

# Growing a Discipline: Evolving Learning Practices in Interior Design

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**Abstract:** *A variety of competing pedagogical orientations have accompanied the evolution of university-based Interior Design teaching. A review of relevant literature indicates that a range of pedagogical models are available, each rooted in a distinct design discipline such as architecture and industrial design. A new undergraduate Interior Design program is described, in order to demonstrate an approach to integrating theory and practice. Diverse teaching influences on the development of a course of study in Interior Design in the context of an established multi-disciplinary design faculty are illustrated. The new program's pedagogical approach is demonstrated through an examination of the first and second year studio subjects. The paper concludes with a summary of the program's strengths and weaknesses, and suggestions are made to promote ways to integrate theory and practice through broadening the theoretical discourse that could allow Interior Design to be explored through other relevant and critical social disciplines.*

**Keywords:** *Interior Design; design pedagogy; design knowledge; design studio; theory; practice; social science*

## Introduction

Over the past few decades, Interior Design education in North America has evolved from various vocational design, decorative arts, or architectural specialty programs, into a largely autonomous, university-based discipline. In so doing, Interior Design has drawn from the visual arts and design disciplines – especially architecture and industrial design – in the formulation of its pedagogical approach. As a result, Interior Design has inherited divergent philosophies and practices, some of which have over time become more relevant and useful than others to Interior Design education. This paper investigates these influences on Interior Design education, and describes the shift from formal pedagogical practices based in the design disciplines, to more situated teaching in which design studio projects are embedded into student experiences of design problems (Saven-Baden, 2001). The paper suggests that pedagogy derived from established disciplines does not always support how design problems evolve in the Interior Design studio. The authors propose that a different type of learning practice is possible, which addresses the specific requirements of a new design discipline. To illustrate their arguments, they draw on the example of a relatively new Interior Design undergraduate program located in a faculty of environmental design and taught in

the context of four existing design departments. The authors conclude that the evolving Interior Design pedagogy is a function of blending certain established theoretical and design educational practices with more problem-based situated teaching and learning.

### **Purpose and objectives**

In establishing Interior Design as a university-based discipline, questions must be asked about the nature of the educational values inherent in the formulation of design thinking and teaching. What is the disciplinary knowledge base for Interior Design? What pedagogical philosophies are evolving in universities to transfer this knowledge to future professionals and teachers? Among the many factors influencing the evolution of Interior Design education are those identified as follows.

In North American educational institutions, there are signs of a divergence between theory and practice: Interior Design pedagogical influences originating from different disciplines (for example, architecture, visual arts, industrial design) are trying to retain their own legitimacy at the expense of professional training in Interior Design. In Canada, several fundamentally different university training programs all promote Interior Design in a climate of uncertainty about what actually constitutes Interior Design (NDA, 1996). Different definitions of Interior Design circulate, thus compounding the problem of a critical perspective from which to define the profession.

Philosophical discourse is infrequently situated in Interior Design, as the discipline is clearly entrenched in pragmatic professional concerns; a recent critique of Interior Design education concluded that there is insufficient critical discussion of appropriate pedagogical approaches, including what underlies what we teach and how we teach it (Vaikla-Poldma, 1999). Ongoing debate about the nature and knowledge base of Interior Design is influenced by professional insecurity about what Interior Designers do and how they do it, and about the tendency of the Interior Design discipline to borrow theoretical and philosophical meanings from other disciplines when discussing fundamental knowledge, rather than cultivating its own critical discourse (Hildebrandt, 2001).

These weaknesses pose problems for philosophical problem-seeking in the design studio. Recent studies suggest that Interior Design, as is it commonly practiced, is a complex, multi-layered and human-driven activity that reaches beyond mere aesthetic categories of form and space. The goal of this paper is to outline the growing need for educational tools for Interior Design that are unique to the needs and requirements of its disciplinary base, and which go beyond borrowed knowledge. The unique knowledge base of Interior Design as a discipline

refers to the knowledge and competencies needed to interact with users and clients, as well as to the specifics of interior space problem-solving. In addition, a more dynamic philosophical debate is to be encouraged on how these knowledge areas, competencies, tools and skills are transmitted in the context of a university education.

