

# Interior design's occupational closure: an ethical opportunity

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## Abstract

*In March 2015 the South African Council for the Architectural Profession (SACAP) announced its intention to register new professional categories for interior designers. This will provide statutory recognition for the professional status of the interior design occupation and it will allow interior design occupational closure, a state where both the practice and title of the occupation will be regulated.*

*To reach this milestone interior design's practical and scholarly endeavour was focussed on the professionalisation of the discipline; a lacuna was produced in which the discipline did not adequately consider a separate identity for interior design. The pursuit of a stronger discrete identity could provide a stronger professional identity (Breytenbach, 2012).*

*If interior design reaches the professional status it pursued it faces two consequences: firstly the discipline arrives at an ethical dilemma; secondly energy previously spent in the pursuit of professionalisation would be at large to deliberate discrete knowledge areas.*

*The ethical dilemma is located in professionalism itself. When an profession reaches occupational closure it succeeds in establishing a monopoly of service which is based on its technical authority which links skill and practice to provide services to the public which are uniquely trustworthy. Professions are technical and adhere to norms and standards. These norms and standards have an ethical dimension: they must service the greater public good (Wilensky, 1964).*

*As an industry, the interior design occupation must focus its intentions, efforts and influence toward 'that which ought to be'. This represents a normative position for interior design in which the discipline must clearly state what its obligation to society is, and how it will be met. Currently interior design is offered the opportunity to redirect its scholarly endeavour in the pursuit of ethical and discrete knowledge areas. This paper will argue that interior design can face both consequences simultaneously, and that these can be addressed through its mimetic production.*

*During this emergent and developmental phase interior design can expand its practice and scope of expertise in an ethical manner. This paper aims to present some of these opportunities: interior design is uniquely placed in the built environment to denote occupation, inhabitation and identity; further, interior design is a tangible vehicle for the expression of intangible cultural practices that are expressed as public rituals (e.g. casual encounters and the conducting of conversations and other opportunities of exchange). Interior design contributes to the establishment and expression of identities which could support social cohesion; this is relevant in the establishment of a principle-driven and human centered profession. The professional accountability and social responsibility lies in interior design's contributions in the cultural realm.*

**Keywords:** Ethics; Interior Design; Profession; Social Compact

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## Introduction

It is, after all, for Humanity, our ultimate client, that we design. We shape the spaces that shape the human experience. This is what we do, what we create, what we give. It

is how we earn our place at the human table. It is why our work is important to our clients, to our societies and to ourselves. It is the difference we make and why we choose this noble profession, IFI Interiors Declaration (IFI 2011).

Since its emergence as a specialised occupation in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century (Massey 2001) the interior design occupation's intellectual endeavour was aimed at professionalisation, this included establishing academic programmes, academic accreditation, apprenticeship, and self-regulation through professional organisations (Anderson, Honey & Dudek 2009).

In March 2015 the South African Council for the Architectural Profession (SACAP) announced its intention to register new professional categories for interior designers (South Africa 2015). This will provide statutory recognition for the professional status of the interior design occupation and it will allow interior design occupational closure, a state where both the practice and title of the occupation will be regulated. This intention is the latest development in a process of engagement between representatives of interior design and SACAP since the creation of the statutory body in 2001 by an Act of Parliament.

Since the traditional model of professionalism places emphasis on autonomous expertise (Wilensky, 1964, p. 137), the interior design occupation's professional efforts were aimed to establish and illustrate this autonomy. In South Africa's legislative context it was specifically necessary to illustrate how interior design is differentiated from its sister discipline, architecture (König, 2010). However, during this emergent stage the discipline did not adequately consider its social compact to do good (Anderson *et al*, 2009:v). Since interior design's practical and scholarly endeavour was focussed on the professionalisation of the discipline; a lacuna was produced in which the discipline did not adequately consider a separate identity for interior design. The pursuit of a stronger discrete identity could provide a stronger professional identity (Breytenbach 2012). I will argue in this paper that interior design's professional development is dependent on its ethics, and that these are linked to discrete knowledge areas in the cultural realm. The ethical responsibility of a profession cannot be solely met through the codes of ethics of its professional bodies (Anderson *et al*, 2009, p. vii); a deeper social compact is required which is addressed through the discipline's ontology. Through literature review and heuristic enquiry I will illustrate that one of the ways in which the occupation services the public good is by enabling inhabitation and the temporary establishment of territory in the public realm in meaningful ways.

