

Blurred Lines? Architects Practicing as Interior Designers

An Analysis of Perceptions

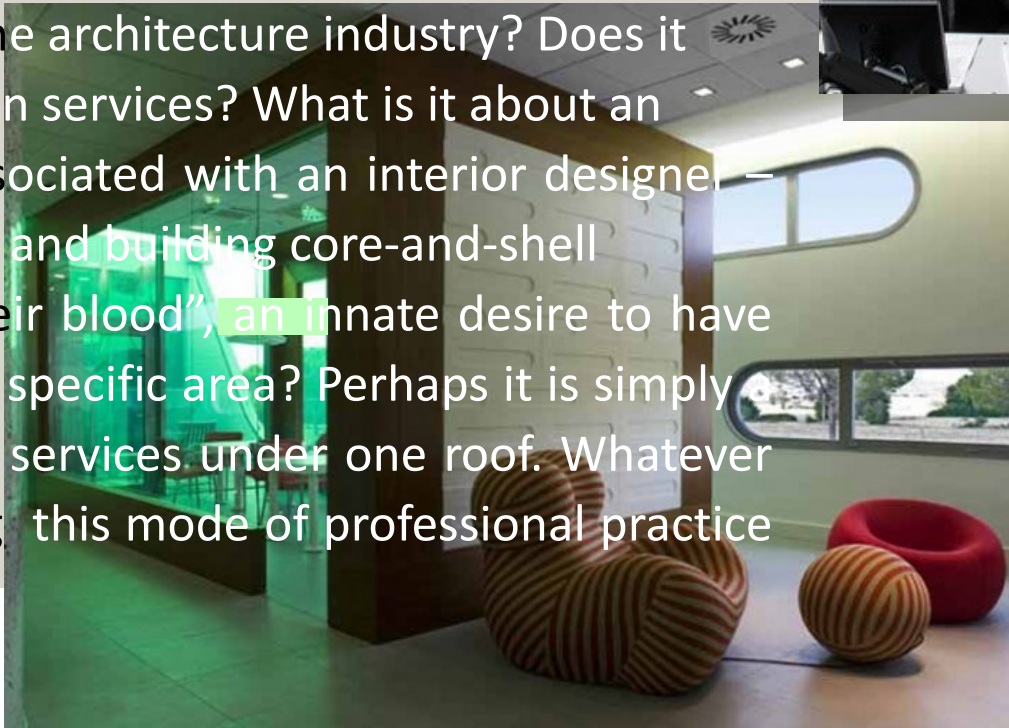
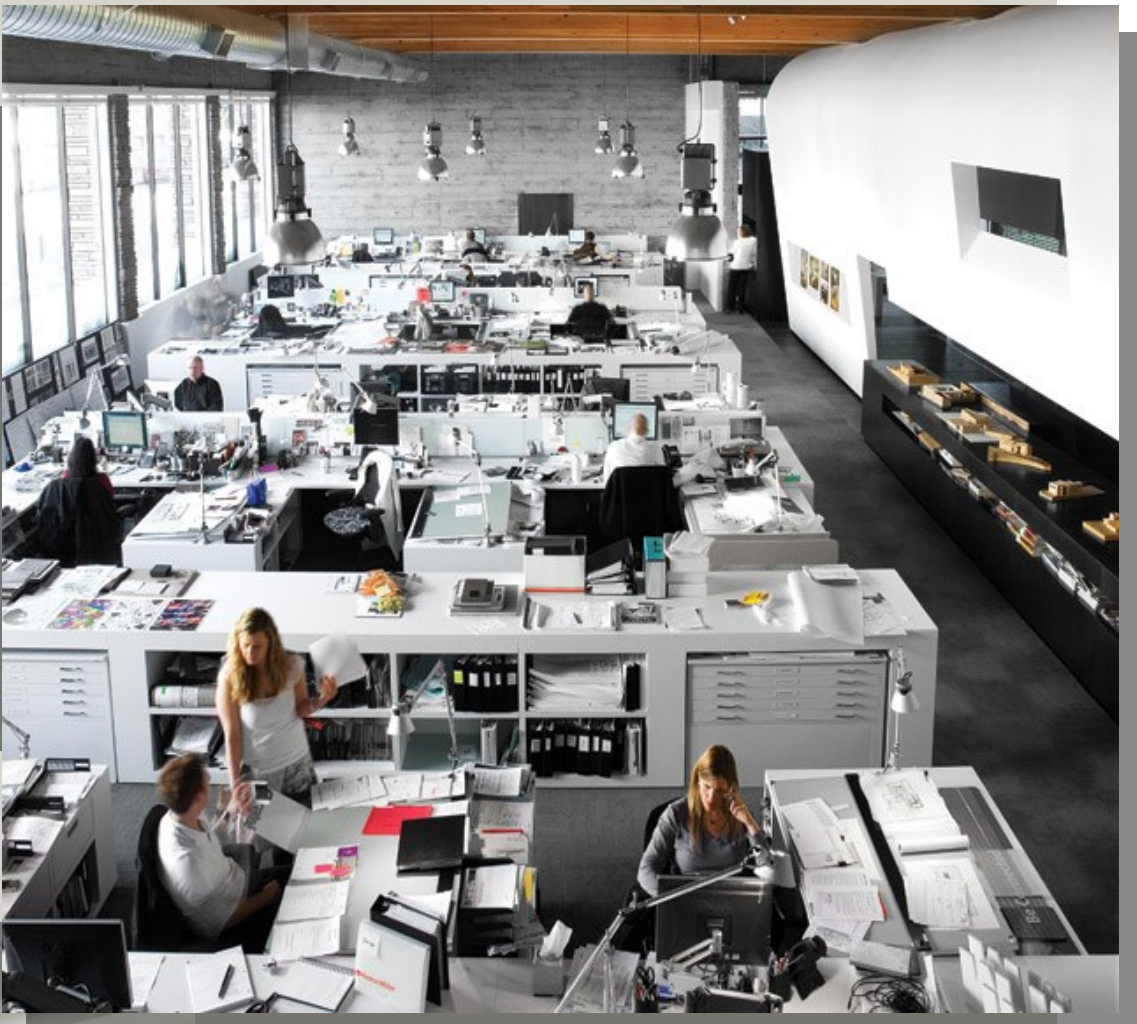


