

# **A THIN VENEER: INTERIOR DESIGN'S SOCIAL COMPACT**

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## **Abstract**

Interior design's struggle to develop a sufficient social compact is considered in the context of the discipline's nascent professionalisation. After interior design developed out of interior decoration it acquired some characteristics of a true profession (mainly a technical knowledge base, associations with higher education, and a public focus). However, its ontological origin as an arts-based practice remains. This practice is reliant on 'good taste', in which an essentially amateur activity is used as an instrument of class distinction. This renders the discipline unable to state its greater social contribution which is required to sustain a compact in which the privileges of professionalisation are counterbalanced by an endeavour to act in the public good. Subsequently, an attempt is made by academia to assert the discipline's social contribution as a precursor to professionalisation. In a diversion from taste-making and decoration, a tacit compact is expressed by the introduction of topics such as human-centred design, well-being, and environmental sustainability. However, the pedagogic underpinnings which support the realities of commercial practice are diminished and the needs of the client and the end-user may be placed in opposition. We suggest that currently the social compact in interior design's academic focus, although well-intentioned, is incompatible with the commercial realities of practice. The failure to resolve these contradictions results in graduates who are not able to apply the compact in conventional practice. This is counterproductive to professionalisation efforts since the discipline is unable to deliver its claimed expertise.

Our aim is to consider the origins of this conflict and its implications on interior design as an academic and professional discipline. This is in order to provide a mediated position in which the discipline may assert a credible social compact which is constructed on the basis of its ontology. In our self-identification as interior designers (who approach the discipline as students, practitioners, and academics) we undertake a heuristic enquiry. We generate novel insights by relating the self to our context. Our insights and opinions are supported and illustrated with empirical data, literature, and pertinent examples.

We argue that the constituent elements of interior design, namely taste-making, decoration and consumption, must be embraced and that the social compact be developed and applied in this realm. This would enable the identification of the compatibility between interior design's ontological origins, its contribution to society, and its commercial value. This would effect an appropriate pedagogy, while contributing to interior design as a profession.

## INTRODUCTION:

### THE CAMPAIGN FOR PROFESSIONAL STATUS

Interior design's aspiration for professional status is an ongoing effort situated within a global discourse on professionalisation. Since professionalisation requires a theoretical foundation, we interrogate interior design's underpinnings as presented in academia. The current disciplinary focus on professionalisation is questionable as it diverts attention from urgent theory construction in other areas of practice (Breytenbach 2012). We endeavour to illustrate why the present situation is unsuitable.

As a condition for professionalisation, the ability of interior design to formulate and define a discrete set of critical practices is crucial (after Wilensky 1964:138). To achieve the privileges of professionalisation (a protected title and a service monopoly) (Wilensky 1964:146), a discipline must convince the public that it is uniquely trustworthy (Wilensky 1964:139; 146). The confidence of the public is conventionally achieved through the development of a social compact, in which a discipline states its contribution to the greater good of society. Harold Wilensky (1964:140) states that practitioners must illustrate that they conform to a set of 'moral norms', reinforcing the requirement of a social contribution. To achieve professionalisation, interior design must be able to state its social compact and fulfil it. One of the main obstacles in interior design's professionalisation is its current inability to define and fulfil its social utility and to convince the public of this.

In view of this, we focus on the discrepancy between students' expectations of practice and what they are taught in academic contexts which inhibits the professional establishment of the discipline. We consider, specifically, the disconnect between interior design's commercial nature and its assumed social utility. The commercial nature of interior design practice centralises the client's profit objectives, which, through the inherent practice of taste-making, involves creating socially exclusive environments. This is in opposition to the values generated by interior design academia, in which a social compact between the interior designer and the public is investigated through a pedagogic focus on the end-user or inhabitant (and not the client). This is promoted through study themes in the curriculum such as human-centred design, well-being, and environmental sustainability, which are developed in isolation to the discipline's ontological practices (in taste-making and decoration) and its commercial focus. In this regard, there are disparate values in practice and academia. Further, Interior Design graduates with social consciousness misaligned with the commercial demands of practice, are at a crossroads for which academia should be held partially accountable. As academics, our duty encompasses, inter alia, evaluating the suitability of the curriculum in preparing students for the rigours and expectations of commercial interior

design practice (Hill & Hedge 2014:42). As interior design academic-practitioners, we consider the discrepancies between the concerns of practice and academia which inhibit the professional establishment of interior design, and explore their causes and pedagogic implications. We further question: what are the ways in which the discipline may express and fulfil a social compact which finds compatibility between the discipline's ontological origins, its methods, and its commercial orientation?

We aim to explore the origins of the potential conflicts of interest between interior design practice and academia, their implications on pedagogy and graduates, and the consequences for the professionalisation of interior design. We deliberate on interior design's origins, its subsequent initiation in academia, and the origins of its practice within the commercial realm. Thereafter, we discuss academia's attempt to re-orient the discipline's social compact as an effort to support professionalisation. Following this, we demonstrate some of the contradictions in values between academia and practice, highlighting the implications for professionalisation. Finally, we propose a mediated position from which the discipline may find compatibility between commercial success and social responsibility.

## Method

As interior design academics with experience in the commercial design sector, the disconnect between the social compact expressed in education and the commercial focus of interior design is something we have both experienced personally (as students, then graduates, then academics). This was realised as three distinct periods of 'culture shock': i) starting interior design education with a desire to create beautiful rooms, but realising that this is not the goal of the academic study of interior design; ii) moving into practice after graduation, in which the progressive ideologies embedded during our education found little scope for expression, and; iii) in returning to academia as educators, in which the commercial realm was seen as shallow, and in which a concern for the commercial environment was criticised as 'just retail'.

