

# An Interpretive and Contextual Approach to Interior Design Education: A Study about Integrating Theory and Practice

*Dr Tiiu Poldma, University of Montreal, Canada*

**Abstract:** *The teaching and learning of interior design processes are collaborative exercises situated in experience in the phenomenological sense. Researchers interested in evolving interior design philosophies need to understand the underlying values inherent in existing theories and the contradictions that occur when these theories oppose actual interior design processes as they are taught and explored in the studio environment.*

*This paper is organised along three streams. First, the rationale situates the dichotomies that currently exist in design theory production and pedagogy. Second, the study methodology and data analysis are described. Finally, consideration is given to how design pedagogies could be restructured in light of these findings and how theory and practice can be viewed as symbiotic parts of a whole rather than as theoretical opposites.*

**Keywords:** *Interior Design pedagogy; phenomenology; theory and practice*

## Introduction

What do we do as interior designers and how do we do it? What values underlie what we teach and how we practice? How are these values transmitted in the design studio? These are some of the questions that I explore as I examine the conflict between the inherent dichotomies of theory and practice. These oppositions occur between the teaching of interior design and the actual framework within which it is explored as a phenomenological experience in the design studio. The theories that are taught are often borrowed from disciplines such as industrial design or architecture (Molnar & Vodvarka, 1992) because there are few constructs situated specifically in interior design. The profession, by not engaging in its own critical discourse, has evolved from a pragmatic rather than a philosophical stance (Abercrombie, 1990; Guerin & Martin, 2001). This stance tends to be grounded in issues of physical form and aesthetic symbol, rather than in broader values that shape human endeavour, such as social values, psychological factors, social-psychological needs and direct lived experiences (Grosz, 1995; Ainley, 1998; Kaukas, 2000; Turpin, 2001; Hildebrandt, 2001). These constructs are assumed to support interior design thinking; however, implicit value assumptions occur that, in fact, negate the more dynamic and collaborative nature of interior design processes. As an example, we often teach interior design history as an outgrowth of architecture, yet in doing so we negate the role that women have played in the evolution of

interior design's own history, philosophy and knowledge production (Spain, 1992; Rothschild, 1999; Turpin, 2001; Kaukas, 2000). These theoretical constructs form implicit hierarchical frameworks that promote certain values above others, including those of gender or social stance.

### **The actual practice of interior design**

By contrast, the actual practice of interior design is a complex, multi-dimensional discipline situated in a context of time, space and dimension that is driven by contemporary ways of living and constant change (Therrien, 2001; Rengel, 2003). Interior design is considered to be both an art and a science (Pye, 1978, p. 93). However, this changing and evolving discipline is also situated in the collaborative experience that occurs between the designer and the client (Franz, 2000). Interior designers need to simultaneously solve problems situated in the pragmatic parameters of space and in complex personal, social, cultural and dynamic relationships (Spain, 1992; Grosz, 1995; Ainley, 1998).

### **What happens in an interior design class?**

In discussing the complexities of interior design knowledge production, it is vital to explore what actually happens in an interior design class. Whose voice we use when we explore design meanings is as important as our philosophical stance. I present the example of my dissertation study, where I investigate the teaching and learning experiences of teachers and students in the first year design studio of a three-year bachelor program. I investigate the current epistemological underpinnings of interior design theory, how it is transferred into the studio, and the inherent problems that emerge when theoretical ideas oppose the actual acts of designing.

### **Contextualising the discussion: About theoretical oppositions**

Interior design has a long history of trying to locate its philosophy and theory, and as a discipline is still struggling to find a balance somewhere amongst opposing philosophies, all of which encounter an interface between object, user, interior environment and building structure (Molnar & Vodvarka, 1992; Rengel, 2003). Compounding this problem is the issue that we practice with insecure assumptions about what we do and how we do it. We wrestle with our own past, and with what Henry Hildebrandt (2001) noted is '...an ambiguously defined theoretical knowledge base...' (p. 75). There are different and opposing views of what constitutes critical interior design. Historically, North American interior design research has leaned towards the pragmatic and has tended to concern itself with practical problems as opposed to philosophical ones (Abercrombie, 1990; Guerin & Martin, 2001). In education

for example, some teachers believe that aesthetic categories are paramount and that human function is secondary, while others believe that human need and user experience must drive design thinking. Philosophical constructs used in design education often place these concepts in hierarchical opposition (Mitchell, 1993; Vaikla-Poldma, 2003). There is much philosophical debate in architecture, industrial design and the visual arts about these issues (Mitchell, 1993; Rothschild, 1999) but far less in interior design, particularly in Canada.

