Transcending Global, Cultural and Disciplinary Boundaries: The Evolving Role of Interior Design

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Abstract: As a by-product of increased globalization, collaboration between disciplines is cultivating a generation of new, innovative solutions to existing cultural and social challenges. While stronger bonds between related professions are emerging, the body of knowledge of all involved begins to collectively strengthen with the exchange of specialized information. With this, the traditionally accepted role of the design profession is evolving, developing a deeper sense of global community, ethical and civic responsibility. This presentation demonstrates this shift through the examination of an interior design studio project, designed to respond to an acute need for healthcare delivery in Haiti. Collaborating with professionals from various industries and sectors (architecture, design, medical, political), eighteen interior design students unveiled a schematic design proposal for a sustainable, cost-efficient model of a women's clinic and education center. Relying on available research and established contacts with the Haitian community, students developed a thorough understanding of the Haitian culture, ensuring that their design sensitively responds to the context of myriad local needs and constraints. This studio project allowed students to generate a creative yet pragmatic solution to a serious social challenge through productive interaction, guidance and assistance of the local professional community. Even though this initiative is continuing to develop, it is recognized as a model that may potentially extend to communities that are otherwise difficult to reach. Through active participation, students gained awareness of the designer's role and responsibility and the impact they can have on the global community.

Keywords: Interior Design, Interdisciplinary Collaboration, Service Learning, Design as Activism, Global Community, Sustaining the Environment, Haiti, Studio Project

> *Designers have an essential social responsibility because design is at the core of the world's largest challenges…and solutions. Designers create so much of the world we live in, the things we consume and the expectations we seek to fulfill. They shape what we see, what we use, and what we waste. Designers have enormous power to influence how we engage our world, and how we envision our future* (Berman, 2009, p. 1).

B Y DEFINITION, DESIGN, to be used as either a verb or noun, is a complex and often difficult word to define but once stripped of its multiple layers and definitions, its essence implies a profound relationship with human beings. As Poldma (2008) quotes from *The Design Way* by Harold Nelson and Erik Stolterman (2003):

Design is different from other traditions of inquiry and action in that *service* is a defining element. Design is, by definition, a service relationship. All design activities are animated

through dynamic relationships between those being served – clients…customers and end-users – and those in service, including the designers. Design is about *service on behalf of the other* (p. viii).

When engage in interior design, the act of thinking and doing is realized (Poldma, 2008). This must be "socially, aesthetically, and environmentally responsible…to the cultural, psychological, physiological economic, historic and behavioral activities and preferences" of the human user (Hasell & Benhamou, 1988, p. 17). Attention to these intricacies is part of the design process.

Design also endeavors to ascertain the problem or challenge and to create a functional, relevant solution – beautifully and with clarity. Cameron Sinclair, founder of Architecture for Humanity, succinctly states that, when faced with a quandary, designers' roles are decisive because of their ability to manifest their ideas into reality since "…people don't fund problems, they fund *solutions*" (Berger, 2009, p.189).

As the profession of Interior Design seeks to comprehend and define its role, Mendoza et al. (2007) argue that assigning the definition of design to a single profession is ill-advised. Rather, they question and speculate whether "…knowledge [is] a thing that can be possessed, or is it a moving, evolving positional process in which we immerse ourselves? If it is a process, it cannot be held in isolation and continue to be relevant" (p. 309). Rather than perceiving rigid boundaries that stringently define the design community, they write that these borders are in constant flux due to their "interactions or intersections with own members" and with others outside their precincts (Mendoza et al., 2007, p. 309). The fluid motion of lines being drawn and redrawn, the porous nature of these boundaries permits the traffic of knowledge to move effortlessly. Loss of convergence at the margins or the periphery only serves to stifle creativity and vigor.

Where is Our Future?

> *One in seven people live in slum settlements. By 2020 it will be one in three*. (Architecture for Humanity)

Having established the notion that our discipline is organic in nature, to continue developing a profession must still be defined by clear parameters. In Interior Design, this definition continues to evolve, capturing the current trends and 'intersections', as it is affected by multiple social, political, economic, technological and aesthetic factors. However, we often 'limit' our potential by seeing most major human concerns as unrelated to our work (Bell, 15). In the last twenty or thirty years many educators, practitioners, and professionals have proposed that the time is right to consider a transformation of Interior Design (Martin, 1998). A number of articles have attempted to predict or explain its evolution, establishing a series of trends, which contribute to the [future] definition of Interior Design. This study will investigate and reveal the currents of social responsibility, which should not only influence, but are the cornerstone at the very core of our profession.