Since this is a topic related to our experiences, heuristic enquiry is used to deliberate our argument. Heuristic enquiry (after Moustakas 1990:40) relates topics of the researchers' self-identification, expression, and selfhood into the research discussion. The problem became clearer through personal encounters and discussion with peers. This is consistent with a heuristic enquiry in which the origin of such research problems occur as result of "an intentional readiness and determination to discover a fundamental truth regarding the meaning and essence of one's own experience and that of others" (Moustakas 1990:40).

The heuristic method allows freedom to explore aspects of the self in this context and, through this, to expand understanding in ways which have social implications (Sela-Smith 2002:59). This examination of the discord between interior design's social compact and its commercial practice may have autobiographical beginnings, but it has broader implications for students and for the interior design discipline (after Moustakas 1990:15).

*A global assessment of the interiors discipline* (Caan 2011) is the main empirical data source for this chapter. This report is the result of a global survey conducted by the International Federation of Interior Architects/Designers (IFI) in 2010 and published in 2011. The process involved an

“opinion-based research method, involving individuals and groups; and understanding them as social constructions that can be analysed through an interpretive method,” (Caan 2011:13). The process involved 29 regional think tanks, a print questionnaire (*n.* > 600), and an online survey (*n.* > 2,000) (Caan 2011:14). At its completion the process involved a range of *interiorists* (such as educators, students, manufacturers, design media, professionals, and other interested members of the public) (Caan 2011:13) in 88 countries around the world (Caan 2011:16). The research process was endorsed by six international academic organisations, including Cumulus and IDEA (Caan 2011:108). To our knowledge, this is the largest assessment of interior design as a practice that has been undertaken to date; no other data of equivalent quality or scope is readily available.

## **The commercial origins of interior design: places of social distinction**

The mass noun ‘interior’ should be distinguished from the products of the contemporary interior occupation. Rather, ‘interior’ can be understood to include all enclosed spaces and is primarily the result of vernacular production, as with the vast majority of domestic interiors. This interior, specifically with its private associations, is described by Charles Rice (2004) as the development of the spatial context for bourgeois domesticity. In contrast, interior as the product of interior design has a commercial focus, the emergence of which we discuss below. This is a discipline of experience and spatial performance (Pringle cited in Attiwill 2004:6). We deliberately exclude attempts to portray a history for interior design which precedes that of architecture by referring to ancient interventions in found space (for example, references to cave paintings in Turner 1981:8). This is since the objectives of prehistoric shelter and those of interior design in the twenty-first century are not comparable. This provides the context for the emergence of the professional practice of making the interior. Although it is presented chronologically, it should not be interpreted as another attempt to model the interior on the canon of art or architecture (after Attiwill 2004:6).

As a professional practice, interior design as an architectural specialisation is considered by Joy Malnar and Frank Vodvarka (1992:4). During the Rococo (c. 1720-1760), some architects specialised in the design of interiors since this field became financially and symbolically important (Malnar & Vodvarka 1992:18-19). This can be considered as somewhat anachronistic, since the recognition of interior design as a discrete discipline appears to be a twentieth-century phenomenon (Gürel & Potthoff 2006:218). John Pile (2005:464) and Clive Edwards (2011:263) place the origins of the discipline slightly earlier, claiming that it was established as a specialist domain in the first half of the nineteenth century. The design of interiors emerged with industrial design after the Industrial Revolution (1760-1840) as the focus on interior evolved from a range of trades involved in the manufacture of enclosed space (such as upholstery, furniture making, carpentry, and millwork) (Pile 2005:464). It is during this period that interior becomes associated with the decorative response to architectural enclosure (Rice 2004:276). Peter McNeil (1994:632) affirms that interior decoration arose from the participation of women in the Arts and Crafts movement (1880-1920). This is reiterated by Penny Sparke (2012:15) who claims that interior decoration itself developed from upholstery and cabinet-making as viable occupations for women towards the end of the nineteenth century. Thus, by the turn of the twentieth century, interior decoration was an established occupation, particularly one acceptable for women. The first

academic programmes with an interior focus were thereafter introduced in the home economics departments of American universities (Gürel & Potthoff 2006:219). At this point in history, the terms 'interior design' and 'interior decoration' could still be used interchangeably.

As a discrete profession, 'interior design' emerged after World War II (1939-1945). During this period, technological innovation and economic development required a holistic design specialisation in which interior designers "increasingly worked in non-domestic commissions, as the commercial sector realised the value of good interior design" (Massey 2001:142). This is a pivotal moment in which the relationship between the interior designer and the commercial client was established in an attempt to differentiate interior design from the less professional and amateur activity of interior decoration. The interior designer's attentiveness to the client is mentioned as a fundamental aspect of the professional position (Stone 2007:229). Although interior design originated as an applied art rooted in the built environment, its development as an interrelated, but autonomous, discipline is on-going (Baxter 1991:241).

Currently, essentialist depictions of the interior occupations can be stated as such: 'interior decoration' is a domestic practice in which the decorator's self-expression and taste plays a fundamental role. In contrast, 'interior design' has a commercial and public focus with a pragmatic objective. Despite the shift in practice from the domestic to the public (Massey cited in Königk 2010:11), the method shared by decorators and designers persists. They both add value through exercising 'good taste'. This remains a fundamental part of the design process, which indicates the interior designer as a taste-maker.

We view interiors as cultural products, or products which reflect and shape culture (Königk 2010). Interior design, as an activity, transforms cultural capital (including the ability to express 'good taste') into economic capital through the provision of an interior as a cultural product designed for consumption. Taste-makers, also known as cultural intermediaries (after Bourdieu 1984 [1979]), operate within creative industries as producers of culture. In taste-making, the interior designer determines popular taste by inscribing the user's needs, desires, and aspirations to designed interiors. In this process, interior designers are active agents in the social system disseminating cultural capital between different role players. As a credible taste-maker, an interior designer acquires cultural capital (through formal education) and is seen to express 'being in the know'.