Introduction

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 undergo constant re-definition 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 context to their identities and add to the growing discussion in 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 it indicate an increasing shift in whom or what provides interior design services? What is it about an architect that compels him or her to provide services typically associated with an interior designer, components outside the customary scope of architectural planning and building core-and-shell detailing? Is it a component of their education or is it just “in their blood”, an innate desire to have control over all matters of design rather than specialize in any one specific area? Perhaps it is simply a matter of economics or a contractual necessity to keep all design services under one roof. Whatever the rationale, there are various and compelling reasons underlying this mode of professional practice

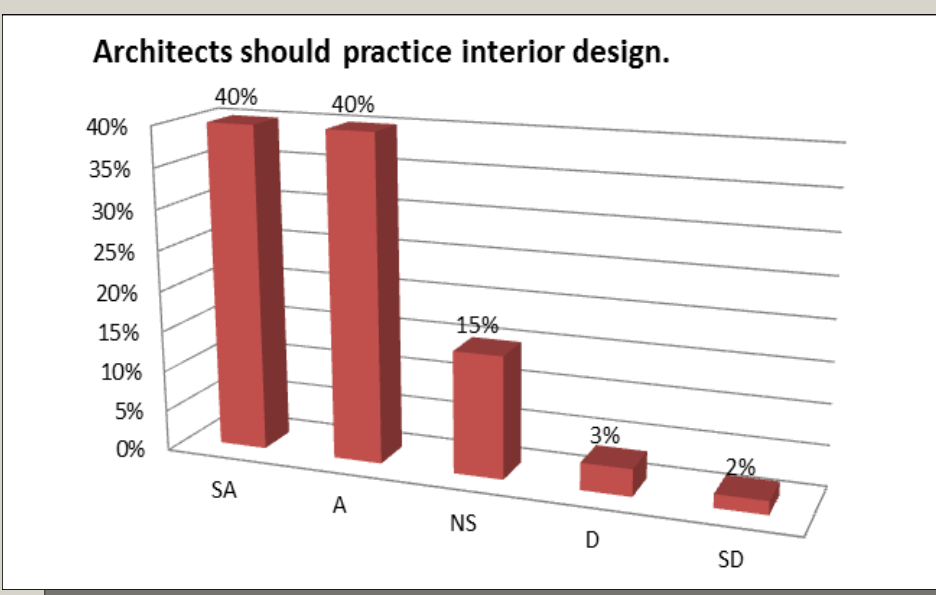
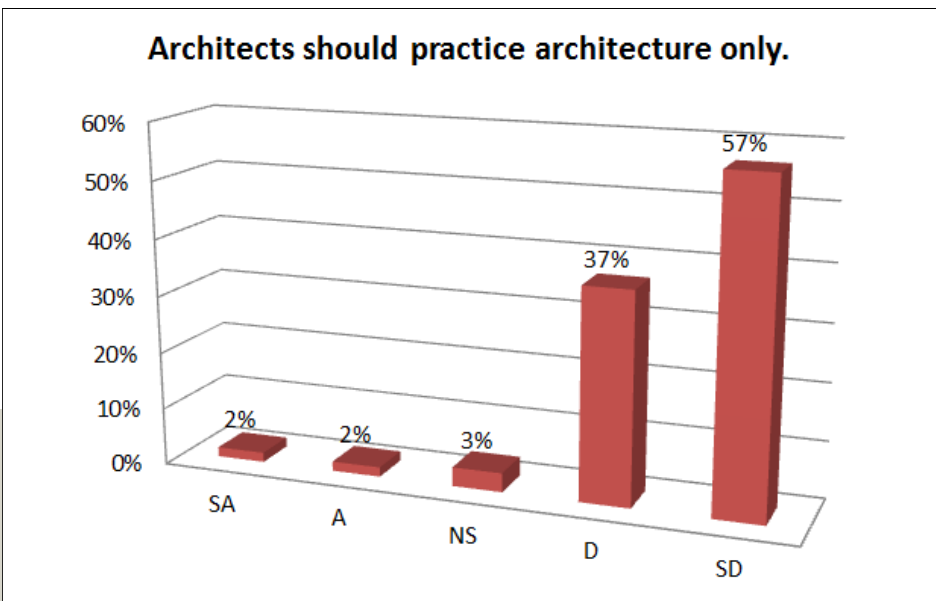
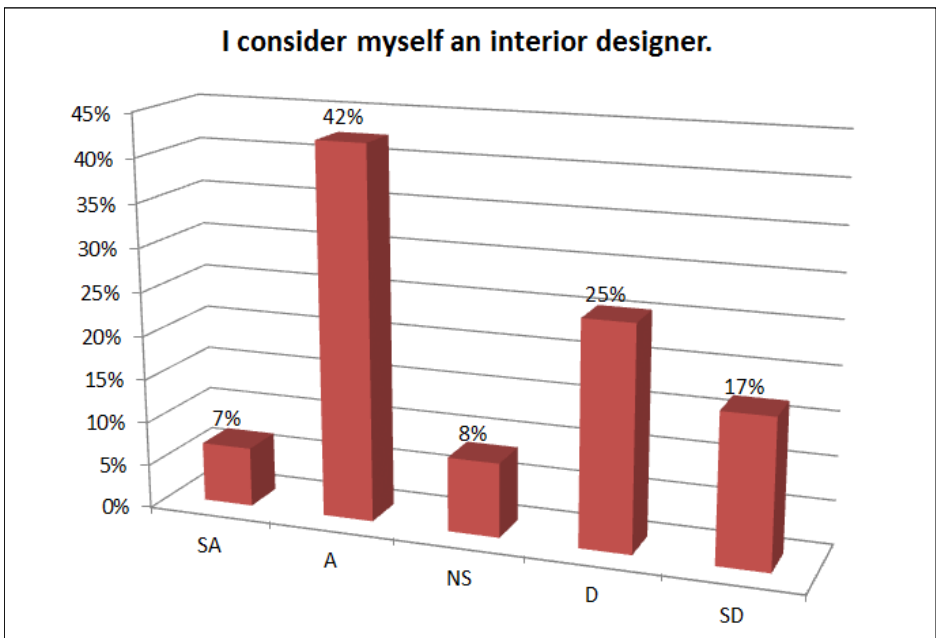
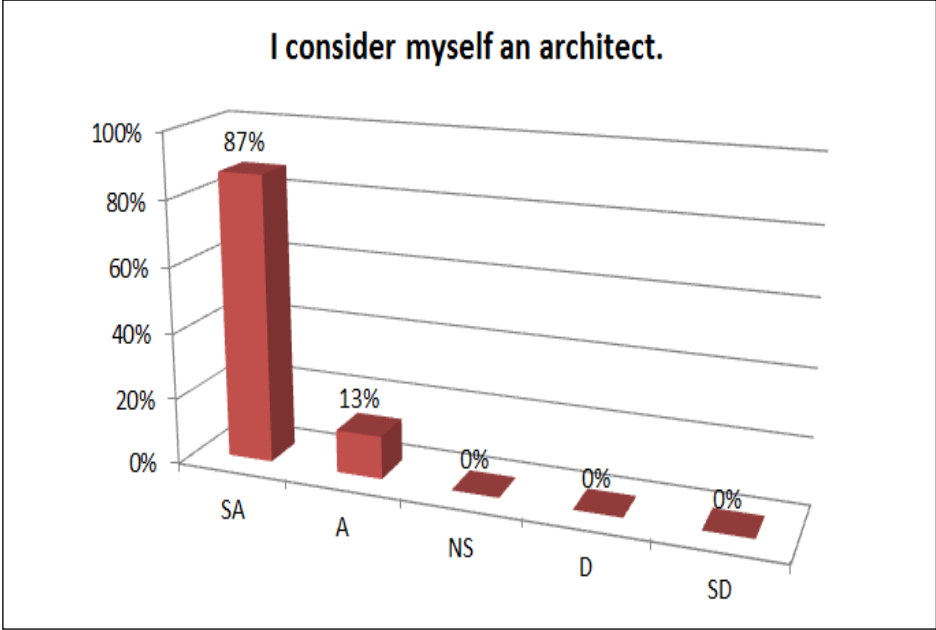


