Introduction

Very little has been written, much less published, on architects’ motivations, their expertise and the perceptions of architects practicing interior design. That is, the assumption has simply always existed that architects should certainly engage in interiors work. It is only recently that the field of interior design has reached a point of complexity where some are beginning to question this notion.

The practices of architecture and interior design have evolved considerably in the last half century. Distinctions between the two professions have been established, but traditional roles in how they are performed continue to blur and often cause confusion and clarification. The purpose of this study is to explore and report on the perceptions of architects who choose to practice interior design, providing insight into these individuals’ broad perceptions and rich, individual perspectives, which may affect both the architecture and interior design professions. It looks at the differences and commonalities between the two professions, with an aim to lend further contact to their identities and to the growing discussion on the research on this issue that investigates both professional practice and academic instruction.

Anecdotal information lends credence to research questions that explore architects’, motivations, expertise and perceptions surrounding architects practicing design. The research is exploring questions such as why is practicing as an interior designer so widespread in the architecture industry? Does this indicate an increasing shift in whom or what provides interior design services? What is it about being an architect that compels him or her to provide services typically associated with components outside the customary scope of architectural planning and detailing? Is it a component of their education or is it just “in the control over all matters of design rather than specialized in any one matter of economics or a contractual necessity to keep all designs in the office in balance.” Indeed, there are various and compelling reasons underlying this model of professional practice.

Survey Observations

The data obtained from a survey of 72 architects shed light on a variety of perceptions surrounding architects who practice interior design. However, they did not reveal or suggest any new or modified definitions that would provide clearer distinctions between architects and interior designers. Regarding the goal of providing a better understanding of the differences between architecture and interior design, perhaps the “better” understanding, unfortunately, is that architecture and interior design are still hamstrung by a lack of clarity concerning their design services. This indicates there is still a great deal of uncertainty surrounding how architects deliver services in a surging culture of social responsibility, will likely continue to influence the perceptions of architects who practice interior design.

Research also seems to support anecdotal evidence regarding a separate but important topic — that perceptions surrounding architects who practice interior design can have the effect of confusing the general public, perhaps even “producing a disparity of clearly defined roles and services for the comprehensive design of an interior environment; a complexity of space, human experiences, and comfort” (Hildebrandt, 2004). Most would agree that this lack of clarity is unintentional and that more clearly defined professional roles will only strengthen the practices of architecture and interior design. Indeed, when reality television tactics suggest that “anyone can be an interior designer” (Martin, 2004:161), it is in the interest of architects, perhaps even their obligation, to make clear their choice to practice interior design. Clearly defined roles could assist architects and interior designers in preparing service-specific agreements; delineating professional responsibilities; and assisting potential clients in selecting the most appropriate architect, designer, or design team. To these ends, both the architecture and interior design professions (as well as the general public) would benefit from clearly identified and published bodies of knowledge that distinguish one profession from the other.

In this author’s opinion, designing from a common point of reference (based on distinct bodies of knowledge described, accepted, issued, and made publicly available) may help lessen the tendency of architects and interior designers to engage in turf battles relative to profession-specific design practice. In separate but complimentary articles examining the gaps between architecture and interior design, authors Henry Hildebrandt and James Cramer suggested that much of the turf mentality stems from “being both boundary-tied by professional legislation as well as seeing themselves as offering specialized service roles” (Hildebrandt, 2004) and a condition in which “the unequal squabbling between the architecture and interior design associations would seem to put these professionals against one another” (Cramer, 2004). Cramer (2004) further described how much of this behavior is in reaction to the post-WWII design professions — a flawed power struggle, often based on misconceptions of turf rather than value to the client’s and public’s best interests. Perhaps the apparent disconnect between representatives of design and design service providers has hindered a number of architects in resolving the inherent boundary between architects and interior designers. This in turn has stirred up the perception of how prevalent the practice of exterior design is by architects is. Is the practice of architecture generally understood and valued by misunderstanding and/or misperception? Publishing better reports on current research attempts by professional organizations to clarify their positions in the design process and work in progress, as common ground remains elusive (AIA, 2004).

In an article for Architecture Boston, Robert Cowherd (2010) provided some insight that helps evaluate this study’s findings. In his examination contrasting the rise of modernism with what he called a “second-modernism” he found the modernist approach to be more significant, and rooted in this social imperative to do the most good, with the least resources, for the most people” (Cowherd 2010:21). One of modernism’s original guiding principles was to solve world problems through architectural considerations. Cowherd elaborated, “The last decade has seen a surge of work reasserting what we have always known to be true: architecture needs to do more than just look good, it needs to do good.” The notion that architecture (and architects) should do more for the greater good, perhaps by providing more comprehensive services in a surging culture of social responsibility, will likely continue to influence the perceptions of architects who practice interior design.