The act of taste-making in interior design finds relevance in the commercial realm. Taste-making targets interiors to specific user groups, who articulate their choice to inhabit a particular interior as an act of conspicuous consumption. This is a form of consumption motivated by the expression of identity and status (Königk & Khan 2015). It is informed by social affiliation: users choose to consume certain products not only as expressions of who they are but also as assertions of the social organisations with which they are associated (Douglas 1996:82). The preference to consume one product and the choice not to consume another are reciprocal definitions of identity and social affiliation, distinguishing one group in society from another (Douglas 1996:81). Given that interiors exist as cultural products (Königk 2010; 2015), selective inhabitations of interior spaces are acts of conspicuous consumption (Milligan, Hollis, Milton, Plunkett, Hay & Gigli 2007:20). Places of consumption occur beyond retail settings: these may include natural sites, urban environments, restaurants, offices, banks, and more (Sundaram 2016:9).

The notion of place consumption is especially relevant to commercial interiors, given the

client's profit motive in commissioning the built interior. The creation of interiors suited to the tastes of particular groups of inhabitants above others supports spatial occupation by appropriate or target users. A commercial interior populated with target inhabitants is a sign of commercial success as the correct design of the interior attracts appropriate target markets. The resultant impact of targeted interiors is the creation of exclusive spaces, in which taste is used to resonate with some and to deter others. This is to say that products of interior design are not for all tastes, but are selectively desired and occupied. Mary Douglas (1996:50) asserts that taste can be traced to arguments about antipathy and embarrassment: "taste is best understood by negative judgments." A consumer may select a product as a judgment against that which was not selected (Douglas 1996:81). For target inhabitants of interior design, a notable expression of judgment is the decision to enter, and temporarily inhabit, a specific interior. This act, as one of cultural production, informs and reforms culture, producing a specific spatial scenario in which cultural groupings are defined through the discovery of affinities or incompatibilities between themselves and the interior product, making the consumption of culture a strategic gesture.

Contention arises when an interior's suitability for selection or rejection by certain users is implied by its design, resulting in the deliberate creation of exclusive spaces. In their choice of this 'consumer good' and, in this case, their choice of interior, the potential inhabitants exercise their underlying discrimination (Douglas 1996:62). This discrimination is based on the rejection of that which is not chosen (Douglas 1996:62). This rejection is not necessarily based on the quality or visual appearance of the product, but on the inhabitant's need to "not want to be associated with another who would definitely" be associated with that product (Douglas 1996:63). From the perspective of a concern for social justice this is problematic, since interiors can (re) produce social exclusivity and inequality, even when the designers and inhabitants of the interior are not consciously aware that this is happening. This is especially problematic in the context of postapartheid South Africa because of the relationship between social distinction and socio-economic variables.

In interior decoration, Elsie de Wolfe initiated the use of taste as a device during the 1950s (Sparke 2012:16-17). She recognised that taste played a fundamental role in defining the status of her domestic clients (Sparke 2012:17-18). By decorating spaces which referenced 'high taste' through the selection and composition of decorative components for the home, she defined the status of the inhabitants, distinguishing them from one social class and associating them with another (Sparke 2012:18). Interior design, although focused on the commercial and not the domestic realm, retains a similar practice in social distinction through taste-making, although less deliberate in the linear distinction of class (Sparke 2012:27). This brings interior design and interior decoration, as taste-based practices, in close proximity.

Although the realm in which one may operate differs from the other (commercial as opposed to domestic), the act of interior design is not further differentiated from the act of interior decoration (Attwill cited in Königk 2010:12). Both are practices which instil intangible social values through the aesthetic and spatial manipulation of the built interior, and this is still ontologically embedded in the practice. The founding of interior design education in a liberal arts curriculum, which was enriched with conventional references to the development of western aesthetics, did not fully differentiate interior design from its earlier fundamentals of decoration. With few exceptions, interior design is still approached as an arts-based practice which is informed by

contextual studies that locate the discipline in the history of art and architecture. Although formal instruction in the agency of taste-making is rare, it is still a fundamental informant of interior design practice.

It is in this regard that interior design finds contention within the academic context. As an arts-based practice, with roots in decoration, the discipline asserts a degree of autonomy as a form of creative expression (Skov 2002:563). Carrying the stigma of interior decoration as a superficial practice, interior design might be defined as so self-indulgent, self-expressive, and materialistic that it is incapable of addressing real-world problems (Harland & Loschiavo dos Santos 2009:146). Interior academia finds discomfort with the tacit, taste-based practice of the discipline in relation to societal needs. This is problematic in reflection of professionalisation. The discipline faces a moral conundrum: following Harold Wilensky (1964), it cannot professionalise, since it is unable to i) define a monopoly of service (due to its similarity to decoration), and ii) express a viable social utility (due to its role in the design of exclusive spaces). It is in this arena that academia responds.

## **The academic response: the social compact**

According to Wilensky (1964:138), the following factors form the conditions for professional status: the profession should have a technical knowledge base; it should operate with autonomy; specialised training should inform its skills and autonomy, and; the public should find trust in the skills and expertise of the professional. Design, in general, is entangled in a process to professionalise its practice, which is characterised by the pursuit of specialised education geared at expected skills, knowledge, and intellectual standards (Julier 2014 [2000]:51).