NCIDQ, the board for Interior Design qualifications states that a 'professional interior designer is qualified by education, experience and examination to enhance the function and quality of interior spaces. However, Anderson, Honey & Dudek propose that in addition to 'enhancing the function and quality of interior spaces, (p. v) , the primary social value of,

and the basis for a social compact for the interior design profession, is designing physiologically and psychologically supportive interior environments that enhance quality of life; furthermore, they challenge Interior Design to meet this description of a profession, in order to take its place among other 'true' professions, which already contribute to the greater good of the society (p. vi). This capacity – and responsibility of our profession to do good - is an often unaddressed aspect, among others, more frequently cited aspects by various studies.

Embracing the premise that the primary role of a Designer is to enhance the quality of life, we propose that our responsibility transcends this notion. Designing supportive environments is the very definition of the profession of Interior Design. The challenge is to develop goals and practices that serve the greater good of the society – beyond that which is commonly accepted. Wilma Plater writes that real changes occur when '…individuals define their work in terms of whom it affects, for what purpose, and with what consequences…and will be successful when what we do actually matters to society at large, and when society is so engaged with the university that our priorities are shaped by societal needs, when the work of every individual can be related purposefully and knowingly to the work of others (Plater, 1999, p. 171).

How does Interior Design, as a collective entity, affect society? What are the consequences of our interaction with the world? Is the society engaged with our academic endeavors? Are our core values and priorities shaped by the societal needs? 'How can we expand the practice of design to provide for the rest, the great number currently underserved, and to play an active role in responding to the social challenges we face in the world' (Bell, 2008, p.15). Without the ability to address broad societal goals, design discipline becomes inward-focused.

While the Profession of Interior Design consists of three parts – Academia, Research, and Professional Practice, according to Guerin and Thompson (2004), the key to promoting an evolution of the field lies in educational transformation. 'To make design more relevant is to reconsider what "design" issues are' (Bell, 2008, p.19).

Appropriately, initiatives to improve the profession have been consistent in Interior Design. Design academics continuously explore the possible future of Interior Design in an attempt to establish trends, which should shape a wholesome, future-minded, context-relevant academic experience. With the increased global focus on socially responsible practices, students must be prepared to take a position on the issue before they enter the professional world. After a careful review of studies devoted to this subject, the following trends were identified as influential in the Profession's quest for socially-minded practice, or social-responsibility.

1. Sustaining the Environment
2. Research + Evidence-Based Design
3. Collaboration + Diversity
4. International Concerns + Social Context
5. Service + Activism

Each of the five current initiatives or trends introduces a unique contribution to Design. Collectively, they present a new approach to design education, and hold the potential of fostering responsible, conscientious professionals.

Sustaining the Environment

One of the most obvious initiatives is the drive toward sustainability or ecological responsibility. Sustaining the Environment is a well-recognized, widely followed initiative formally launched in 1987, with the release of *Our Common Future* by the United Nations; the term 'sustainability' has been gaining recognition ever since. This document, also known as the *Brundtland Report*, stipulates that "sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" and that 'Sustainable development requires meeting the basic needs of all and extending to all the opportunity to satisfy their aspirations for a better life' (United Nations, ch.2). Based on this premise, stewardship to the environment contributes directly to the greater good to the society, and therefore Interior Designers hold the primary obligation to meet ecological aims.

In response to numerous sustainability initiatives, the International Interior Design Educators Council (IDEC) adopted a resolution supporting the 'concepts of socially responsible design…an integral part of interior design education' (IDEC Annual Report, 2005, p.2). Similarly, the Council for Interior Design Accreditation also supports Sustainable movement, by expecting accredited programs to teach 'environmental ethics and the role of sustainability in the practice of interior design (CIDA Manual, 2006).

Research + Evidence-Based Design (EBD)

As human lives and environments become more technological, complex, and specialized, research that supports design decisions becomes a necessary part of practice (Guerin and Thompson, 2004). Understanding these complex relationships allows practitioners to better justify and defend their design decisions. This process, otherwise known as Evidence-Based Design, holds the potential for enhanced human interaction with the build environment, and can contribute to the overall satisfaction, healing, and productivity. Because less than 15% of what was a part of Design education twenty-five years ago is still relevant (Fowles, 1992, p. 2), continuous efforts to grow the body of empirical research in the field of Design are necessary.

