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The Rise of the Interior Architect

BY ANNMARIE MARANO

Some design firms today are choosing to identify themselves as interior architects rather than interior designers in order to more appropriately convey the depth of their work.

"Interior architecture is exactly what we at Studio Gaia call it rather than interior design," said Ilan Waissbrod, principal and founder of the NYC-based firm.



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ALEJANDRA LILLO

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STEFAN BEESE

"The importance of interior architecture is that sometimes when you do a space and the architecture of the interior of the space, you don't need to think of how you fill in the walls with decoration because it's part of the architecture and done well."

ILAN WAISSBROD

"Interior architecture and architecture students in our department share some required courses and design studios. This sharing of broad knowledge encourages student relationships, expands creative processes and allows for flexibility in integrating different scales and various contexts."

ALISON SNYDER

Waisbrod says interior architecture actually began at the same time as architecture itself. The forefathers of art, such as Michelangelo, never distinguished between architecture and interiors.

"Interior architecture has more to do with the treatment of specific walls, floors, ceilings — not decorating them but treating them as a design move. My understanding is that interior design is more dedicated to finishes, furniture and colors," said Alejandra Lillo, senior associate with Graft Lab in Los Angeles — an interior design firm comprised of almost all architects by degree. Graft creates an interior sculpture rather than

designing it, she said.

"It's about the re-thinking of space and the re-distribution of pre-conceived functions and challenging those traditional uses in space planning. This is not necessarily the distinction but when we are doing interior architecture that's what we do. We redefine traditional uses. We challenge pre-existing paradoxes of spaces and hopefully make them better." But according to Waisbrod, more people are taking notice and developing an understanding of interior architecture as a reaction to the intense "decoration" and use of materials that was done on cruise ships and interiors in the 1980s. "So it's

not a movement. It's basically going back to basics. It's going back to where it used to be and where it's supposed to be. I'm not saying that interior design from the point of view of materials is not right. I'm saying it's supposed to be done in the right taste and the right limit."

"In the 80s, there was so much interior decoration that they didn't put enough attention on the space in terms of architecture. Rather, they started covering it in materials. This is how the Studio Gaia approach is completely different. We don't believe in the decoration and the materials because it doesn't have longevity; it's not timeless. It

can change from period to period, but interior architecture won't be changed. It's supposed to be done as good and as professionally as the architecture of the building," Waisbrod said.

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According to Waisbrod, if you think of a job as simply "decoration," then you want to fill every empty hole with art or materials, flooding the space rather than letting it



Studio Gaia's Corporate Cafeteria

Waisbrod cited the Camino Real Hotel in Mexico City as a perfect example of modern interior architecture. It was opened in the 1960s and never renovated. "It looks just as modern as it was in the

60s and more modern than people trying to do stuff today. It's a great example of when interior architecture is done right, it doesn't fail the test of time."



Camino Real lobby

just be — "because that's what the architect meant."

But for some, the term "interior architect" not only represents a willingness to break out of the box of traditional thinking. It can simply point to a more well-rounded designer, who can tackle any type of project.

"We do exteriors, interiors, furniture — anything that interests us," said Lillo. "Our office is growing and hopefully we won't decide to specialize in anything. Most other small boutique architecture practices delve into both interiors and exteriors. As long as it's interesting," she said.

"The idealized future is more of a partnership — a marriage between interior design, architecture and industrial design. These are three disciplines together that have a huge impact on a space," said Thomas Lambeth, chair of the Interior Architecture department at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

"We teach our students that they are smart enough to design everything. We are

teaching them to have a new, more integrative and more collaborative sense of who they are and what they do."

The idea that "interior designers can only do this and architects can only do that — that is ridiculous to me and to everyone else here," he said.

Waisbrod has similar theories — "I believe a good designer can design anything: a cup, an interior, an airplane, a building. If you are a good designer, then you can design anything that comes to your hand."

He identifies the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena as "the best school in the country, if not the world." Studio Gaia welcomes an intern from the Art Center's environmental design program every three months. According to Waisbrod, that program teaches a student "total design" and they experiment with a number of courses, such as industrial and classic design.

"It's about an ongoing relationship between architecture and interior design.

We teach our students to design not just finishes of an interior space but be involved in the team process of designing space," Lambeth said.

The department changed its name about six years ago from housing and interior design to interior architecture, (which in real terms doesn't actually exist), he said. "I was expecting a lot of controversy, but there wasn't," Lambeth said of the name change. "There are a lot of traditionalists in interior design who are scared of it."

But he says he thinks interior architecture is "on the

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THOMAS LAMBETH

rise" and something that will be realized and understood more in the years to come.

There are associations that accredit interior design (the Council for Interior Design Accreditation; CIDA) and architecture (The National Architectural Accrediting Board; NAAB, which is the sole agency authorized to accredit US professional degree programs in architecture according to their website); but there are no accreditation programs for interior architecture, says Lambeth. Many interior architecture programs are accredited by CIDA, including the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and the University of Oregon's interior architecture program.

The Interior Architecture Program, one of two programs in the Department of Architecture at the University of Oregon, was established in 1922. According to its director, Alison Snyder, their undergraduates and graduates take a rigorous interior design course of study that is



Hotel Q by Graft

also very interdisciplinary. "Interior Architecture and Architecture students in our department share some required courses and design studios. This sharing of broad knowledge encourages student relationships, expands creative processes and allows for flexibility in integrating different scales and various contexts."

"We try to fit within the standards that CIDA sets for interior design programs but we go a lot further than that," Lambeth said. For example, the department teaches eight to 10 different software programs because they believe that advancing digital imaging is the future, he says.

Lillo also noted that the language of interior architecture has changed due to 3D computing being used as a way to visualize space and build.

Lambeth said they changed their name to interior architecture in order to make a statement about their beliefs and change their identity.

"I think that one of the purposes of an academic institution is to advance the state of the profession. I've been here 23 years and we've always thought this and we felt it was time to make a statement and call ourselves interior architecture. That name isn't perfect either but we

approach everything we do from a humanistic point of view rather than a manufacturing point of view. It's what makes us different."

"Interior architecture is a common profession in Europe," Lambeth said. Stefan Beese, senior associate with Graft Lab, holds an interior architecture degree from the Hannover School of Applied Sciences. He studied both interior as well as production design.

In Germany, he said, interior design is better defined as interior architecture. "You're basically allowed to design and to a certain degree provide the plans. It goes a little bit further than

normal interior design here." "The education I got goes a little beyond what I've seen from my colleagues in the states with the same title in terms of engineering. It's a little bit more involved in the architectural part of a project. What you learn about engineering and materials leans into construction rather than just application."

Interior architecture is a move toward focusing on architectural changes and improvements, Beese says. "It goes into the shell of a building, rather than just designing or remodeling the plain material of a project. The interior design has a lot to do with finding the FF&E for me. Interior architecture goes beyond that and goes into demolition and how the space can be improved from a technological standpoint, such as with heat and green applications. This ends up being in the shell of a project. You have to work very closely in the architectural arrangements. You are dealing with the whole project."

"I don't really know enough about what programs are offered in interior design or environmental design," Lillo said, "but one of the benefits (of going about an education the way she did) is you look at the articulation of the space rather than application of finish." Lillo has a bachelors and masters degree in architecture.

"And that makes a big difference in how we approach interior architecture. We're looking for something experiential rather than to apply something pretty. Not that I want to degrade interior designers."

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Graft principals Thomas Willemeit; Wolfram Putz; Larz Kruckeberg