In the efforts to achieve professional status, the development of a social compact for interior design becomes imperative since it should state the discipline's contribution to social good. Since public trust is contingent on professional status (Wilensky 1964:138), it is intended that this may be gained through the social compact which acts as a contract between the practitioner and society. The compact is a tacit agreement in which a profession acts in the greater public good (Sullivan 2005:30-31). In exchange, the profession receives a monopoly of practice for a discrete set of services (Anderson *et al.* 2007:v; Wilensky 1964:138). The creation of interior design's social compact therefore is occurring as a result of the pressure to legitimise the discipline as a profession (Anderson *et al.* 2007:v).

However, there have been obstacles to the establishment of interior design's autonomy through an exclusive knowledge base. Historically these arose during various unsuccessful attempts to define a discrete practice (Anderson *et al.* 2007:v). These efforts were primarily to differentiate interior design from interior decoration on the one hand and architecture on the other (Königk 2010). This was a misguided effort – interior design is not sufficiently different from either interior decoration or architecture to be a discrete service (Königk 2010) and is therefore unable to claim professional autonomy as Wilensky (1964:138) recommends. Unless the discipline is able to state its social compact, it will not receive public trust, and hence, professional recognition (Anderson *et al.* 2007:viii). Once public trust is earned, recognition of the discipline for its exclusive contribution is given and it is expected that a discrete area of practice will follow (after Wilensky 1964).

In the route towards professionalisation, an early stage is the requirement of practitioners to have engaged in formal training, which should be attached to universities (Wilensky 1964:144). This is applicable to interior design: undergraduate courses were established in the 1920s in Canada; the 1940s in Australia; and in the 1970s in South Africa (Breytenbach 2012:2). The discipline has since developed to the extent that it is possible to complete doctoral degrees in interior design.

Academia, as a core locus for the discipline's values, is seen as the place in which the social compact can be developed (Anderson *et al.* 2007:xi). After the compact is sufficiently fostered and incorporated into the curriculum, it can be delivered to professional practice (Anderson *et al.* 2007:xi). In the spirit of operating as an ideal profession, it is expected that interior design's social compact will be disseminated through recent graduates who take these teachings to practice, implementing socially responsive interior design, and thus legitimising the practice. This mechanism is called for by the International Federation of Interior Architects/Designers (IFI) too: practitioners expressed the opinion that recent graduates should contribute to the public understanding of the profession (Caan 2011:95). This would, presumably, accelerate the journey to obtaining professional status for interior design.

Barbara Anderson, Peggy Honey and Michael Dudek (2007:ix) view this social compact – interior design's social utility – as a human-centred design approach, from which environmental sustainability and well-being stem as key sub-themes which determine best practice. In the global assessment, the social compact is suggested by the IFI through values associated with the 'happiness', 'well-being', 'pleasure', and 'comfort' of the inhabitant (Caan 2011:27). It is clear that ideas such as happiness, pleasure, and comfort can easily be considered to be aesthetically produced. The discipline tries to assert more gravity by including well-being (Anderson *et al.* 2007). The IFI's assessment includes a significantly wide acceptance of human needs and well-being as core values of interior design practice (Caan 2011:45), but does not explicitly and adequately describe these concepts. There are peripheral mentions of "psychological health, sustainability, safety, and universal accessibility" (Caan 2011:45). The importance of environmental sustainability is mentioned by a small minority of practitioners (Caan 2011:27).

In their survey of articles published in the *Journal of Interior Design*, Stephanie Clemons and Molly Eckman (2011) demonstrate the state of, and influences on, interior design theory from 1975 to 2008. They report that interior design theory finds focus in human-centred approaches, in which "human beings, human life and human activities" are important (Clemons & Eckman 2011:31). They note an emphasis on empirical and behavioural studies in interior design theory, derived from the social sciences (Clemons & Eckman 2011:38). They critique the lack of depth in knowledge interpretation, and the relation of knowledge from other fields to interior design problems as "lacking appropriate application in the interior design context" (Clemons & Eckman 2011:43). Further, they acknowledge oversights in relevant areas of interior design theory building, and call for particular scholarly attention to theory expansion from the perspective of business, describing this as "critical to the success of interior design practice" (Clemons & Eckman 2011:37,42). This is reiterated by Caroline Hill and Asha Hedge (2014:43) who argue that despite the interior design discipline's claims that it creates environments which support human well-being, there is a general short-coming in understanding the fundamental business principles which would support the profession.

The commercial fundamentals of the interior design occupation are tentatively considered

in academia (Clemons & Eckman 2011:42). The reality of interior design as a decorative, taste-based, profit-driven, commercial practice fares negatively in the light of conventional perceptions of public well-being (Harland & Loschiavo dos Santos 2009:148). Although the designer-client relationship is still the basis for professional status (Anderson *et al.* 2007:vi), academia generally ignores or subdues the commercial nature of the discipline (Clemons & Eckman 2011:42; Anderson *et al.* 2007:vi) or deems it incompatible with the concept of social justice (Harland & Loschiavo dos Santos 2009:148; Preston 2012:97).

The opposition of commercial and cultural problems on the one hand, and the academic orientation of interior design as a human-centred-practice (Anderson, Honey & Dudek 2007:ix) on the other, creates a dichotomy in which one issue is viewed in opposition to the other. The need to address 'real human problems' (following Harland & Loschiavo dos Santos 2009:148) mitigates the perception that design is merely an aesthetic end and a producer of desires with little public relevance (Julier 2014 [2000]:49). Academic curricula are subsequently modified to favour areas of study in which the commercial nature of interior design may be circumvented, such as healthcare design and social housing projects (see Harland & Loschiavo dos Santos 2009). Further, attempts are made to instil a social understanding of users in isolation to economic factors, such as universal access (the accessibility of space to differently-abled users) and environmental sustainability (Anderson *et al.* 2007:ix). The rejection of the commercial aspects of interior design as a valid pedagogic concern is symptomatic of the broader design community, in which the commercial realm is regarded as being unable to address the social needs of the larger community (Papanek 1985 cited in Harland & Loschiavo dos Santos 2009:146). In this scenario, design is expected to produce its own justification, regardless of any real societal need (Julier 2014 [2000]:49).