There is a disparity between the theories used to teach interior design and the actual act of designing. Some of these theories are ascribed as objectivist and absolute truths (Mitchell, 1993; Krufft, 1994). Notions of truth, beauty and values embedded in assumptions about what constitutes design in general, and interior design in particular, are often taken for granted (Ainley, 1998; Vaikla-Poldma, 2003). For example, design history education is often influenced by Modernism, which advocates the use of aesthetic categories and constructs that situate the architect as the visionary who determines a building vocation through the aesthetic categories of symbol and form (Molnar & Vodvarka, 1992; Mitchell, 1993). The unquestioned acceptance of these aesthetic categories as part of an interior design stance does not take into account the role of humans as subjective entities in interior spatial environmental designs (Ardener, 1981; Ainley, 1998). Rarely is the interior designer given *carte-blanche* to be a visionary in the Modernist sense, and design problems tend to be solved by understanding the complex social dynamics and personal needs of the users within a physical framework that is not static (Vaikla-Poldma, 2003, p.19).

### **The philosophical basis for this study**

I turn to an alternative means to understand the philosophical values that might be considered in interior design knowledge production. Everyday experiences help us as humans to formulate a philosophical understanding of the theoretical basis of the values and knowledge (Shusterman, 1997, p.18). In our society, we are all users of space and of the places that we inhabit (Heidigger in Molnar & Vodvarka, 1992, p. 278), and therefore we all bring our values to the design of spaces. If value production is composed of multiple constructed knowledges (Code, 1991; Peters & Lankshear in Giroux et al, 1996), then this implies recognition of the subjective differences of humans in how meaning is constructed. The uniqueness of interior design processes demands a framework that is at once philosophical and pragmatic, and that expands beyond the limitations of modernist thought and objectivist absolute truths (Shusterman, 1997). Occupied interior space is at once personal, physical, and psychological, experienced in a subjective personal sense.

### **Students in the design studio**

It is in the first year of most interior design bachelor programs that the foundations of design thinking are laid for future problem - solving. The learning environment frames the meaning making that we will engage in later on with our clients (Franz, 2000). In first year, a vital part of student development is the design of projects that encourage both cognitive and affective responses (Arnheim in Margolin & Buchanan, 2000), skills that are developed through theory but honed in the design studio. The programs that I have studied in North America use the design studio project as the means of engagement (IIDA, 1998). Studio project content is usually structured in one of two ways. One is to promote the design project as an aesthetic problem, where the teacher is the all-knower informing the student as the empty vessel recipient (Findeli in Margolin & Buchanan, 2000). The alternative is the project that simulates practical experiences in the profession (IIDA, 1998; Findeli in Margolin & Buchanan, 2000). When alternative ways of exploring design processes include collaborative dynamics, and when these run up against theoretical constructs promoting individualistic and artistic visions, the collaboration between the teacher and the student is harder to support. By this I refer to the teacher who transforms design problem solving into a stimulating exchange that promotes student learning (Canestaro & Carter, 1992; McNiff, 1993). I conduct my study within this arena in order to understand how these dynamics and relationships occur.