### **Methodology and framework**

The paper examines these questions, first by exploring pedagogical influences on Interior Design education from the more traditional design disciplines, and then by presenting the approach used in establishing a new three-year undergraduate program in Interior Design at a design faculty in a major university in Canada. As the new Interior Design program has unfolded over the past four years, strategies for structuring its pedagogical approach have included input, discussion and shared reflection on the part of the teaching staff (academic and professional) about the nature and needs of teaching design. Issues raised include the values being transmitted through studio projects, the tools and skills needed to communicate with students, and the appropriate pedagogical philosophy for university-based teaching of a pragmatic discipline such as Interior Design. These discussions underscored the need for both a philosophical discourse and a pragmatic approach that would be meaningfully communicated through the theoretical course content and in the design studio.

Using examples from this program of study, which the authors were partly responsible for developing, we will define the evolution of the program and its use of disciplinary-based material from Architecture, Landscape Architecture, Industrial Design and Urban Design. Courses from all these programs have contributed to the new Interior Design program, and in particular, courses in Architecture and Industrial Design.

By identifying the strengths and weaknesses of alternative pedagogical approaches relative to Interior Design teaching, it has been possible to define elements worth keeping and those needing to be replaced in order to ensure self-definition and self-sufficiency for Interior Design. For example, Architecture studios consume a disproportionate amount of teaching time for both students and teachers (12 class hours and 6+ 'homework' hours a week), thus limiting time available for other courses and activities. Interior Design, required at first to adopt this model, which is well-established and well-respected in the faculty, opted after four years for an alternative studio course structure of 6 class hours and 6+ 'homework' hours, using smaller-scale design problems with more realistic deadlines. As well as reducing course costs, this approach gives teachers more flexibility in setting design problems and deadlines, and the students have more time in their schedules to take optional courses. Optional courses

can include basic drawing and technical skills for those students (not all) who were using studio design problems to acquire them.

In another example, Architecture courses dealing with construction techniques and materials, building systems (mechanical and electrical) and lighting and acoustics have been kept, in spite of the resistance of some of the architecture professors to teaching Interior Design students. The future of both professions lies in good communication between the two disciplines and overlapping areas of knowledge. The pedagogical model on which this Interior Design program is based is shown in Figure 1.

Thus a philosophical approach to renewing Interior Design pedagogy in terms of its distinctness from existing design disciplines is evolving through the new program's structure. The strong positive results being generated by the new program illustrate the evolution of a pedagogy uniquely tailored to the needs of this discipline. Requests for admission to the program have gone from 50 and 70 in the first 2 years to over 200 a year today, on a par with applications to the much larger and longer-established Industrial Design program. Two thirds of the permanent teaching staff have PhDs, which is a higher proportion than in three out of the other four schools in the environmental design faculty. And not only is an increasing proportion of graduates applying for higher degrees, but each year applicants to the undergraduate program are better-qualified, many with junior college degrees in Interior Design, some with other undergraduate degrees, and all meeting the increasingly high academic standards that are being imposed as criteria for admission.

### **Review of the literature**

A study of post-secondary institutions teaching Interior Design in North America found that institutions tend to situate their mission and pedagogical approach as being 'contemporary' or 'modernist' in nature, as opposed to 'decorative' or 'technical' (Therrien & Dubois, 2000). These streams of Interior Design knowledge are generally treated as dichotomies, and inter-discipline relationships considered second-rate in terms of academic achievement. Some programs have been influenced by Charles and Ray Eames and the Cranbrook School of Design; others have used the New Bauhaus School vision of Moholy-Nagy in establishing pedagogical programs for design schools (Findeli, 2000), and still others have grown out of departments of home economics and textiles, or arts and crafts schools, such as those in numerous smaller U.S. universities (e.g. Michigan State, Oklahoma State) and art and architecture schools such as Emily Carr and Cooper Union.