However, academia is somewhat disingenuous in this regard. It seems indifferent to the commercial sphere, which is the discipline's conventional area of practice, implying that its facilitation of consumption is incompatible with social value (after Harland & Loschiavo dos Santos 2009). Douglas expresses a similar frustration at the supposed incompatibility of consumption environments with social justice: "Anyone who feels passionately that consumerism is wrong, should be consistent" (Douglas 1996:111). As taste-makers, interior designers have a responsibility to acknowledge the plurality of identities and movements of society, and design for the tastes associated with these (Sparke 2012:27). Sparke (2012:27) aptly affirms, "... we have to accept the idea of the coexistence of multiple tastes and the interior decorator/designer's responsibility to design for them". The concept of consumption in interior design is reinforced by the inherent practice of taste-making, which plays a significant social role.

Academia's omission of the discipline's commercial interest and its relationship with taste results in an atomistic emphasis on social good. This is a misrepresentation of the practical reality of the discipline. Consumerism, and the inherent autonomy involved in its exercise, allows individuals the freedom to express themselves, regardless of the tyranny of conformity (Douglas 1996:111). In their choice of goods, consumers make choices about the kind of society to which they wish to belong (Douglas 1996:112). We assert that the interior, as such a 'consumer good', plays a similar role. The inhabitation of the interior is viewed as an act of consumption in which inhabitants express their identities through occupation. If this is not adequately acknowledged, incorporated, or addressed, then students are consequently inappropriately equipped for

practice. Early graduates may be so far removed from the commercial realities of practice (in which interiors are designed as profit-generators, facilitators of consumption, and are influenced by client input) that they are unable to deconstruct the practice sufficiently to implement aspects of the nascent social compact.

## **An uncanny dichotomy**

That the client is not the end-user creates a feeling of familiar disquiet for the interior designer. In the context of interior design, the 'client' and the 'end-user' are exclusive of each other (Caan 2011:31). We use the terms 'client', and 'inhabitant' or 'user'. The client is defined as the entity who commissions and pays for the design service, and the inhabitant or user is defined as the person, or group of people, occupying a space. In the domestic realm (such as the architectural commission for the design of a private house) the client and inhabitant or user may be the same person. In the commercial realm, they are usually not. For instance, a shop may be commissioned by a retail holding company but be inhabited by employees and consumers who play no active role in the design process. That the client is not the inhabitant of an interior may create a dilemma for designers if it places the client's needs and objectives at odds with those of the inhabitant.

In most cases, the client's objective in commissioning a commercial interior is to create an environment which facilitates profit generation (Harland & Loschiavo dos Santos 2009:146). Interior designers believe that clients expect the integration of functional requirements and technical knowledge into practice (Caan 2011:39). With academic value placed on social justice through human-centred design (Anderson *et al.* 2007:vi), the interior designer's prioritisation of the user as central to design risks alienating the client whose financial incentive for project generation appears to become subordinate to social justice. The majority of participants in the IFI assessment believed that the client's values are incompatible with social and environmental priorities (Caan 2011:53). Human-centred design therefore appears to divert attention from the client's objectives and directs this to the user as the generator for interior design decisions. Interior design practitioners also identified this dichotomy between the client and the inhabitant, with many expressing the belief that although the interior designer is commissioned by the client, the designer should act in the inhabitant's interest (even if this is of no interest to the client) (Caan 2011:53).

Robert Harland and Maria Loschiavo dos Santos (2009:148) claim that this approach may result in changes to academia which adopt a social focus and steer away from the industry *status quo* of client-centric design. In their view, appeasing clients and pursuing commercial design practice sustains a form of designer-indulgence and selfish luxury (Harland & Loschiavo dos Santos 2009:148). Paradoxically, an emphasis on the social need of users may appear to the client as the interior designer exercising self-indulgence, in which a personal social position is expressed at the financial cost of the client. In discussions about the beneficiaries of interior design, the inhabitant may even be referred to as 'the real client' (Caan 2011:53). This is a clear conflict of interest which contributes to the professional conundrum. We are not disputing the idea that the designer should have consideration for the inhabitant, but as a profession, to whom is the designer accountable?

An analogy can be drawn when considering the common struggle between creative

practitioners and commercial stake-holders. The creative autonomy afforded to arts-based practitioners has proven difficult to justify as a form of 'self-expression' in the face of financial realities (Skov 2002:563). As with the importance of the inhabitant, the creative autonomy of the professional is not under question; however, as creative professionals we ask, when does professional accountability override artistic expression?

In the following example, we illustrate the dichotomy between the client's financial objectives and the designer's social objectives. In an attempt to fulfil the sustainability mandate, a designer specifies costly light-emitting diodes (LEDs) as lighting for a retail interior. This decision is made largely due to the perceived low energy use of LEDs, although they are significantly more expensive than alternative lighting sources. The socially-conscious designer identifies a heavy burden, which the client must carry. This is also short-sighted: a narrow focus on energy use may overlook other aspects which are relevant to the appropriate choice of lighting. High-energy discharge lamps may use more electricity, but are more efficacious in terms of the amount of light energy delivered (c.75 lm/W for metal halide lamps, compared to c.50 lm/W for LEDs). Although their energy use is significantly higher, incandescent lamps will have more optimal colour rendering characteristics (c. 100 Ra for halogen lamps, compared to c. 90 Ra for LEDs): both aspects are of paramount importance in the retail environment. Further, if inappropriately specified, the high colour temperature of LEDs (up to 6000 K) may affect melatonin production, mood, productivity, and memory of the inhabitants (Knez 2001) which may limit their time spent in the retail store. Although the designer may be well-intentioned, it is at the expense of the client, who pays more for a low-energy solution, and of the inhabitant, whose aesthetic experience suffers. If an inappropriate and uncomfortable environment is created, an unprofessional service is rendered. Although oppositional requirements are not scarce in themselves, this example illustrates the problematic nature of the social compact and the necessity for technical training to enable designers to mediate this.