### **The framework for the methodology – grounding the study**

Many research studies in interior design explore teacher activities and student behaviour (Canestaro & Carter, 1992; Watson & Thompson, 2001), but far fewer study the direct narrative of students and the dynamic relationships that occur in teacher-student conversations. In looking at ways to underpin this study theoretically, I explored examples in critical educational and post-modern theory. Critical educational theory offers a means to ground the study in terms of both teacher and student stance, and to create the ethical structures necessary to study students and their experiences as a researcher/teacher (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; McNiff, 1993; Giroux et al, 1996; Hernandez, 1997). The teacher's stance must at once be reflexive and reflective, ready to think about the phenomena without a priori assumptions (McNiff, 1993; Ely et al, 1997). For example, if the object of the design problem is a work environment, post-modernism might offer a different perspective on how questions about the nature of work are asked. Lankshear and Peters (in Giroux et al, 1996) suggested that this framework allows the student to be seen differently by the teacher, not as an empty vessel, but rather as someone engaged in understanding the meaning of work in the modern world. This opposes modernist principles, as they explained: '...rather than accepting the

modernist assumption that schools should train students for specific work tasks, it makes more sense in the present historical moment to educate students to theorize differently about the meaning of work in a post-modern world. Indeterminacy, and not order, should become the guiding principle in which multiple views, possibilities, and differences are opened up as part of an attempt to read the future contingently instead of from the perspective of a master narrative that assumes rather than problematizes specific notions about work, progress and agency' (p. 67). In this sense, the interior designer thus becomes an agent of problem solving in a cultural and political world (Vaikla-Poldma, 2003, p. 110).

### **The study**

The study is composed of three components. First, I investigate the first year teaching and learning processes using action research, and record on video the studio activities as they occur. I keep on-the-spot hand-written journals and follow up with reflective and analytic memos; a qualitative recording tool (Charmaz, 1988; Ely et al, 1997; Davis & Butler-Kisber, 1999). Second, I analyse the collected data by studying the transcribed narrative, using reflective practices such as narrative, and creating visual concept maps (Clandinin & Connolly, 2000; Davis & Butler-Kisber, 1999). This type of layered analysis is at once contextual and contiguous in nature (Ely et al, 1997; Price, 1999; Davis & Butler-Kisber, 1999), and moves from descriptive to in-depth analysis where deeper meanings emerge. The perspective reflectively shifts from the teacher/researcher to the student and back again.

Finally, I analyse the emerging issues by collecting additional data to verify the ideas and concepts. In the ensuing 18 months I discuss the students' perspectives individually and in focus groups. For example, although I begin the initial data analysis by considering the entire group, I later focus on the meanings and messages of four of the students in the group, in order to delve into emerging issues in greater depth. This theoretical sampling is done in the third phase of the study as a means to ground the theories that emerged during the analysis (Charmaz, 1988; Strauss & Corbin, 1991; Price, 1999). Some examples of emerging issues include the different ways that students discover and search for the design concept and their discomfort with formal critique processes.

### **The findings**

The analysis of the data reveals new meanings that bear consideration about the dynamics, personal experiences, and social processes in the design studio.

Several issues emerge about student perceptions and the subsequent relative success or failure of their projects. One issue is the complexity of the many messages that design

students must negotiate. Conversations reveal that the dynamics of the teacher-student learning processes are situated in making meaning and in learning how to exercise critical and informed judgement. Making meaning varies from student to student and is difficult for some to negotiate. Design meanings are held within a social and political construction of aesthetics and difference, situated in varied forms of design thinking. These depend on the particular social, gender, or cultural background of the student and support the possibility that design is not neutral. For example, the gender issue emerges in several of the student conversations and actions. Not only do men and women explore spatial design differently, but the social dynamics of the studio influence how they perform during both informal and formal critiques.

Second, the emerging conversations of the four students show how meaning develops differently for each one. While teachers and students construct meaning together, it is both the construction and clarification of it that constitutes part of the student learning process. How and why certain issues become meaningful depends on the problem, the client, the parameters, and the situations within which students find themselves.

Third, there are difficulties with making meaning, as meanings are open to challenge. As mentioned earlier, formal aesthetic categories do run up against process-oriented approaches, and these oppositions imply hierarchies that the student must choose to negotiate. For example, some of the students in the group elect to apply aesthetic categories into the space and ignore the user altogether.

Fourth, students must learn to judge their ideas in several ways; these may include aesthetic categories, aesthetic meanings, subjective user ideas, universal truths, peer pressure and their own sense of self. Who judges becomes an important component in the relative success or failure of a student's idea.

