

The Architecture of Change

Era 05, the changing role and challenges of design. This congress aims to provide a new perspective to the challenges of design and the role of designers in a rapidly changing environment. Now that's something. Great social and commercial challenges require a new perspective. True. But do I hear anything new here? Is this an unprecedented challenge?

The answers may be new, the challenges are not. The tempo of change may be higher, but change has always been and will always be the merit of design. There is no future without a past. To fully understand today's challenges, we have to learn from the past. For interior architecture, this principle sometimes seems to be a bit out of sight. As a result, interior design is not a very clearly defined profession. We play around somewhere between architecture and design, use a bit of both to create other people's future living environments in existing or new spaces that were created by others. Sounds clear, but not very flattering. If we want our clients, and the general public, to know who we are and what we do, we have to show what we did and why we did it. To be good and tell it. Before we look ahead, let me take you back first.

Since the beginning there was Architecture, the mother of arts that is concerned with Building and Beauty, and stands for Culture and Comfort. Architecture reflects stability and continuity. *Utilitas, Firmitas et Venustas*, or as we say firmness, commodity and delight have guided and guarded architecture since Vitruvius. Ever since, the art of building relies strongly on craft skill and on-site experience, responding to client demand. What began as creating shelter, emerged into a highly sophisticated industry, that sets its own technical and economical standards. Architecture is a slow art. Innovation in architecture comes gradually, and it is this slow maturation that has made building an art that outlives us by intent. With our strong emphasis on durability, low-energy consumption and recyclability, buildings are created to last for at least 30, 50, 100 years, or even for eternity. While the art of building is a complicated process, not seldom already between initiative and completion of a building our demands will change. Still, we have to live in our buildings, so we constantly adapt them to our ever changing needs and moods.

We know that roughly every six or seven years a building's inhabitants change. People move, other people move in, people change jobs, working structures or conditions change. Even when we do not move or change anything, our demands alter. We grow older and go through different

stages of live with different functional and stylistic requirements. Technology changes. Fashion changes. With it, our idea of comfort changes. Interiors change with us. Adapting our living environment is not a consequence, it's a condition. That makes design not only a part of the building process, but also a feature of every buildings life. We make buildings, and every so often we remake them as they are overtaken by time. Design guides how we do that, how we react to the architecture, how we make it fashionable yet durable by adaptation. Interiors are never finished.

I am aware that this short vision on architecture and design is not adequate to describe the richness of the subject, and is at least arguable. But it is a starting point to clarify the issue of interior design. Interiors are not designed for eternity. Interiors change, like our moods, needs and fashions change. From that point of view, interior design can be seen as a fashionable, cosmetic attribute to fulfill our hedonistic lifestyle. But even though interiors sometimes are fashionable and stylish, that vision is a bit short sighted. Even stylish interiors have to serve the practical needs for which they were intended for, and require a general obligation to safeguard the health, safety and well-being of its users. This asks for professionals.

Today, many disciplines are involved in the business of adapting interior spaces to human occupation. Architects, designers, spatial designers, stylists, decorators, furniture suppliers, interior contractors, furniture makers, general contractors, just to name a few. Also, many ordinary people are their own designer, whether or not challenged or assisted by the boost in media attention for fashionable and comfortable living. What distinguishes the interior architect from them all is that he focuses to the direct and close relationship of man with his environment, or more precise, of user and interior space. Interior architects are professionals, skilled by training and practice.

Unfortunately, here is where the general idea of what an interior architect really does or means stops, as well under professionals as by the general public. Practice and training differ greatly, not only in different countries and cultures, but even within the profession itself. Naturally, every interior architect or designer has his own design philosophy, style and way of doing business. But do we have a common idea of what Clients may expect from us? How to sell our profession? What may we expect if we ask ten different people in the street what an interior architect or designer is or

does? I would expect ten different answers, most of them probably wrong or unclear. Can we blame them for that?