Conventional client-consultant relationships require that the consultant (interior designer) fulfils the responsibility of providing expertise in their field, and ensuring that client interests are fulfilled. This expertise is based on the discipline's core knowledge, acquired by its practitioners through training and experience. According to Johan Muller (2011:287), a discipline may be defined by its core knowledge base, which is considered legitimate only by public consensus. This is where interior design faces vulnerability: the very core knowledge of the discipline is disconnected between practice and academia: each hold a conflicting truth and occupy unstable common ground. Essentially, for practice, this revolves around financial benefits and performance standards in the commercial realm (Caan 2011:27, 39), while for academia, it revolves more around social and environmental responsibility.

A point of convergence between practice and academia, and an example of this unstable ground, is environmental sustainability. There is general consensus from practice that a greater focus should be placed on environmental aspects in the interior design curriculum (Caan 2011:60). Academia is expected to meet this need. As its contribution to the protection of ecosystems, the only practical suggestion the discipline could state was through the selection of materials (Caan 2011:59), which requires more rigorous study and theorisation to evolve into a set of technical and sustainable best practices. Even a cursory reading of issues of environmental sustainability in the interior environment provides a variety of strategies ranging from reducing the emission

of volatile organic compounds, improving interior environmental quality (including olfactory, aural, and visual comfort), to the reduction of energy and water use, and promoting the use of public transport (for example, USGBC 2018; and Hausladen & Tichelmann 2010:30-77). The free availability of such knowledge, and the support for its place in both practice and academia is surprising, given that it is superficially treated, as is shown in the discussion of examples later in this chapter. This is an indication that the social compact, the technical knowledge base, and the integration of these in both practice and academia is embryonic.

Clients seek consultants to offer expertise they do not have themselves. The credibility of consultants' expertise may be determined on the basis of their professional status (Fincham 1999:337). While consultants (such as engineers) conventionally align themselves with professional bodies who verify their expertise, interior designers are without such certification. The absence of professional status complicates the relationship between the client and the consultant since the interior designer's expert opinion may be held questionable by society at large, and paradoxically, the client in turn. The public perception of interior design as a talent-based, superficial, or decorative practice (Anderson *et al.* 2007:xiii) undermines the knowledge, training, and skills required to successfully conduct commercial interior design. It also confirms the general criticism lodged against the practice of design as being a self-indulgent and self-expressive activity. Interior practitioners refer to the perceived inferiority in professional status – interior design is not considered to be on par with the classic professions (Caan 2011:38). Due to a lack of professional status, the discipline remains unregulated, with no legislative restriction on the title of interior designer. This circumstance deteriorates interior design's ability to form a consistent measure of its performance in practice. The process by which clients attribute credibility to consultants is not necessarily objective (Fincham 1999:338). With factors such as knowledge and training, professional registration, and relevant experience contributing to consultant credibility (Fincham 1999:337-8), the absence of hard evidence of these in the interior design discipline leaves the client's appointment of an interior designer as a typically subjective choice. The basis of the professional relationship lies here. If interior design is offered a monopoly of service, it will impact the client directly.

Given the existing contention of the discipline's legitimacy, educated interior designers who seek to fulfil their instilled social compact through emphasis on environmental sustainability, human-centred design, or well-being in order to provide meaning to their commercial projects, are risking client tension and putting the larger profession at risk. Since these topics never formed part of the core ontology, and were only recently introduced into the curriculum, they are addressed with limited depth. This is illustrated in the following three scenarios.

First, sustainability is often reduced to rudimentary references of its environmental aspects with inadequate consideration of the complexity of the issue. Interior design practitioners indicated the selection of materials as one of the most important contributions to environmental sustainability (Caan 2011:59). In undergraduate design studios, well-meaning students frequently specify bamboo flooring since it is a 'natural' and 'renewable' material. This narrow claim is also present in literature focusing on the topic (for example, Dennis 2010:31; 40). This does not take into consideration that bamboo-flooring is a composite material containing urea-formaldehyde, the material is dependent on heavy industry for its manufacture, and must usually be transported great distances. Although products that eliminate or mitigate these factors are available, if the

future practitioner is reliant on a rudimentary understanding of the issues, they will not be sought out.

Second, a professed concern for the user is manifested as compliance with normative standards of universal access or the systematic application of anthropometrics. We believe that in this application these two aspects are not sufficiently complex and the scope of knowledge is too narrow to be considered a professional knowledge area (after Wilensky 1964:48). In other words, knowledge of basic normative standards, like this, is easy to acquire and its application should be common practice. These should not constitute a social compact, especially in the built environment. If, however, the complexity of human-centred design is considered, a common oversight is currently observed as a lack of concern for the 'physical', 'social', 'emotional', and 'spiritual' aspects of existence (Caan 2011:45). Further, if the user is considered as a consumer in commercial environments, then the 'good sense and integrity' of the consumer should be acknowledged (Douglas 1996:81).