### **Discussion: Towards a conceptual framework**

The messages that are uncovered reveal the complexity of what constitutes interior design knowledge production. In essence, the making of meaning and the clarification of this meaning for both teachers and students are situated within the learning and teaching processes in the studio. These processes are supported by what it is to be a good teacher and how students come to define their own meanings in interior design. What emerges is not meant to be a model, but rather a potential conceptual framework for understanding and building philosophy constructed in interior design studio practices.

I suggest this conceptual framework with five secondary sub-categories. First, students have a personal subjective experience of the design problem. The design act is an individual one, experienced as a phenomenological act first and as a rational act second. Second, time and space affect student experiences, and student development is a long-term, evolving process. Third, cognitive and affective aspects of designing are not part of student memories and experiences in first year. Students need to develop both a critical and visual means to evaluate ideas and nurture thinking that promotes confidence of expression while instilling critical judgement. Fourth, social relationships are affected by the design studio milieu, and this changes one's personal and visual experience of interior space. Finally, design teaching affects knowledge production, particularly when it is situated in the formal critique process. For example, in the study, the critique is examined in terms of both formal and informal structures. When judged formally, the tendency is for the design problem to become an aesthetic one, rather than one rooted in critical perspectives of social or cultural processes.

## **Conclusion**

The phenomenological study of students in the design studio environment is as much about actual lived experiences as it is about knowledge. This type of study opens up new possibilities for understanding interior design students as gendered social beings, as negotiators with their teachers and as peers of a profession in evolution. Questions can be formulated about the broad and complex nature of the design act, with its inherent subjective and inter-subjective perspectives. However, these constructs must also effectively support the evaluative aspects of design and its transfer into the tangible reality of the public domain. The study and analysis that I have described uncovers issues of values that underpin what we learn, how we learn it, and what we subsequently teach as truth and knowledge.

I suggested earlier that part of the epistemological framework is critical educational theory. This infers a movement beyond the mere act of teaching. By combining phenomenological description, grounded theory and interpretive analytic techniques, I have attempted to provide interior design with a philosophical approach that is rigorous and reflective, and opens the door to an engagement of theory with practice. Adriana Hernandez (1997) has suggested that: '...The need to develop a theory by theorizing the practice, what Giroux would refer to as a theory emerging in concrete settings, although not collapsing in them, in order to analyse them critically.... the use of concepts, such as voice and dialogue...to deconstruct and reconstruct the terrain of everyday life...' (p. 14). In advocating an understanding of the actual lived experiences of students within the design studio milieu, theories can be constructed in the concrete settings that Hernandez mentioned and need

not be held in opposition with practice. Teachers themselves need to understand the critical and dialectical nature of interior design as a process, and the transformation of theory into practice. This includes evolving philosophical and phenomenological questions that situate the student within the design process, and developing theoretical constructs that bring the user experiences into the direct realm of student learning.

Ultimately, what we hope to do is explore oppositional ideas in dialogue, and create the basis for a philosophically pragmatic knowledge for interior design as an evolving discipline.

## References

- Abercrombie, S. (1990). *A Philosophy of Interior Design*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Ainley, R. (Ed.). (1998). *New Frontiers of Space, Body and Gender*. London: Routledge.
- Ardener, S. (1984). *Women and Space: Ground Rules and Social Maps*. New York: St.Martin's Press.
- Arnheim, R. (2000). Sketching and the psychology of design. In Margolin, V., & Buchanan, R (Eds.), *The Idea of Design: A Design Issues Reader*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.
- Canestaro, N. C. & Carter, E. H. (1992). Survey of teaching Innovations in Interior Design classes. *Journal of Interior Design*, 17(2), 25–34.
- Carr, W., & Kemmis, S. (1986). *Becoming Critical*. London: The Falmer Press.
- Charmaz, K. (1988). The grounded theory method: An explication and interpretation. In Emerson, R. M (Ed.), *Contemporary Field Research. A Collection of Readings*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland.
- Clandinin, D., & Connolly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research Texts*. San Francisco, C.A.: Jossey-Bass.
- Code, L. (1991). *What Can She Know?* Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.
- Davis, D., & Butler-Kisber, L. (1999). Arts-based representation in qualitative research: Collage as a contextual analytic strategy. Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting, Montreal, Qc. *Resources in Education*, 34(11), 135.
- Ely, M., Viz, R., Downing, M., & Anzul, M. (1997). *On Writing Qualitative Research: Living with Words*. London: Falmer Press.
- Findeli, A. (2000). Moholy-Nagy's design pedagogy in Chicago (1937–1946). In Margolin, V., & Buchanan, R (Eds.), *The Idea of Design: A Design Issues Reader*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.
- Franz, J. (2000). An interpretive-contextual framework for research in and through design. In Durling, D., & Friedman, K (Eds.), *Foundations for the Future: Doctoral Education in Design: Conference Proceedings*. 8–12 July La Clusaz, France. UK: Staffordshire University Press.
- Giroux, H., Lankshear, C., McLaren, P., & Peters, M. (1996). *Counternarratives: Cultural Studies and Critical Perspectives in Postmodern Spaces*. New York: Routledge.
- Grosz, E. (1995). *Space, Time and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies*. London: Routledge.