Many interior designers adhere to the additive ~architect. The reason for that may be that they want to identify themselves with the kind of work architects do. The concept of 'architect' hardly needs explanation; people know what to expect. Ask those same ten people and they will probably give you ten identical and more or less accurate answers.

Like architects, interior architects main concern is dealing with space, defining the way we move around in it, experience it, feel and behave ourselves in it. But do we take the same responsibilities architects do? In most countries around the world the profession of architecture is protected by title-laws, alike physicians, lawyers etc. This legislation is to safeguard the health, safety and well-being of the people, which is a major concern for the authorities. Also, architects are expected to guide their Clients through the entire building process, not only the spatial design, but everything from refining the Clients visions and defining their needs to documenting them in plans and specifications, monitor construction and counsel the budget. Many interior architects will say that that is exactly what they do too. On a different scale maybe, with some exclusions, like structural work, and some additions, like designing workplaces and dealing with ergonomics. And alike architects, most interior designers are not design celebrities, but talented, hard-working and experienced professionals, committed to the job.

Interior Architecture is a young profession, and although decoration is of all times, we haven't quite decided yet if it is art or science. It is only two-hundred years ago that furniture was mainly a form of architectural decoration, fixed in the space. At the beginning of the 20th century home-decorators, inspired by the arts-and-crafts movement, did some good business, and from America ideas about a more practical furnishing of homes came to Europe. But it is only after World War II that the design of the interior became an independent profession in Europe, practiced mostly from a socio-cultural point of view. Inspired by the pre-war Modern movement early post-war interior design brought us an esthetic moralism that sought to improve the quality of life through bright and sparsely furnished interiors. Those were the days of white walls, black linoleum and utility furniture. Interior designers thanked their independence to a headstrong conception of their job and a sense of social responsibility. Soon a more fashionable interior design came over from America, and it was not long until Ikea's and Terence Conran's Habitat stores made design

affordable and within reach of the masses. This democratization of interior design gave way to a new decorative eclecticism that also affected the work of the professional interior architects considerably.

From that first post-war generation of interior architects we may even remember some names of designers. But most have long been forgotten. With them, their interiors are long gone, and their work is scarcely documented. In general, the history of interior design has hardly been written, neither from an art-historic point of view, nor from a socio-cultural point of view. Interiors are vulnerable, and historic interiors are more rare than high art. Strange, if we realize what the way we furnish our homes and offices and shops can tell us about the cultural history and anthropology of our times. This goes for designed interiors as well as for the vernacular. One might even say that in this regard vernacular interiors are in a way always a reflection of the styles and fashion of the time, and as such of the designed interior.

Not only do we not record the history of our profession, there is also no coordinated research on the circumstances that determine success or failure in interior design. Interior design is design driven; not primarily the result of research and knowledge. We live in a time of ideas. It is no longer the product, but the idea behind it that appeals to us. From marketing we learn that the line between idea and illusion has become thin. In our own profession we can, thanks to computers, bring the most fantastic ideas to virtual reality. We learn to think in concepts, in images. Design is not a solution, it's an attitude. Designers deal with complexity. Good design is never a compromise, but a resolution which somehow redefines and unifies the shards of the original problem. Creative people are impatient, they want to go ahead, to investigate, to innovate, solve problems. Creative people look forward, and that is exactly what they are hired for by their Clients.

The temptations of creativity are great. But in the end design only works if we translate innovation into products. Which means that the interior architects work needs to cover the whole process, including technology, ergonomics, functionality and other unsexy aspects of the design work. That we need to have knowledge of manufacturing and execution. That we have to deal with rules and regulations, know about jurisdiction and liability. And that we are able to market our skills and know how to maintain a profitable business.

Design education has improved greatly over the last years. The creative and conceptual skills of young designers are on a very high level. But this improvement was largely at the cost of technical and practical skills. Subsequently the idea touched ground that the challenges of our modern society ask for a broad and innovative design approach. Which might be true. But personally I think that ideas and creativity alone are never enough to solve whatever challenge. I believe strongly that students should not only learn to develop themselves conceptual, but also should learn craft skill on human behavior, health and safety issues, some basic understanding of construction engineering, marketing skills, entrepreneurship, design-for-all issues and other less appealing responsibilities. Such more businesslike aspects generally are underdeveloped. The result is a generation of conceptually strong interior architects who, as one colleague recently put it, make beautiful designs but ramshackle structures.