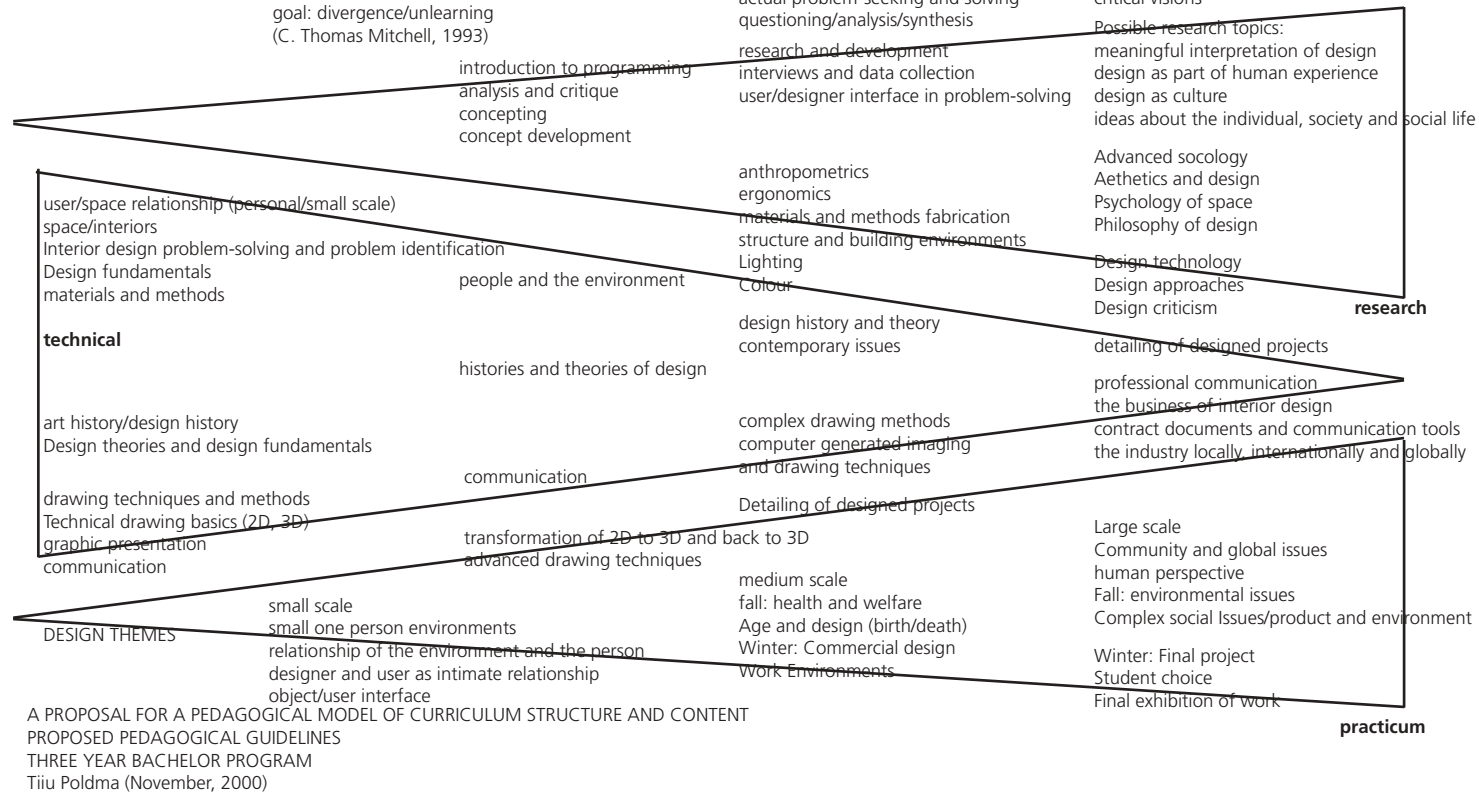


Figure 1: Theoretical model of undergraduate Interior Design program  
(Drawing: Tiiu Poldma)

