

ARCHITECTURE'S STRUGGLE TO BECOME A PROFESSION¹

Interior designers who anguish about the time it is taking to secure state sanction for their profession's title and practice should bear in mind that it took architects a lot longer. Arguments over who is and is not qualified to design buildings punctuate the history of the profession.

In the Middle Ages in Europe, the master masons were the building architects. During the Renaissance in Italy, artist-architects supplanted them. They were considered to be qualified as architects owing to their training in *design*. Architects such as Brunelleschi and Michelangelo took a strong interest in engineering and technology, too, as they strove to realize their ambitious building projects. With Vitruvius, they believed that architecture was a liberal art that combined theory and practice. Master masons, who apprenticed in the building trades, were disparaged because their training was purely practical.

Yet the Italian Renaissance also saw the emergence of the professional in Europe's first true architect, Antonio Sangallo the Younger. Apprenticed to the artist-architect Bramante, Sangallo helped implement many of Bramante's later buildings. In time, he established a studio that is recognizably the prototype for today's architecture and design firms. The architectural historian James Ackerman has described him as "one of the few architects of his time who never wanted to be anything else."

Four diverging traditions emerge from the Renaissance: artist-architects, trained in

design; humanist-architects, trained in theory; architect-architects, focused on buildings and striving for a balance between theory and practice; and builder-architects, focused on construction but still interested in designing buildings.

Artist-architects looked for patrons; architect-architects looked for clients. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, we see this distinction played out between "gentleman" architects and the emerging profession. Thomas Jefferson counted architecture among his gentlemanly pursuits, a trait he shared with others of his class. Lord Burlington, who did much to establish the architectural profession in England, was widely criticized by his peers for his "unwonted" interest in the pragmatics of building construction. When the Institute of British Architects was established in 1834, noblemen could become honorary members for a fee. (Significantly, all connection with the building trades was forbidden.)

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, English architects also faced competition from surveyors. In his *Dictionary* of 1755, Dr. Johnson gave essentially the same definition for the words "surveyor" and "architect." In England, at least, the two professions remained closely aligned through much of the nineteenth century—with both designing buildings. Engineers designed buildings, too. In 1854, one of them even won the Institute of British Architects' Gold Medal.

PROFESSIONAL ETHICS

Like other professionals, interior designers must contend with ethical issues. Indeed, the issues can be quite similar to those of allied and other learned professions. Like architects, lawyers, and doctors, interior designers can also do bodily harm and create financial damage if they practice incompetently or unethically. They can also put people at risk by failing to be effective advocates of their interests. Here are some examples of these issues as they arise in interior design practice.

- **Life safety.** Designers sometimes bemoan codes and regulations, but these rules exist to establish a minimum standard of health and safety. Failure to meet code can delay a project, which damages the owner, and can also cause bodily harm.
 - **Confidentiality.** Interior designers often have access to confidential business information—a planned acquisition, for example, or a new business plan or strategy. This knowledge is shared with interior designers only because it has a direct bearing on their work, and it is shared with them in confidence. Ethically, and often by contract, that confidence must be respected.
 - **Conflict of interest.** Interior designers are their clients' agents, so they have an obligation to avoid or disclose to them any potential conflicts of interest. (Disclosure means that you are prepared to end the conflict if the client so requests.) The *appearance* of conflict can be as problematic as the reality. Just as voters worry when politicians become too cozy with special interests, clients start to wonder when interior designers accept gifts or junkets from contractors and vendors. The occasional lunch, party, box of candy, or bottle of wine is no problem, but all-expenses-paid vacation trips and other costly “perks” cross the line. They create the appearance if not the reality that design decisions—specifying a product, for example—are being made to repay favors rather than to serve the interests of the client.
- **User advocacy.** Interior designers have a responsibility to users. If, in their judgment, a project's requirements, though legal, compromise user comfort and performance unacceptably, they have an obligation to try to change them, or to resign from the project if the client is unwilling to make changes. Design professionals have a broader obligation to educate their clients on the value of design features that improve user quality of life and performance.
 - **Competency.** Professional competence reflects ongoing mastery of the skills and knowledge demanded by professional practice. Professional certification or licensing formally requires a level of mastery that necessarily lags behind what design professionals actually need. For example, FIDER's requirements do not yet specify that interior designers know the principles of sustainable design. That lag does not excuse professional interior designers from mastering these principles, or any new skills that may be necessary to maintain their professional competence.