Third, efforts in promoting well-being tend to *cul-de-sac* at colour choices which are 'scientifically proven' to affect the mood of the inhabitant (for example, Kwallek, Lewis & Robbins 1988). The IFI's global assessment broadens the scope of strategies to colours, furniture, material, and the arrangement of objects (Caan 2011:47). The inclusion of a consideration of objects is noteworthy; it has direct links to interior design's origins as a decorative practice, while the concern for objects is surely an act of conspicuous consumption. Clemons and Eckman (2011:42) point out the importance and complexity of the symbolic interaction between the user, objects, and spaces. This offers ample opportunity to develop the social compact in the commercial sphere.

The current application of interior design's social orientation suppresses its ontological practices of taste-making and decoration which are directly relevant to commercial interior design typologies. The superficiality also removes design opportunity: compare the design of a shoe shop with a general practitioner's rooms, in which one typology offers more scope for interior design expression than the other. Taste-making and decoration are substantiated by theoretical fields such as Environmental Psychology, Consumption, Sociology, Cultural Studies, and Marketing, which have limited influence on interior design curricula and academic knowledge bases. With the interior designer's 'expert' voice being guided by academically instilled social values of human-centred design, well-being, and environmental sustainability, an apparent ethical contradiction between social justice and the motives of the commercial client emerges.

It is ultimately the client who bears the cost of the designer's utopian ideals. This creates an uncanny moral dilemma in which the interior designer is cornered into either succumbing to client pressure, which entails abandoning instilled social values, or into preserving idealised social justice whilst estranging the client and betraying the fundamentals of the client-consultant relationship.

This dichotomy and its implications are recognised and stated by Shashi Caan (2011:iii):

It would appear that the more formal and idealistic responsibilities of an [interior designer] appear to be clear, but that the potential conflicts of interest (or as yet unidentified opportunities/possibilities between and amongst these responsibilities) are not acknowledged or recognised.

However, this seems to be a false dilemma. It may be argued that if the commercial sector is a major employment division for graduates, then the incompatibility between social ideals and the expectations of practice is problematic. In its delivery of socially conscious graduates, academia produces practitioners who are ill-equipped to deconstruct the (re)production of exclusive environments. This practice is located in design's ability to give form to the serial reproduction of the social and economic system (Julier 2014 [2000]:241). Further, the discipline's inability to fulfil the needs of practice may diminish academic credibility, threatening the grounds for the discipline's professionalisation. Lastly, as illustrated above, the discipline itself is not fully equipped to deliver the expertise it claims to possess. The situation increases in complexity when it is considered that the interior designer also bears a responsibility to the profession itself. The profession is the result of the cumulative expression of the individual practitioners (Anderson *et al.* 2007:xii).

The designer also introduces the risk of culpability: if the client's venture fails due to an ill-conceived attempt to provide social justice, *is any good done?* If the designer is unsuccessful in convincing the client to carry the burden of social justice, *is any good done?* If the designer contributes to the commercial success of a client, *is harm done?*

## **Commercial success or social good? A critique of the (re) production of exclusive environments.**

The examples we discussed illustrate that concepts such as human-centred design, environmental sustainability or well-being are dealt with in isolation and in contradiction to the commercial fundamentals of interior design practice. It is these shallow efforts which we regard as the 'thin veneer'. If they are to be included, they must be thoroughly investigated and incorporated in appropriate typologies in the interior design curriculum. This is an onerous task, especially in the commercial sphere. There are apparent contradictions between the motives of the commercial client and interior design's social compact. Ironically, the argument can be made that this contradiction renders graduates unprepared for practice, which ultimately affects the personal well-being of interior designers trying to act in the greater good of others (Hill & Hedge 2014:43). We recommend a shift in academia's knowledge base to inspire a practical alignment and appropriate social orientation without compromising on the discipline's ontological origins. This is in order to inspire a critical pedagogy which grounds the discipline's ontology as the basis for its social contribution. This requires the consideration of cultural practices as innately 'real' problems, rather than indulgences of a higher order. We propose the following positions:

Academia should recognise that taste-making is inherent to interior design practice.

In interior design, user experiences are designed to incorporate the needs, aspirations, desires, and tastes of specific targeted consumers. Commercial spaces are made attractive to potential users who express their wish to occupy these interiors as acts of consumption. In interior inhabitation, the first act of user-exclusion is a micro-aggression which makes spaces unattractive to those not considered as part of the target market. The decision to inhabit the interior is based on the consumer's acceptance of its social capital (after Bourdieu 1984 [1979]) and personal identification (or a denial of this). In their choice to temporarily inhabit a specific

interior the consumer should be considered to be a rational person (after Douglas 1996:81). Consumers select artefacts (which include interiors) as a coherent expression of the kind of society that a person wants to live in (Douglas 1996:81). In its association with goods and products, the commercial interior acts as a spatial commodity within the system of consumption. The designer transforms cultural capital to economic capital. The interior is a cultural product and the user's occupation is a form of self-expression. Self-expression, in turn, forms the basis of conspicuous consumption. This is not a malicious activity nor a superficial one (König & Khan 2015). Further, the interior designer, as a *new* cultural intermediary, stakes a claim in democratising design. With high taste formerly being afforded to the upper-class structures in the traditional sense of taste-making (Bourdieu 1984 [1979]), *new* cultural intermediaries approach taste-making through destabilising the system of privileged taste consumption by broadening the accessibility of cultural capital to further market segments (Nixon & Du Gay 2002:497). Taste-making, in facilitating aspirational consumption (though not accessible to all) promotes a contemporary practice of cultural mediation, accessible to further segments of society by contributing to the redefinition and growth of aspirational society (Nixon & Du Gay 2002:497; Sparke 2012:16). In expressing consumption choices, the consumer has agency, which is not really used to make a determination between different goods, but between different positions in society (or different kinds of society) associated with these (Douglas 1996:112). In the South African context, in which western and postcolonial forms of distinction in society provide an evident contrast reflecting the legacy of apartheid, taste-making can play a significant role in the (re)definition of societal structures through a growing consumer class, in which commercial interior design typologies form ideal opportunities for socio-economic shifts. This is informed by entanglement of expressions of conspicuous consumption in which design and style are situated (Julier 2014 [2000]:241).

