title and practice. Even today, the American Institute of Architects and its state and local offshoots battle with building designers, contractors, engineers, interior designers, and others over the question of “who is entitled to design what” in the built environment.

One reason for the struggle is that interior design is a hybrid profession whose roots trace back to architecture, the fine and decorative arts, graphic design, and even home economics. Especially at a larger scale, designing building interiors is a collaborative process, too. Interior designers are