At this moment, the higher educational systems in 25 European countries are being transformed into a uniform trans-European system, based upon the Anglo-Saxon bachelor master system. The main goal of this transformation is to encourage the international exchange of students, teachers and researchers. Of course this transformation also concerns schools of art and design and interior design schools. Here lies a tremendous chance for our educational institutions to form a network of interior design schools, and to set up international research and exchange programs. Unfortunately, that is not what I see that is happening. In stead, I have the impression that competition between schools has grown stronger, and that the urge to attract students with challenging programs sometimes exceeds the need to deliver the best practitioners. But I'm convinced that eventually the new system will lead to stronger cooperation and professionalization of the education, and with that of the discipline as a whole.

History and theory are the starting point to enter into tomorrows challenges. And challenges we have! As I said in my introduction, interior architecture is the architecture of change. Strong economics and globalization brought us, at the end of the 20th century, a new attention and recognition of the value of a good living environment. While technology changes the way we communicate, new office concepts were developed in close cooperation between interior architects and management consultants, Government authorities start to recognize the importance of well designed work places and public buildings. Schools and

university buildings are now interactive learning environments, that combine students needs with appealing design. And the overdose of beige, to which we used to expose patients in hospitals and seniors in elderly homes, is slowly but surely being replaced with designed interiors, in which people feel better and cure better

Health care, and the fast growing market for housing for the elderly and sheltered living, offer chances for interior architects to contribute with their specific knowledge to the realization of quality improvement in the sector. Also the public interior, the continuation of public space in public and semi-public buildings, is an area where interior architects typically can contribute to functionality and perception. New theme's such as multi-culturalism, safety and privacy are added challenges.

To be able to deal with these challenges, we need coordinated research and a documentation of projects that goes beyond nice pictures in glossy magazines and coffee-table books. We need an attitude to discuss and debate our work, to learn from each other and to add individual experiences to common knowledge. To create best professional practices we need research and debate.

Research and debate traditionally belong to education. But theory and scientific orientation are usually treated in stepmotherly fashion at art-schools. The question arises whether the current bachelor programs are equipped for such research tasks. And most of the master programs that are set up recently do not offer a theoretic scientific approach of the discipline, supported by lectorship. Teaching should go beyond the training of individual students, and combine education with general research.

But we can not blame education alone for being an undefined profession. In fact, education has done a great job in broadening the view and bringing in interdisciplinary insights. It is thanks to this broad view that interior architects can think outside the box, and approach challenges with unhindered creativity. To deploy this richness of ideas the professional field needs to work closely together with the educational institutions. Schools need the input of actual practice. Professional organizations should be more than service organizations, and offer their members a broad scope of contacts and instruments to further enhance their skills and knowledge. Continuing education projects can create such a bond between education and practice, and add greatly to the experience and knowledge of the profession as a whole. The profession should organize itself in such a way that being informed and abreast of things is a minimum

requirement, backed by a strong awareness of the history and theory of the professional field. Educators and professionals must work together to create an ongoing platform of exchange for knowledge and experiences.

Along with minimum educational qualifications, professional business standards and high standards of ethics, life long learning is the best guarantee we can offer our Clients to design the architecture of change. Knowledge and creativity are not only our best marketing tools, but more than that they are the only way to define the ever changing answers to ever changing needs. The question is not whether we are architects or designers, or whether craft skills are more important than innovative thinking. The real question is how we can contribute to society's ongoing process of change. For that, we need to understand the dynamics of usability, comfort and style. And with that understanding we are back at Vitruvius' basic formula; *Utilitas, Firmitas et Venustas*. Romance, sociability, sensory pleasure and human delight have always been and will always be the great benefactors of our profession.

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