

routinely part of teams that include architects, engineers, and other professionals and specialists. In this context, these “border wars” are meaningless: the interior designer’s specific contributions are what matter.

INTERIOR DESIGN AS A PROFESSION

Until recently, interior design has been a self-certifying profession, similar to urban and regional planning (with its professional appellation, “certified planner”). In many states, individuals are still free to call themselves interior designers, regardless of their qualifications, and to offer interior design services. Only a business license is required.

This is beginning to change. Regional chapters of both the American Society of Interior Designers (ASID) and the International Interior Design Association (IIDA) are pushing hard to secure for interior designers the same protections—of title and practice—that architects now enjoy in the United States. Architects are licensed on a state-by-state-basis, and their activities are overseen by registration boards that administer licensing examinations, issue licenses, and discipline their licensees for malpractice and other practice-act infractions. To advocate change in the interest of the profession and their clients, design professionals should understand the nature of the arguments currently being made for and against such professional protections, and the factors that justify guarding interior design as a profession.

Arguments and Counter-arguments

Historically, both professions and trades have sought to limit entry to their ranks and to guard their traditional privileges by eliminating potential competitors. When possible, they have used the law to support this gatekeeping. California Governor Jerry Brown, in the late 1970s, proposed to “sunset” the practice and title acts of a wide range of trades and professions, including architecture and landscape architecture. The trades and professions resisted, arguing that public health, safety, and welfare would suffer if registration

ended. That was their only possible argument: in America, anything else would be restraint of trade.

In seeking to license the title and practice of interior design, the ASID and IIDA are also making a public health, safety, and welfare argument. Opposing them, understandably, are architects and interior decorators, their main competitors among design professionals, who question whether such public health and safety considerations apply. Some architects question the need for state sanction of interior design practice, given its focus on non-load-bearing structures. Some interior decorators and residential interior designers argue that the requirements put forward by the proponents of interior designer licensing go beyond what is actually needed to protect public health, safety, and welfare. That would make those requirements exclusionary and therefore in restraint of trade.

The arguments for and against licensure have a political component as well. A dispute in the early 1980s in California pitted licensed architects against registered building designers—a category created as a compromise to preserve the traditional rights of draftsmen, carpenters, and others to design houses and small buildings. Similarly, the AIA and its civil, professional, and structural engineering counterparts regularly bicker over what their respective practice acts allow them to design or engineer. Similar compromises can be expected for interior design in relation to architecture, interior decoration, and residential interior design.

The legal and political possibilities available to both sides in arguments for professional protections will continue to cloud rather than resolve the issue of what constitutes a profession, so let us consider other factors that justify interior design as a profession.

Professionalism

Traditionally, professionals have pointed to credentials as evidence of their professionalism. This is what separates them from lay people, para-professionals, and “mere technicians.” However, David Maister—a well-known consultant to professional service firms—argues that while these things may point to competence, true professionalism depends on attitude. A professional, in Maister’s view, is a “technician who cares”—and that entails caring about the client.