Concurrently, academia should recognise the compatibility between taste-making and human-centred design. In interior design, taste-making is compatible with human-centred design in that both principles place the consumer-inhabitant as an informant to the design process. In taste-making, the user is considered as the consumer, for which interiors are overt cultural products which are designed for consumption. In human-centred design, the user should be thoroughly researched, defined, understood, and accommodated through interior design for physiological and psychological well-being (Anderson *et al.* 2007). It may thus be argued that human-centred design and taste-making in interior design occur intrinsically and are mutually supportive. If interior designers approach commercial practice with human-centred design principles but are unaware of the implications of taste and choice, they may (re)produce interiors of social exclusion, *albeit* unwittingly. When considering the relevant inhabitant as central to the design process, interior designers are active in heightening the probability of spatial consumption through the design of customised, user-relevant experiences. This connects the commercial interior to extended opportunities of consumption: the clients' offering (products, leisure, food, or other) and the formation and expression of a personal and cultural identity. In acknowledging the concept that the consumer is engaged in the process of making a collective good; we imply that their tastes and choices are determined by the kind of society they deem valuable (Douglas 1996:114). This also promotes commercial success. Ironically, interior design's social compact may be fulfilled through a human-centred design application, in which taste-making is an intrinsic practice which practitioners apply with awareness.

In addition, academia should recognise commercial typologies as an appropriate channel to express its social compact. For interior design, the majority of commissions are for the design of commercial spaces. Academia should recognise commercial and consumptive practice as fundamental to the production and practice of interior design as a profession. Academia should not define commercial and social characteristics as opposing forces since this creates and fuels unnecessary polarisation. Academia must be able to define the various professional and ethical roles, to deconstruct these, to develop these, and to successfully synthesise these. To do so, academia must accept, and embrace, the fundamental, ontological values and outputs which constitute and define interior design as a practice. To accomplish this, academia must identify an appropriate canon of built artefacts in which it can highlight its ontological practices with theoretical substance developed and adapted from informative disciplines such as Environmental Psychology, Sociology, and Marketing. The inter-relationships between these fields should enrich academic and practical approaches to human-centred design, well-being, and environmental sustainability. These knowledge areas should be interrogated, appropriated and built upon to relate to the specifics of interior design (Clemons & Eckman 2011:43). If academia is correct in formulating a social compact based on human-centred design, well-being, and environmental sustainability, these issues must find application in commercial typologies. A narrow set of commercial typologies would allow the discipline greater opportunity to define a distinct area of practice and to limit the scope of investigation which will facilitate research in these areas to provide real solutions. For example, when the design of a line shop in a shopping centre is considered, many of the obvious sustainability strategies (for instance, using natural light or passive ventilation) are not available. Academia should therefore be responsible for providing the necessary technical knowledge to address these design problems. This is an ideal opportunity to establish a technical knowledge base that supports the social compact. To source typologies which allow an easy expression of the social compact does not serve the discipline. As such, a critical pedagogy should enable graduates to deconstruct their own practice and to express an appropriate social awareness in the real-world projects they complete.

Finally, practice should claim ownership of interior design expertise. For interior design, it is the responsibility of the practitioner to manage the client and their influence on the built interior. We advocate that it is not acceptable for practice to merely identify a need and require academia to respond accordingly. Interior designers should be conscious of their culpability when, i) acting solely on behalf of the client at the expense of ethical principles formulated to benefit society, ii) when compromising the client in their attempts to adhere to these ethical principles, and iii) when they do not consider their individual contribution and responsibility to the profession as a collective of practitioners. The interior designer has a responsibility to provide disciplinary expertise and insight which the client does not possess. Further, the interior designer must be able to provide the expertise they claim to possess. This places the interior designer (and discipline at large) at risk should this knowledge be absent. To recognise that the veneer of veracity is thin, the designer's culpability must be understood and deconstructed in its full complexity.

## Conclusion

Through the enquiry of the establishment of interior design in academia and practice, we deliberated the differences between the priorities of each. These discrepancies stem from embarrassment about the foundation of interior design in decoration and taste-making, and the perception that these practices are incapable of making a social contribution. In order to assert its social utility, a redirected academic focus in interior design involved aspects such as human-centred design, well-being, and environmental sustainability. Although principled and well-intended, we argued that this academic focus is largely incompatible with the current realities of practice in which the client and commercial nature of built-interior projects are influential in the design process. Due to the inappropriate basis of the social compact, interior design graduates are consequently ill-prepared for the realities of practice. This is regarded as problematic: the definition and application of the social compact in relation to current practice should be explicit. Attempts to circumvent the difficulty in the compact's commercial application is highlighted as counter-productive in the efforts towards professionalisation. We thus propose a reorientation in the discipline's social compact through a mediated position, in which the constituent approaches of interior design (taste-making and consumption) be addressed in the commercial realm where its social utility can be applied. This should stimulate a critical pedagogy which acknowledges the discipline's ontological origins as the basis from which a viable social compact is derived. From here, principles such as human-centred design, well-being, and environmental sustainability may be introduced into the curriculum, should they find genuine application within the interests of commercial interior design. We conclude that, if interior design is truly based on human-centred design, it offers the potential to contribute to the client's commercial success in an ethical manner. If academia and practice acknowledge this, then the uncanny dichotomy will collapse. These efforts should propel the progress towards interior design professionalisation.

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