
DESIGN AS A BASIS FOR LEARNING

Education of the interior designer

Education of the interior designer begins with the premise that, to design space where people live their lives, the designer must learn and reconceptualize the habitable—what people in a time and place accept as space they can live in—with ease, comfort, pleasure, and well-being. In dealing with the habitable, designers attempt to sustain the art of living. To meet these goals, designers must learn how to learn about the habitable, how to continually redesign their education, and how to expand their expertise.

Learning the habitable is a process of gathering and processing all sorts of information about the ways in which people live, interact with each other and with the environment, and change the way they live. It depends not only on something that professors can quantify, scholars can recount historically, researchers can document, scientists can evaluate, and decorators can stylize; to learn the habitable, designers must constantly redefine livability. Inside is where we choose to spend most of our lives. Just as designers must see that the concept of interiority looks outward as well as inward, they must understand that learning the habitable is not simply an inward-looking endeavor. It takes living and studying how we live, where we live, what we want with living, and how our existence defines the world. As part of investigating and inventing the culture of habitability, the designer must exercise awareness, understanding, and acceptance of diversity. If designers are to learn about the habitable in a meaningful way, and thereby reconceive ideas of privacy, shared, and public place, they must understand changing lifestyles, mobility, aging populations, shifts in family constituency, personal, local, and global environmental strategies.

One of the essential requirements of educational endeavors is a commitment to teaching how to learn, and in the design field this commitment suggests that in the undergraduate years design students should be exposed to a broad educational experience inclusive of many design and design-related disciplines. Many design programs begin with a “year of discovery,” an approach to awareness that establishes a deeper relationship with the environment, people, things, and space. In this initial year, design students explore the thinking integral to allied disciplines—architecture, landscape architecture, industrial design, product design, graphic design, and environmental design. Unfortunately, during the latter half of the twentieth century, segregation into “allied

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fields” after that first year became the norm. Generations of architectural and interior design educators supported this artificial separation by omitting exposure to, understanding of, and collaboration with the other disciplines. By separating academic disciplines that share similar goals of improving human habitation, design educators have failed to fulfill their responsibility as educators. This separation of the disciplines has specialized and vocationalized activities that are by their very nature complex, comprehensive, and collaborative. The “year of discovery” in design education needs to continue throughout the educational experience, mixing disciplines and offering “real-world” exchanges and collaborations.

Undergraduate education needs to have a broad base if design students are to be fully prepared to specialize later in a particular field of knowledge and evaluate how best to design graduate education to meet their goals. The education of the interior designer is an education in sustaining the art of living. Currently, design institutions are facing the challenge of redefining just what constitutes an education in design. As the knowledge base increases and the field of practice expands, design institutions must critically evaluate both the breadth of undergraduate introduction to the field and the expectations of skill development and design experience needed. At the graduate level, design institutions offer theoretical and technological specializations as well as professional and creative coursework. Degrees in Consumer Research, Environment Branding, Edutainment, and the Creative Workplace are appearing and promoting new specialization in culturally developing areas. As the range of interiority is redefined, and its expanded practice recognized, the need for selective learning becomes a necessity as well as an issue. A design student’s path may continue beyond the undergraduate introduction to include diverse foci at the graduate and postgraduate levels. Design students must choose carefully not only what to learn, but also from whom to learn it. As much as the reputation and pedagogical affiliation (decoration, design, or architecture) of an institution matter, so do the individuals who are teaching and who envision the future direction of the teaching of interiors. When design students and design institutions accept that there is value in learning from a range of teachers and practitioners, they begin to understand how to learn about a broad-based discipline.

At its best, design education constantly redesigns itself. Through critique and reevaluation of its methods and by imagining the designer of the future, design education is moving from a proscriptive approach to an inscriptive