A recent IIDA publication outlines two characteristics that are inherent to most American design school pedagogies: 1) fundamental philosophical roots which locate abstract concepts centrally in the operation of the design studio; and 2) the tendency to stream schools either into vocational, process-oriented, or formalist pedagogical models (IIDA, 1998). Reflections about the philosophy of the design studio revolve around complex ideas about the definition of what exactly constitutes 'design pedagogy'. There is a tendency in current Interior Design programs to promote either an abstract theoretical approach that uses abstract problem generation in an artificial setting, or a concrete 'hands-on' experience, involving the use of existing project situations that are more practical or vocational in nature and scope (Margolin & Buchanan, 2000; IIDA, 1998). But, as Findeli has stated in his critique of Moholy-Nagy and the design pedagogy used in the Chicago New Bauhaus school: '... underlying model(s) of design ... actually do exist but rarely, if ever, are they explicit or conscious' (Findeli, 2000, p. 29). He suggested not only that models of pedagogical thinking in design only sometimes exist, but also that, when considering various pedagogical approaches, programs choose one or another approach in a mutually exclusive fashion.

Other writers have drawn attention to the tendency of Interior Design education to align the vocational or the process-oriented pedagogy with either a 'formalist' (abstract), 'technical', or 'humanistic' design approach (Molnar & Vodvarka, 1992; Margolin & Buchanan, 2000). Many design schools emphasise the modernist aesthetic and formalist abstract notions of design, as linked to aesthetic categories of form, symbol and shape (Molnar & Vodvarka, 1992; Findeli, 2000; Krufft, 1995). The implication is that this 'way of designing' is superior to more humanistic or more technical approaches. Such criticism creates a dichotomy between vocational training and process-oriented approaches on the one hand, and more formalistic pedagogical approaches on the other. It is clear that there is little to lose and much to gain by making underlying pedagogical models of university design teaching more explicit.

### **Program development: Evolution of design studios in a 3-year undergraduate program**

The limitation of making such a choice becomes clear when the complex nature of the design process is explored in relation to the design studio. Design students must creatively solve problems of form and interior space while answering questions of function and the needs of users with contrasting living, working and social situations. Recent studies indicate that not only are there wide differences in student learning styles, but that there are as many educational approaches as there are teachers in the design studio (Watson & Thompson, 2001).

Formalist and/or technical and/or process-oriented pedagogies alone cannot respond to the dynamic and fast-paced situations that constitute Interior Design in North America today. The Interior Design program described here comprises a progressive and evolving curriculum in which elements of theory and practice are integrated into the learning activities of the design studio.

Structurally, the new program is primarily built around the design studio, supported by theoretical courses that explore four categories of design knowledge: history and theory, design creation, technical and professional skills, and visual communication. As the design studio comprises almost 70% of the total teacher-student contact time, this necessitates that philosophical and theoretical discourse be embedded in the design problem students are being asked to solve. Philosophical reflection forms part of the active engagement of students, and is used to create an environment where they seek out answers to questions, for example, about the philosophical values underlying the needs of users. Students are also encouraged to read design theory and to apply formal critique to the studio design problem as well as to their own work. The pragmatic aspects of Interior Design are also introduced through the studio projects, where students transform concepts and ideas into workable design solutions.

Projects in each of the design studios are situated in 'real life' scenarios, and are presented along with complex philosophical questions that explore psychology, social psychology, anthropology, semiotics and other disciplinary orientations. This approach to studio-based teaching obliges the new program to combine the philosophical rigour of aesthetics and an aesthetic understanding of space with the more pragmatic realities of getting a project realised, as well as situating design problem-solving as it might be experienced in the profession.