'Design education should provide the foundation for a [student] to make a lifetime contribution to design and society'. (Fowles, 1992, p.3)

One of the ways to do so is through research, and through an increase in the breadth and depth of the body of knowledge. Ernest Boyer encourages institutions of higher education to redefine the concept of research for a range of scholarly endeavors, one of which he titles the scholarship of 'application' (1990).

Collaboration + Diversity

"At the core of design problem solving…the merging of knowledge is greater than the sum of the parts" (de la Harpe, Peterson, Horvat, Berry & Anastasiou, 2007, p. 1). To that end, it is unrealistic to subscribe to the notion that sublime thoughts are developed in a sterile, solitary environment. Inspired work develops not only between the creator and the creation but also, through the interplay and synergy between the collective and the self (de la Harpe

et al., 2005). Despite the possible inclination to derive inspiration from those closely associate with our work, Mendoza et al. (2007) keenly observe that:

We often learn the most from people with whom we are not in close contact. As we search for new information and new connection, there is a great likelihood that the people with whom we are in close contact have access to the same circle of information. New information and opportunities are shared best by those with whom we have weak ties, as their perspective and knowledge will be from an entirely different realm. Interior design education is comprised of a core community; however, contact with those on the periphery of that community can infuse the field with new ideas and energy (p. 310).

When boundaries open to create new alliances between many, diversified sources, "knowledge networks" or interdisciplinary collaborations form which are an asset to any industry (de la Harpe et al., p. 2, 2007). Acquisition of this knowledge should be unrestricted; a cooperative whereby "the collective mapping of interrelated knowledge" is established affords participants "the ability to interrelate with others using the map, to add to and edit it creates a powerful participatory learning tool" (Mendoza et al., p. 309, 2007).

Interdisciplinary collaboration creates a larger platform or outlet for the recognition of anything beyond the status quo. Those who will be questioning, testing and disputing the current state of affairs – the forthcoming group of professionals (students) – need to engage in this relevant and meaningful exchange.

International Concerns + Social Context

In the context of today's awareness of globalization, the demand for the discipline to respond to these cultural changes must be noted. New ways of thinking and doing will provide sorely needed answers that can speak to the dynamic character of the world market. To be effective and be prepared to design in the current context, students must comprehend factors such as "the cultural, social, economic and political circumstances" of their clients (Asojo, 2007, p. 24). Educators and practitioners

…can no longer approach design solutions from an ethno-centric design perspective. Instead, the global implications of created space and environments are upon us. We must examine research that helps us to understand the cultural context in which we are working…As communication and technology continue to shrink our world, practitioners must include a global and culturally sensitive perspective in their programming and design solutions (Guerin & Thompson, 2004, p. 5).

In response to globalization, a heightened awareness has been established within institutions of higher learning. Boyer and Mitgang (1996) note in *Building Community: A New Future for Architecture and Practice*

"The need for inclusiveness is more urgent than ever. Repeatedly, we were told by practitioners and educators that much of the future of the profession lies beyond U.S. borders, in developing nations and in non-Western cultures" (Asojo, 2007, p. 24).

Identified as paramount to the evolution of an international citizen, students cultivate a consciousness about the world and its myriad cultures (Kucko, Prestwood & Beacham, 2005). The Council of Interior Design Accreditation (CIDA) Professional Standard 2009, Preamble states:

> *The best preparation for the future is an education that will enable graduates to adapt to a changing world. Adaptation to changes requires that graduates draw on history and on the experiences of many cultures and apply the theories and methods of quantitative and qualitative investigation. A sound curriculum for professional interior design education must provide a balance between the broad cultural aspects of education, on the one hand, and the specialized practical content integral to the profession, on the other.* (p. II-2)

Complacency towards international concerns will diminish the future of educators and professionals as global citizens. Lack of resolve will expose the discipline of Interior Design as ineffective and obsolete.

Service + Activism

> *'Tell me, and I will forget. Show me, and I might remember. Involve me, and I will understand'.* (Confucius, c. 450 BC)

Educators in general and Design educators specifically, face a challenge of communicating information to their students with intent for the students to apply it, repeatedly, in the future. Multiple methods of transfer of information have been established and become mainstream; however, in the recent years, an approach that received primary consideration is service-learning (Subotzky, 1999 p. 423; Wolf, 1996, iv).