- Guerin, D. & Martin, C. (2001). *The Interior Design Profession's Body of Knowledge: Its Definition and Documentation*. An original report prepared for the Association of Registered Interior Designers of Ontario (ARIDO). Toronto, Canada: ARIDO.
- Hernandez, A. (1997). *Pedagogy, Democracy and Feminism; Rethinking the Public Sphere*. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press.
- Hildebrandt, H. (2001). *The Rise of a Profession: The Evolution of Interior Design*. *Perspective: Journal of the IIDA*, 74–81.
- IIDA, IIDAF, & E-lab (1998). *A Study of Interior Design: An Analysis of the Needs of the Practice and Implications for Education*. Chicago: International Interior Design Association and E-lab.
- Kaukas, L. (2000). Learning from others; what recent postmodern theory has to offer Interior Design. International Interior Design Education Council Annual Conference, Chicago.
- Kruft, H.W. (1994). *A History of Architectural Theory from Vitruvius to the Present*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press.
- Margolin, V., & Buchanan, R (Eds.). (2000). *The Idea of Design: A Design Issues Reader*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.
- McNiff, J. (1993). *Teaching as Learning: An Action Research Approach*. London: Routledge.
- Mitchell, C. T. (1993). *Redefining Designing: From Form to Experience*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold.
- Molnar, J. M., & Vodvarka, F. (1992). *The Interior Dimension: A Theoretical Approach to Enclosed Space*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold.
- Price, J. (1999). In acknowledgement: A review and critique of qualitative research texts. In Josselson, R., & Lieblich, A (Eds.), *Making Meaning of Narratives*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Pye, D. (1978). *The Nature and Aesthetics of Design*. Bethel, CT: Cambium Press.
- Rengel, R. (2003). *Shaping Interior Space*. New York: Fairchild Publications.
- Rothschild, J. (Ed.). (1999). *Design and Feminism: Re-visioning Spaces, Places and Everyday Things*. Piscataway, N.J.: Rutgers University Press.
- Shusterman, R. (1997). *Practicing Philosophy: Pragmatism and the Philosophical Life*. New York: Routledge.
- Spain, D. (1992). *Gendered Spaces*. Chapel Hill, N. C.: The University of Carolina Press.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1991). *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*. Newbury park, C.A.: Sage.
- Therrien, J. (2001). *Domesticité en Mutation: Essai de Perspective*. *Unpublished Master's thesis*. Montreal, Quebec: University of Montreal.
- Turpin, J. (2001). Omitted, devalued, ignored: Re-evaluating the historical interpretation of women in the Interior Design profession. *The Journal of Interior Design*, 27(1), 1–11.
- Vaikla-Poldma, T. (in press). An Investigation of Learning and Teaching Practices in an Interior Design class: An Interpretive and Contextual Inquiry. Montreal, Canada: McGill University.
- Watson, S. A., & Thompson, C. (2001). Learning styles of Interior Design students as assessed by the Gregorian Style Delineator. *The Journal of Interior Design*, 27(1), 12–19.