Two examples of design projects illustrate this point: the first and second year design studio. Teachers work in collaborative teams to promote both individual and collaborative learning in each year, depending on the skills and concepts being investigated and the educational goals of the particular studio topic. The first year design studio consists of an exploration of evolving and changing lifestyles and approaches to living in a complex, technologically charged and socially mutating world. This urban exploration of social issues in design is explored on three levels, including the homeless, socially challenging neighbourhoods, and the design of interior spaces for families with 'real scenarios' of living. As an 'ice-breaker' introductory exercise, students went into impoverished neighbourhoods and studied homelessness in order to design a shelter for transients. Examples of two drawings (Figures 2 and 3) illustrate the student's identification with users, placing herself inside the body of the occupant.

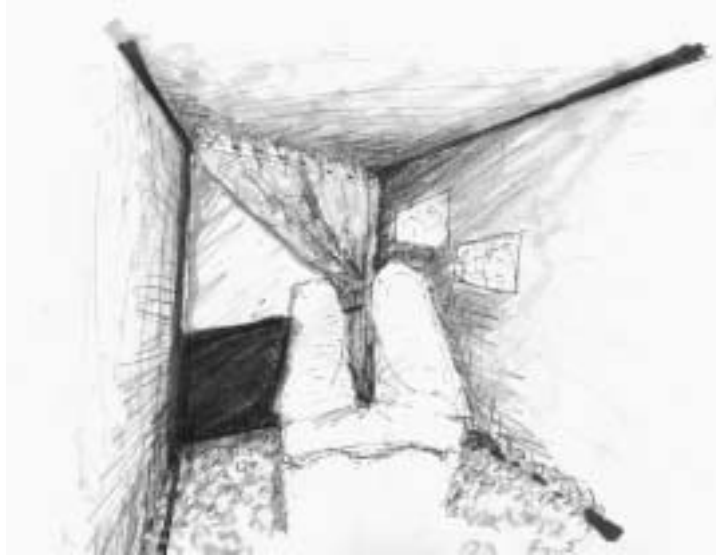


Figure 2: Student sketch showing occupant perspective of room

### VUE EN PLAN



\*LONGUEUR DE LA TRIANGLE  
 $\rightarrow a^2 + b^2 = c^2$   
 $(0.90)^2 + (1.60)^2 = (c)^2$   
 $= 3.64$   
 $\sqrt{3.64} = 1.85M$

\*TAILLE DE L'INDIVIDU (MOI)  
 $\rightarrow 1.63M$

### VUE EN ÉLEVATION



### VUE EN COUPE



Figure 3: Student sketch showing room plan and elevation

In this exercise, the link between social values, moral issues and design decisions was explored. In previous years, students explored more conceptual problems, such as designing their own homes or making a loft out of a 60m<sup>2</sup> cube. These design activities, although interesting aesthetically, did not challenge the students' value structure.

In second year, studio design problems are presented in the context of moral and social dilemmas related to the delivery of health and social services. Examples include a palliative care environment for dealing with death, a birthing centre, upgrading buildings frequented by the frail elderly to help them be more independent for longer, and residential environments for delivering services to drug and alcohol addicts, battered women, and the poor. In order to ensure that social questions and philosophical discussion form part of studio learning, questions such as the role of society (and the responsibility of its professionals) towards its weakest members, whether birth and death belong in hospitals, and how environments built for a specific social group reflect society's values and attitudes towards that group (e.g., battered women) are raised and discussed.

In both first and second year, the students are encouraged to read literature outside, as well as within, design disciplines relevant to their topic, to question their own assumptions and prejudices about users by visiting existing places and meeting people in these societal categories, to think about the role of the designer in confronting social problems, and to critique their own projects in terms both of design approach and design solution (Vaikla-Poldma, 2003). In addition, the partial integration of theory courses from other disciplines offers an inter-disciplinary and multi-disciplinary exchange of ideas and broadens the students' Interior Design knowledge base.

## **Discussion**

This approach to Interior Design pedagogy is in its first experimental stages as the new undergraduate program grows and evolves. Although the program is exciting and stimulating, problems occur when courses must work within the more traditional framework of the institutional setting within which it is situated. For example, Interior Design students in the Industrial Design studio have been told by their teachers to focus on product design, exclusive of both users and context. Architecture studios combining both Architecture and Interior Design students tend to set complex problems of interior space with no interior space pedagogy attached, relying on old-style architectural preoccupations with site, form and construction. These and other similar experiences only emphasise the unique needs of Interior Design and the need for its own pedagogic approach, in spite of the value and enrichment from other design disciplines that collaborative courses and studios can provide.