Application, or practical learning is becoming a key approach to scholarship, which combines learning (classroom), volunteering (service) and practice (internship). Multiple studies have been conducted in support of service learning. Wolf contends that the 'most successful professional programs are those with experience in service-learning' and asserts that 'the interface between academic disciplines and the wider community [will] shape the future of higher education (1996, iv). Subotzky predicts that service-learning pedagogy is the approach which will help universities to re-position themselves and become vital, active leaders in advancing the integration of knowledge, scholarship and a sense of community for public benefit (1999, p. 423). Service learning has become one of the most powerful tools available for integrating experiential learning, professional training, civic responsibility, and responsiveness into higher education (Decker, 2000, 53).

The two-fold intent of service or experiential-learning is: 1) to engage students in meeting the unmet needs of communities, and 2) to enhance students' academic learning, their sense of social responsibility, and their civic skills. Studies reviewed by Zollinger et. al. show that service-learning activities 'improve [the students] higher order thinking skills, increase their understanding of course-to-application knowledge, improve communication among peers, increase their awareness of other perspectives, enhance their problem solving and decision making, and improve their linkage of course materials to outside settings (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Hamner, 2002; Sterling, 2007), among others.

One author identifies four key components of service learning pedagogy:

1. The educators identify and define the need, issue or agenda they wish to have addressed.
2. Community members are active participants and effectively partner in the activities with students and academic staff.
3. Service learning is intentionally integrated into the academic curriculum of the students' degree programs as a structured learning activity so the rigor and relevance of disciplinary knowledge is understood through its application for social benefit.
4. Students are co-learners with their teachers in 'discovery-based learning experiences' (Subotzky 1999, p. 423), creating a link between research, learning and teaching. (Guinlan et. Al. 2004, p. 14-15)

Engaging in this type of learning encourages students to build bridges to people and communities in which they would otherwise not come in contact. Students learn to apply their professional skills for the enrichment of the lives of others, and through reflection on the completed work, larger social issues may become evident behind the needs which were addressed by the exercise.

In the book *Glimmer*, Warren Berger astutely observes that designers are poised to bring about change in a world full of issues and complexities that require a set of skills such as "creativity, experimentation, empathy, and system thinking" that mimic the design process (p. 186). He emphasizes his point with a quote from Maria Blair of the Rockefeller Foundation who is calling for a different approach to solutions for "human problems":

"If design is about how you solve problems…the social sector is about problems that we have not been able to solve. Those problems are incredibly complicated and they are people-centered. If the design industry can begin to grapple with them, it can move the whole practice of design thinking forward. It's one thing to design a better potato peeler – but addressing the issue of, say, clean water, is going to require another evolution in the practice of design." (p. 186)

Berger writes that designers are "optimistic people who are trained to be courageous about the future – and making the future happen" (p. 270); unlike others who have notions or intentions, designers are different because "they have the ability to give form to those ideas" (p. 72) and finally, a ray of light that design offers: *It is hope made visible*. (p. 73).

With many of students classified as "Millennials", they "expect work that is meaningful…" (Powell & Lasalla, 2009, p 186). Better yet, Berger is confident that "A growing number of designers actually seem quite eager to confront global and social challenges because they view them as an ultimate test of creativity and resolve" (p. 187). Students want to be involved and are energetic to work on "real projects". Why not encourage this and commit students to create "real change"?

Today, with many despairing that "with a global population climbing toward seven billion, with economic turmoil, with resources dwindling and the planet warming, and with the spate of natural disasters that has hit hard in recent years", they have resigned to hopeless with the rising tide of trials and human shortcomings. Yet, "…there's never been a better time to be a designer, because there is so much in need of better design" (Berger, 2009, p.185). Dean

Kamen (inventor of the Segway) states: "Right now, the capabilities are out there to just about anything we want to do," he says. "We use to ask ourselves, 'What can we do?' But now the real question is, 'What should we do?'" (Berger, 2009, p. 56)

Seeds of Hope: A Case Study

"At no time in human history has the potential for designing solutions that contribute to the benefit of humankind been greater than it is today." (Mau, n.d., as cited in Berger, p. 122).

Seeds of Hope, a project developed by a graduate studio in the Spring of 2009, serves as an example of a project which spans all Socially-Responsible Design initiatives. Designed by a group of students in the Institutional Design Studio over the course of 4 weeks, it is a model for healthcare delivery to women and children of Haiti. The project, titled the 'Seeds of Hope' attracted attention of various organizations and entities, and went on to win a Healthcare Environments Award for innovative approach to healing environments. Below is the description of this model.