## Professionalism and the ethical compact to 'do good'

The social compact to 'do good' is an ethical aspect that lies at the core of professionalism itself. Wilensky (1964, p. 138) opens the definition of a profession by stating that, in order for an occupation to establish professional authority, it must find a technical basis, assert exclusive jurisdiction, link skill and jurisdiction to standards of training, and it should convince the public that its services are uniquely trustworthy; this would establish the profession as a carrier and agent of knowledge. In addition to higher education, professions are those occupations which are organised into institutions that control the conduct and commitment of its members, implying a form of social control of professional behaviour (Freidson, 1986, p. 26). After World War II the theory of professions developed out of an effort to provide a coherent definition for professions where expertise was the central construct (Freidson, 1986, p. 28-29). In the academic treatment of professions the aspect of power became an important consideration from the 1960's onwards. Writers emphasised that monopolistic professional institutions treated knowledge, skill and ethics as an ideology to preserve the status and privilege of the professions (Freidson 1986, p. 29). Professions are occupations which have managed to establish and maintain monopolies in the labour market for expert services; by introducing service monopolies they strengthen occupational hierarchies and exacerbate socioeconomic inequities (Sciulli, 2005:917). Social criticism of professions state that they reduce competition and that they prohibit entry into the labour market (Carpenter 2007, p. 26). It is to gain these service monopolies, autonomy and exercise of expertise that occupations pursue

professionalisation; the benefit to society in return for this privilege lies in the profession's ethical compact to do good.

If interior design reaches the professional status it pursued it faces two consequences: firstly the discipline arrives at an ethical dilemma in which it must clearly voice its social compact to do good; secondly energy previously spent in the pursuit of professionalisation would be at large to deliberate discrete knowledge areas.

The ethical dilemma is located in professionalism itself. When a profession reaches occupational closure it succeeds in establishing a monopoly of service which is based on its technical authority which links skill and practice to provide services to the public which are uniquely trustworthy. Professions are technical and adhere to norms and standards. These norms and standards have an ethical dimension: they must service the greater public good (Wilensky, 1964). For interior design this greater public good lies in answering one of the two normative questions: *what ought to be?* This is the utopian question and in its answer professionals can consider their contributions to the greater good. As an occupation, interior design has adequately answered the other normative question: *what is interior design?* This is the ontological question; its answer brought the discipline the opportunity to reach occupational closure.

At this juncture the occupation is offered an opportunity. As an industry, the interior design occupation can focus its intentions, efforts and influence toward 'that which ought to be'. This represents a normative position for interior design in which the discipline must clearly state what its obligation to society is, and how it will be met.

### Interior design's social compact to do good

Interior design cannot address the utopian question by focusing on health, safety and welfare since this issue is addressed by all environmental design disciplines and does not adequately differentiate the discipline (Anderson *et al*, 2009:viii-ix).

The International Federation of Interior Architects/Designers (IFI) undertook an initiative to define interior design and to reach a form of consensus regarding the procedures and responsibilities of the discipline as a practice and a profession. The Design Frontiers: Interiors Entity project (DFIE) culminated in the (unanimous) adoption of the *Interiors Declaration* (IFI 2011) by the DFIE Global Symposium which was held in New York, 17-18 February 2011. The *Interiors Declaration* can be considered as a normative statement based on seven tenets (value, relevance, responsibility, culture, business, knowledge, and identity). This declaration can be considered as interior design's social compact to do good, specifically as it answers the call by Anderson *et al* (2007:xi) to design human-centered "interior spaces that physiologically and psychologically support and enhance the quality of life".

This implies that the interior design occupation fulfilled its professional requirements, the occupation is able to define a discrete area of practice and it has stated its ethical obligations to society. This achievement currently offers the occupation the opportunity to redirect its scholarly endeavour in the pursuit of ethical and discrete knowledge areas. Interior design can face both consequences simultaneously, and these can be addressed through its mimetic production.

