

Interior design came into its own in the 1990s as settings came to be seen as strategic resources. The catch phrase “Place matters!”—so emblematic of the second half of the decade—turned out to be literally true. When people have real choice about when and where they spend their time, the quality of these settings—their ability to support people in their desired activities—becomes crucial, often the deciding point. A “place” can be part of the landscape or cityscape, a building or building complex, or an enclosed indoor or outdoor setting. The word implies a richness and wholeness that mocks the design professions’ efforts to carve it into parts.

The built environment today has immense range and diversity. Much development embraces multiple uses. The time dimension of buildings is changing, too, with more components expected (or needed) to be ephemeral rather than “permanent.” Already, many projects today feature *hybrid* teams that are organized around each project’s particular blend of uses and timeframes. These interdisciplinary teams are the future. They expose each profession to the others and give all of them a shared perspective about “place” that transcends each one’s necessarily narrower view.

This shared viewpoint may eventually give rise to entirely new professions, which we may no longer be willing to categorize as “architecture” or “interior design.” In time, too, the division between design and construction may prove to be an artificial boundary, no longer justified by practice. Professions are conservative forces in society, constantly resisting pressures to change, yet constantly placed in situations where the need to change is obvious and imperative. New professions arise in part because old ones fail to adapt.

Compared to architecture, interior design is still in its infancy—a profession that is just now marshalling its forces to secure the recognition to which it feels entitled. All this is taking place against the background of our entrepreneurial and bandwidth-driven era. How important is it, in this context, to secure the profession’s boundaries or win state sanction for its practice? If it helps strengthen the education and training of interior designers, and encourages them to meet their responsibilities as professionals, then it is probably well worthwhile.

Especially today, it is hard to predict the future of the interior design profession. One clear way to prepare for it, however, is to make the education of

interior design professionals much more rigorous. This argues for a more comprehensive curriculum, as I have outlined previously, and for a four-year professional degree program at the undergraduate level.

It also argues for *learning*, as Peter Senge calls it—not just maintaining skills, but actively learning from practice. Senge’s point, made admirably in his book, *The Fifth Discipline*,¹⁸ is that work itself is a learning experience of the first order. Our interactions with clients, colleagues, and other collaborators provide constant glimpses into an unfolding future. If we are attentive, we can understand some of what the future demands—and take steps to meet it appropriately. People who care about their careers, and who take their responsibilities as professionals seriously, need to make learning a constant priority.

Notes

1

This brief account is drawn from Spiro Kostof (ed.), *The Architect*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1977, pp. 98–194.

2

Maister, David H., *True Professionalism*, The Free Press, New York, 1997, pp. 15–16.

3

Maister, *True Professionalism*, p. 16.

4

Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary, G. & C. Merriam Co., 1977, p. 919.

5

Webster’s, p. 63.

6

Webster’s, p. 265.

7

Foundation for Interior Design Education and Research (FIDER), “Definition of Interior Design” (from FIDER’s website: <http://www.fider.org/definition.htm>).

8

A good introduction to this topic is Diana Lopez Barnett and William D. Browning: *A Primer on Sustainable Building*, Rocky Mountain Institute, Snowmass, CO, 1995.

9

Romm, Joseph J., and William D. Browning, *Greening the Building and the Bottom Line*, Rocky Mountain Institute, Snowmass, CO, 1994.

10

Daly, James, “Sage Advice” (interview of Peter Drucker), *Business 2.0*, August 8, 2000.

11

Brand, Stewart, *How Buildings Learn*, Viking, New York, 1994, p. 13.