Efforts are now being made to fine-tune the Interior Design program within the context of the more traditional pedagogical 'theory as course'/'practice as studio' framework as it exists in the faculty. This implies and requires an understanding of the pedagogical influences of the educational tools situated in this framework, and how this program must work around these limitations. For example, theory courses are framed within a fixed three hour 'lecture hall' framework, which does not lend itself well to courses exploring scenarios or project-situated examples of theory as 'lived experience'. For the new approach to succeed, more fundamental changes are necessary in terms of finding ways to successfully integrate dynamic, experiential, process-based learning into the current institutional framework, for example, by re-structuring the studio courses into 6 hours a week rather than 12 hours a week time blocks.

Both academic and institutional pressures exist to evaluate the new program. First, it is scrutinised in terms of its capacity to succeed in creating legitimate academic preparation for the profession as well as for graduate studies and research. This goal is considered important for legitimising Interior Design as a university discipline. The new program must create both potential researchers and pragmatic professionals by forming conceptual and critical thinkers able to problem-solve in a wide range of situations. Secondly, as a new program, Interior Design is under pressure to merge with one of the other, better-established departments. This may be for pragmatic reasons – office and classroom space, administrative support – as well as for academic reasons such as combined research teams, joint studios and shared theory courses. Interior Design needs to strike a careful balance between cross-disciplinary collaboration and exchange, and a distinct Interior Design identity, disciplinary content and course structure.

As Interior Design evolves as an academic discipline, its educational philosophy will be increasingly oriented to integrating theory and practice in the design studio. The future of university-based Interior Design education lies in integrating formerly opposed pedagogical models of teaching design, in terms of choice of teaching philosophy, communicating social values, with a pedagogy oriented both to theory and practice modeled, in part, on the 'reflective practitioner' (Schon, 1984).

### **Conclusions**

The new Interior Design program outlined above aims to create a stimulating learning environment that combines social and psychological theory with pragmatic, 'lived' experiences of users in designed spaces. The studio examples presented reflect this bringing

together of theory and practice. The issues that need to be addressed in designing a university-based Interior Design training program include recognition of the need to make explicit the theoretical underpinnings of both the teaching and the practice of Interior Design. In addition, courses must be designed to respect the pragmatic nature of the Interior Design discipline as it exists in the practitioner environment, while at the same time preparing graduates for careers in research and teaching. There is currently a deep void in the research and development aspects of Interior Design, and all university programs need to consider how their graduates will have opportunities to rectify this imbalance in years to come.

The evolution of the curriculum of the new program is based in part on providing a variety of ways for students to ask critical and philosophical questions about what constitutes Interior Design, the role of Interior Designers in society, and the impact of design decisions on the social and political structures that form the framework of our society. Areas of knowledge that are seldom explored in more traditional design departments – such as semiotics, sociology and psychology, feminist epistemologies and values studies, and critical educational research – are potential areas in which Interior Design research activities could and should be carried out.

Experiences with the new program have led us to conclude that the Interior Design ‘process’ should be an integral part of Interior Design teaching, with an emphasis on performance objectives, teacher-student relations, and the interactive design process at an experiential humanistic level. As Lovejoy (2003) has pointed out, ‘In the light of each term, the other can allow an examination of the conditions within which design occurs, in other words, its ethos’ (p. 2). By including aesthetic meaning and interior spatial composition and function, this integration of oppositions ensures theory and practice are combined in realistic terms in the studio environment in order to ensure an appropriate transfer of knowledge at the university level. In exploring both theory and practice in the design studio, the dynamic and changing nature of Interior Design is promoted and explored as the integral and dynamic process that it actually is when the designer and the client collaborate in creating interior space.

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