Survey Observations

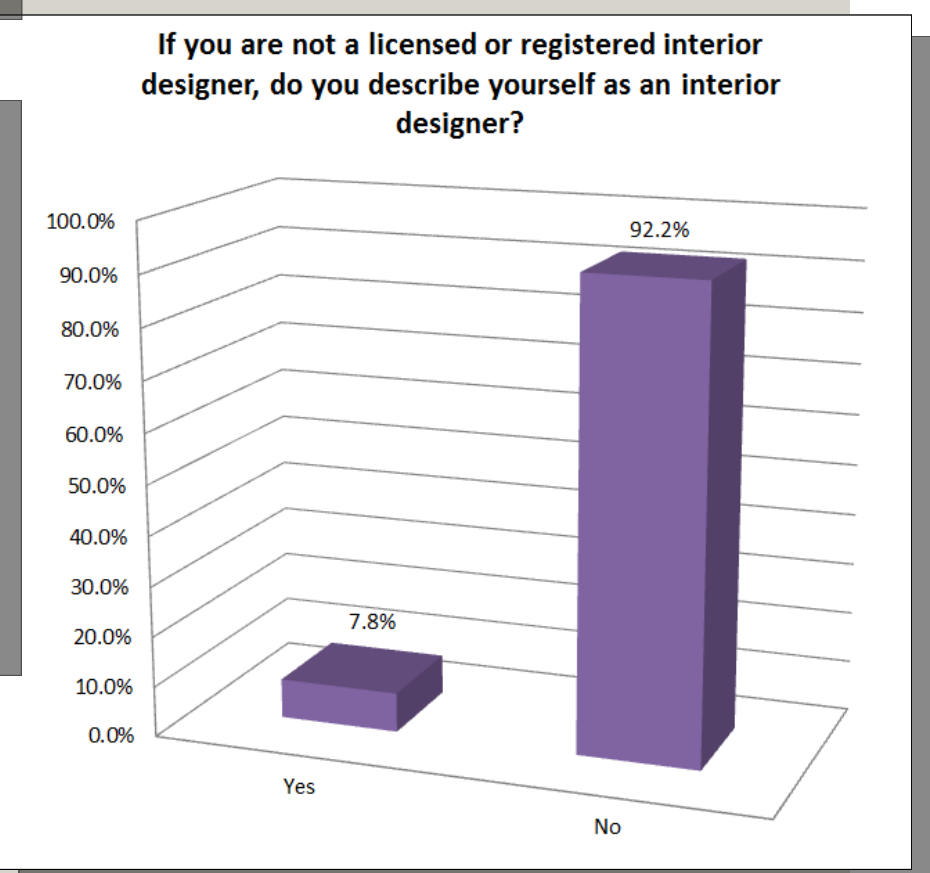
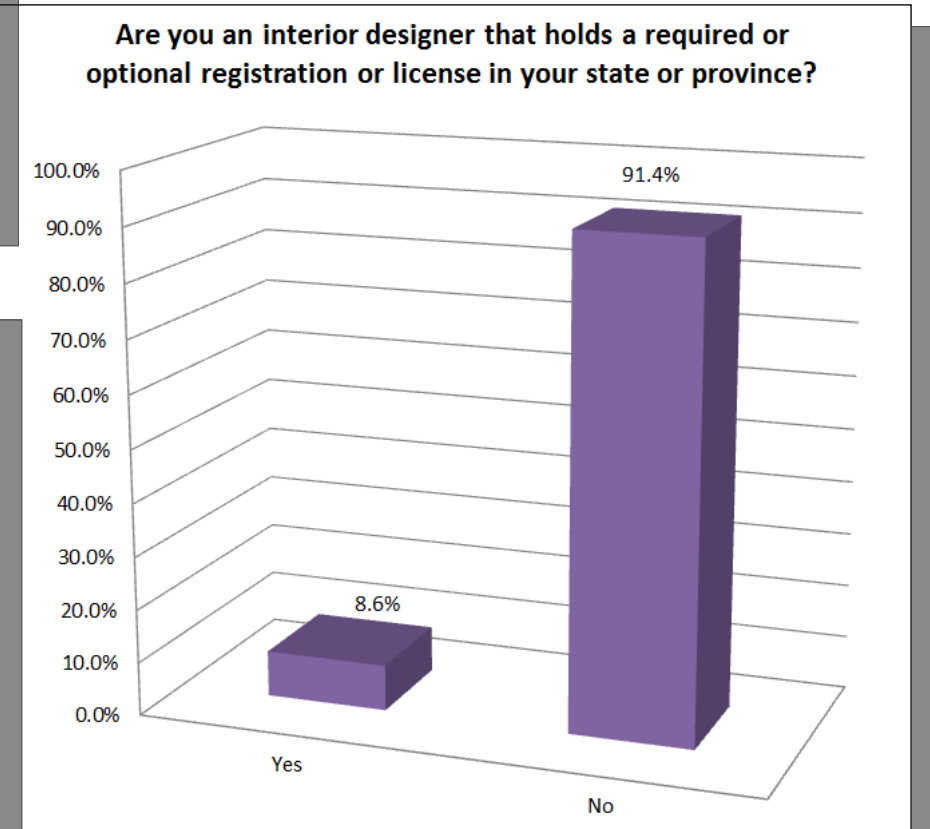
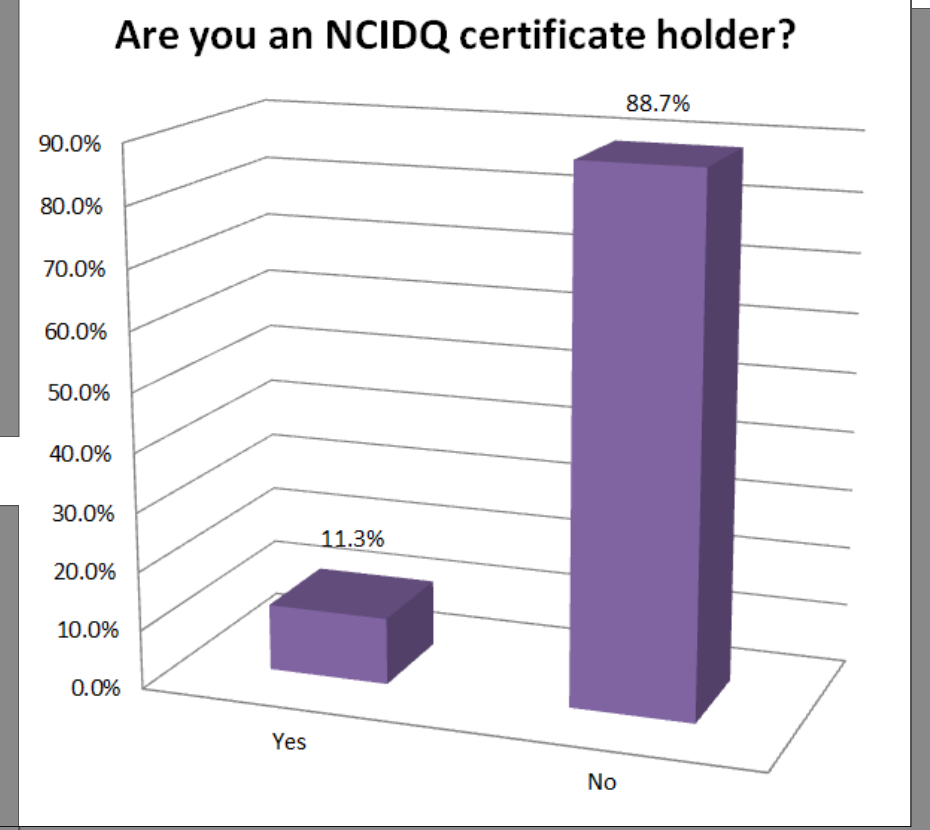
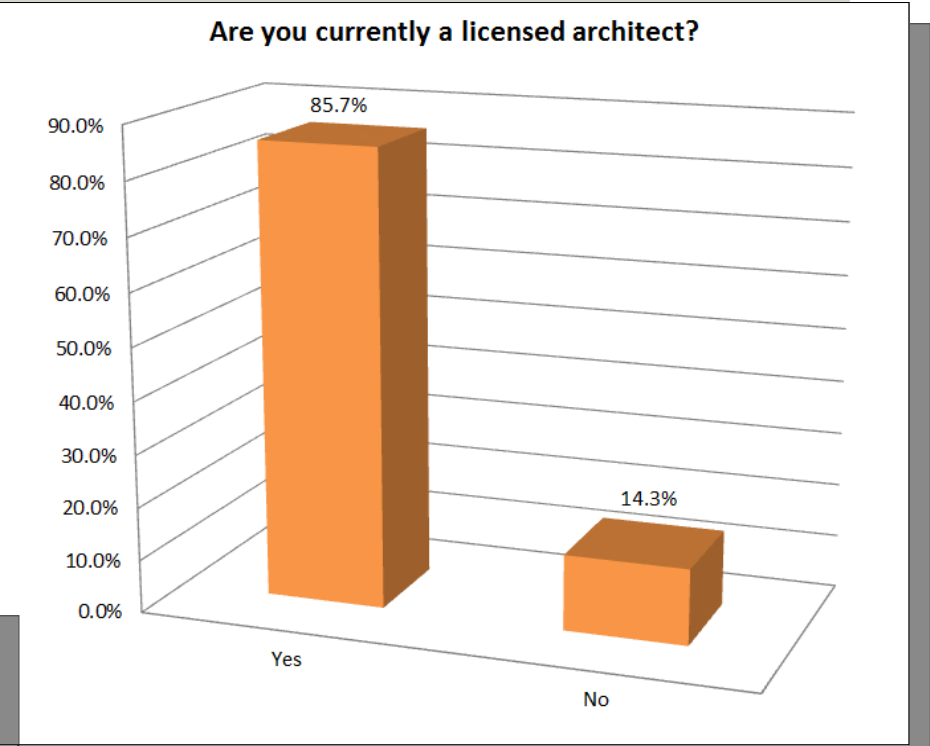
The data obtained from a survey of 72 architects shed light on a variety of perceptions surrounding architects who practice interior design. However, they did not reveal or suggest any new or modified definitions that would provide clearer distinctions between architects and interior designers. Regarding 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 perceive their role in interior design (or as interior designers). This observation is supported by the fact that, although participants’ responses to the survey statements varied somewhat, roughly one-third of participants responded “not sure” in a large number of categories. Although the author anticipated participants would generate more unique, distinctive, and compelling data, the results indicated that a broader range of diverse perceptions characterize why some architects choose to 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 tacitly suggests 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 unfortunate squabbling between the architecture and interior design associations would seem to pit these professions against one another” (Cramer, 2004). Cramer (2004) further described how much of this behavior is anti-strategic to the future of the design professions — a flawed power struggle, often based on insecurities of turf rather than ‘value building’ in the client’s and public’s best interests.” Perhaps the apparent disconnect between representative organizations and design service providers has created a stumbling block in resolving the relationship between architects and interior designers. This in turn may feed into the question of how prevalent the practice of interior design by architects is. Is the practice more common than generally understood, or is it a perception fueled by misunderstanding and/or implied division? Published position papers and other research that cites attempts by professional organizations to clarify their profession’s scope and types of design services indicate that such clarity is still a work in progress, and common ground remains elusive (AIA, 2011; NCIDQ,



SA Strongly Agree
A Agree
NS Not sure
D Disagree
SD Strongly Disagree



Looking Ahead

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 modernization,” he reflected that “Modernism’s cult of function was 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 (ibid.) 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.



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