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Design Research and Methodology

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The practice of interior design is like the practice of medicine in two important ways: first, design begins with problem identification and diagnosis; and second, it develops a solution (in medicine, a “treatment”) derived from an understanding of the specific context and needs. However, interior design departs from medicine in one crucial way: it rarely conducts research to find out whether its “treatments” work. That is, does the design solve the identified problem? (In medical terms, is the diagnosis accurate?) Does the design result in improved comfort, performance, and pleasure of the occupants? Does it support the client’s business strategy and needs? Present indicators of design “success”—costs per square foot or square feet per person—do not address these kinds of questions.

A skeptic might argue that interior design has functioned for a long time without a research base. Why is it important now? Several emerging trends are shifting the landscape for interior design, thereby increasing the importance of developing a strong research component at both the educational and professional levels.

- *First, more clients are developing a “show me” attitude. They are increasingly demanding justification for design decisions. When a designer claims that a new interior will increase productivity, clients are asking for evidence. When a designer claims that his or her firm’s solutions are successful, clients are beginning to ask how they measure success. The firms who have the best answers to these questions are more likely to get the job.*
- *A second reason for developing a stronger research component in interior design is the emergence of performance-based contracting. While performance-based contracting has not yet become a big issue in interior design, it is increasingly being used in architecture, especially in energy-efficient design. Under this contracting system, the architect is not paid the full fee when construction is complete. Rather, a component of the fee is paid after the building*