Design + Culture: Charting New Directions for Interior Design Scholarship and Pedagogy

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Culture is at the heart of interior design scholarship, education, and practice. The changing American demographics and the global nature of the profession both add to the need to nurture interior design students who are global citizens that can navigate complex political, social, religious, and economic systems in a responsible manner. In positioning this Special Issue on Design + Culture, then JID Editor-in-Chief, Dr. Margaret Portillo, Jennifer Webb from the JID Board, and I set an ambitious goal: chart new directions for Interior Design scholarship and pedagogy. Questions were puzzling to us: when is the “+” relevant and in what manner? What constitutes “new”? How are “directions” to be defined and what role do we envision them to play? To tackle these questions, we stayed focused on the bigger vision to foster synergies among design educators and other allied scholars who are eager to rethink the field’s relationship to culture and contributions to interdisciplinary discourse.

The process started with a symposium in March 2014 as part of the IDEC annual conference in Fort Worth, Texas. A total of 17 papers were shared that ranged from historical typologies to Caribbean design and the global transfer of interior design curricula. Three roundtable discussions followed: What are the different understandings/narratives of culture? What are the impacts of these narratives on our collective work and action? And in what ways can Interior Design’s contributions to discourses around Design + Culture be strengthened and shared? The end result was a 17-page document with questions that helped channel the efforts to identify the different foci of this Special Issue.

The Special Issue is meant to mark a beginning, not an end. Papers selected push questions around Design + Culture in ways that help us move toward our goal:

- Ellen Pader, an anthropologist, uses the Perspective essay and her personal story to explore how home and aesthetics are constructed in displacement and the inherent social and political consequences that result from choices about how to live in a private interior.
- Jacqueline Power transports us to Tasmania and the Australian aboriginal experience to propel a rethinking of how knowledge is produced and how the language used can shape understandings of what interior spaces are and whether they belong in the interior design historical canon.
- Norma Figueroa expands questions on how gender relationships are negotiated in Kuwaiti hospital waiting rooms to uncover how personal agency often overrules spatial characteristics, such as seemingly inflexible furniture arrangements.
- Gregory Marinic examines how immigrant and minority groups use everyday manipulations to appropriate retail environments in two American suburbs, regenerating aspects of interiors that are flexible and adaptable.

Readers should be reminded that many papers were submitted that would add to these dialogues. Only three could comprise the Special Issue. Our hope is that the questions raised by these papers will challenge interior design scholars and educators to move beyond the comfortable and the familiar and see the opportunities that arise when Design + Culture is framed in a more complicated and colorful light.
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