

January 2009

IIDA Notes: Why Does the Interior Design Profession Need to be Legislated? An Architect's View

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By Mitchell E. Sawasy, FIIDA

The public's perception is their reality. The public believes that architects create buildings and that interior designers select colors and materials. This simplified view is not a news flash.

In actuality, the roles of architects and interior designers are much more complex and can be better understood in comparison to a conductor playing a symphony. They are both striving for the successful outcome of their vision, and rarely do they perform as a solo act. They use their own experience and expertise to lead a team of specialists to turn an initial vision into a final form.

For architecture and interior design projects, it takes hundreds, even thousands of hours to get from the client's vision to the final form. Yet the public only sees and understands the final form, perhaps not realizing the scope of their work and what it takes to get there.



The public's perception is their reality. The public believes that architects create buildings. Yet, in creating a building—that final form the public knows and understands—an architect relies on specialists to bring the many facets of a project into harmony. Even on the most simple of building types—a single family home—an architect could call upon a structural engineer, a civil engineer, a soils engineer, and perhaps also a mechanical/electrical engineer. A courthouse project would require a different team of consultants, and a multifamily housing project would require yet another team. With a complex project such as a hospital, an architect can work with perhaps 12 or more consultants to complete the project, ensuring that all are working harmoniously leading to the same finale.

Each of these team members is a specialist: educated, trained, and licensed (or certified) to ensure a level of competence and accountability. In their specialty field, these team members must have achieved a level of competence that can only be qualified by a standardized method of evaluation. In most industries, this is done by fulfilling education requirements, apprenticeship and examination in order to earn a license that recognizes those qualifications.

The public's perception is their reality. The public believes that interior designers select colors and materials. Certainly, interior designers do select color and materials as part of their job, but it is only a small part. Yet the public only sees and understands the final form, not realizing what it takes to get there.

As with the varied architectural teams that respond to specific building types, interior designers must also be educated, trained and licensed (or certified) to ensure a level of competence and accountability.

A single family home is a different project type than a senior housing project. Yet they both are housing projects that must respond to their inhabitants' wants and needs. They both have finishes, lighting and furniture. But an interior designer working on a senior housing project must also be able to work with the variety of state and local codes that govern the interior design requirements for a senior housing project ... from the practical applications of understanding the impact of color and patterns on the senior eye, to meeting the challenges of the aged. An interior designer cannot guess that the materials will work; they must know from education and experience that the environment they are creating will not harm the occupants or disorient them causing distress. As my parents move into a senior housing project, I want to make sure that it will function for them

and not just look nice.

When my children were in school, the classrooms needed to be appropriately designed to address the needs of the students and the teachers. Lighting, colors, materials, heights of cabinets and sinks, and maintenance of surfaces all impacted the daily life of my children. This could not be achieved without an appropriately educated and trained interior designer.

Well-designed spaces do not happen by accident; nor do they magically appear because someone can blend color and materials. It takes education, training, and experience to ensure a level of competence. Licensure ensures that interior designers have this education, training, and experience.

Perhaps it's time to ask the public: What is the environment in which you want your family to live, learn or to be cared for, and how do you know that it was designed correctly? How do you ensure the best for your loved ones?

Rely on licensed professionals.

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