The Seeds of Hope is a projected model for healthcare delivery in rural areas of Haiti. Focusing on women and children's' care, it proposes phased construction of a main clinic facility, which will offer prenatal care, labor/delivery and post-natal care, as well as preventative care, general medical and surgical services. Additionally, an outreach program will offer family planning, immunization, HIV/AIDS screening, nutrition and breast-feeding support and counseling services. The education center, housed on site, will provide mid-wife and first-aid maternal health training to women from near-by villages. After completion of the training program, these women will staff branch clinics in their home villages.

The branch clinics will be placed in rural residential areas and will serve as the first point of entry into the 'Seeds of Hope' for many Haitians. These facilities are intended to be staffed by personnel trained at the main clinic, and provide Haitian women a safe, supervised environment to give birth and receive general treatment. In cases where the midwife/nurse foresees potential complications, patients will be directed to the main clinic for an elevated level of care.

SUSTAINING THE ENVIRONMENT. Sustainable construction practices were researched and incorporated into the design of the proposed clinics, utilizing natural and local resources and building practices. This approach was intended to lower construction and operation costs and to promote socially responsible communities through design and living.

RESEARCH / EVIDENCE-BASED DESIGN. Students have explored available precedents for construction of both – sustainable healthcare facilities – and structures in Haiti. Eighteen research topics were identified, and assigned one per student, who, through investigating literature on their subject, became the class 'expert'. Research related to the design of healthcare facilities, Haitian culture, resources and building practices, was used throughout the design process. No decisions were made without direct reference to available empirical studies. Finally, information was gathered directly through contacts at the Haitian embassy, Haitian doctors, and other sources.

COLLABORATION. Students were proactive in inviting guests who could enhance or inform our process. Lecturers ranged from nursing personnel, to architects, designers, engineers and political leaders in the community. The project was presented to the Architecture

for Humanity, Haitian embassy, American Academy for Healthcare Interior Designers, and RTKL, a progressive architecture firm in Washington DC. Through establishing a strong support team within – and outside of the university, the project gained a deeper value and perspective, and students were able to overcome challenges which otherwise would be out of reach for interior designers. Finally, working as a team of eighteen, with various experts, helped students relate to the reality of multidisciplinary, team-based professional practice.

INTERNATIONAL CONCERNS/SOCIAL CONTEXT. Globalism, a comprehensive consideration of events, actions and consequences, is affecting the products of many cultures and cross-cultural communities. The need for inclusiveness is urgent, and Interior Design cannot remain an ethno-centric profession. Overwhelmingly, students agreed that this exercise has exposed them to issues which, otherwise, they would not encounter, developing or increasing sensitivity to the needs of another culture, one withdrawn from our daily functions. The future of our discipline will transcend geographical borders, and join hands with our counterparts from various parts of the world.

SERVICE/ACTIVISM. Coming together as a community passionate about design and reaching out to a community in need to resolve a meaningful challenge resulted in an idea, which was appropriately titled, the Seeds of Hope. This project lit a fire in our program which continues to grow and attract interest. It was presented as a proposed model, and will continue to develop next semester with the guidance from professional partners, directing student efforts. Students will advance the existing design into the Design Development phase.

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Through employment at various architecture firms, including Callison Architecture (Seattle, WA), Nadia has participated in the design of multiple corporate, hospitality, retail, higher education and residential projects, with experience spanning from concept development to project management and design implementation. Her experience centers on the healthcare market, culminating with a completion of her thesis research on patient-centered healing environments. With strong commitment to social responsibility and service learning, Nadia became LEED accredited in 2006 and chose to continue her design career through academic appointments at the Department of Interior Architecture at University of North Carolina, Greensboro and currently at The George Washington University, Washington DC. She is presently directing a collaborative endeavor focused on the development of a sustainable, community-based medical facility in Haiti.

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Prior to her position as an assistant professor at the George Washington University Interior Design Program in Washington DC, Catherine worked as a project manager in a variety of architecture and interior design firms for over 14 years. Her primary practice experience was on commercial projects for a wide range of clients such as law firms, non-for-profits, associations, embassies as well as large-scale urban design developments. She earned a BS in Architecture and a MArch that included study abroad in Rome and Koper, Slovenia. A LEED accredited professional, her teaching focus is on sustainable interiors and urbanism as well as the design process for first-year students and capstone graduate students.