Like others (Anderson *et al*, 2009; Breytenbach 2012) I believe that interior design will only reach full professional legitimacy when it embraces its unique ethical and cultural contributions; specifically those that relate to the discipline's unique artefacts, interior spaces. There is a need for interior design research focus to move away from professional identity towards a larger ontology aimed at an informed community of designers capable of leading change (Perolini 2011, p. 173). In other words it becomes necessary to not only understand interior design's power and responsibility, but to use it with care in leading change. The evolution of the profession is dependent on the identification and development of the theoretical underpinnings of interior design (Clemons & Eckman 2011, p. 31). A

greater understanding and a variety of approaches must be developed for interior design (Perolini 2011, p. 170). When building theory in interior design the research process must not only be analytical but must include creative processes (Clemons & Eckman 2011, p. 32).

During this emergent and developmental phase interior design can expand its practice and scope of expertise in an ethical manner. This paper aims to present one of these opportunities: interior design is uniquely placed in the built environment to denote occupation, inhabitation and identity. Further, interior design is a tangible vehicle for the expression of intangible cultural practices that are expressed as public rituals (e.g. casual encounters and the conducting of conversations and other opportunities of exchange) (Königk 2015, p. 5).

### **Inhabitation and the expression of self**

Public interiors are commissioned by clients, conceived by interior designers, executed by contractors and finally inhabited by their users. Interiors are made to be inhabited, since the occupation and inhabitation of these spaces is the ultimate purpose of interior design it is likely that the social compact to do good may be found in this process.

When individuals inhabit or take possession of interiors they do so by ascribing personal values to the objects in the interior (Rice 2004, p. 277). In the architectural sense “the first meaning of a building is what one must do in order to inhabit it,” (Eco, 1980, p. 20). Inhabitation therefore implies complying to the operational purpose of a space (what one must do to inhabit it) and in assigning personal meaning to that space (what the place means). Bunt (1980, p. 421) introduces the opposition between the ‘expressive’ dimension of architecture and the ‘experiential’ dimension which the individual will encounter when inhabiting the actual artefact. These dialectic dimensions of inhabitation are easily navigated in the private realm, where privacy itself affords the user the ability to occupy a territory. In the public realm this occupation is most often temporary, and must be mitigated against the occupation and territorial behaviours of others. A building reflects the duality between its inhabitants and strangers. Since they are made to be inhabited, all built spaces identify at least one ‘inhabitant’ (Hillier & Hanson 1984, p. 146). Interior designers solve problems to enable humans to use and inhabit a space (Perolini 2011, p. 172). This must be done in ways ‘that physiologically and psychologically support and enhance the quality of life’. Since the interior design occupation was pre-occupied with its drive towards professionalisation, it could not adequately address fundamental theoretical and human issues such as these.

The theoretical consideration of the inner self as distinct from the rest of the world is applied in interior design in the contemplation of enclosure and the differentiation between the self and the world. Interiority establishes the interior as a discrete realm and moving into the interior is a movement from the public arena to a space which can express the idiosyncrasies of identity (Hillier & Hanson 1984, p. 144-5). Interiority is the philosophical concept which examines the innerness of interior design as a locus for feeling and projection in which the interior environment is experienced via the body (as a ‘culturally lived organism’) (Taylor & Preston 2006, p. 11).

In the public domain, it is specifically the combination and placement of found objects in close proximity to produce meaningful patterns (such as ensembles, constellations, and symbolic motifs) which facilitate territorial behaviour and the mediation between the self and others through signifying inhabitation. These actions allow inhabitants of crowded spaces a sense of belonging, of knowing where one belongs, and having a sense of how to navigate the space. This is important for the occupation since the interior must provide its inhabitants with a sense of belonging and identity (Perolini, 2011:164). Although the aesthetic realm plays an important role in the creation of the interior artefact it is not the only determinant. The interior is created through the manipulation of volume and material with an identifiable purpose of inhabitation.

The presence of objects in space acts as indicators of inhabitation (Taylor & Preston 2006, p. 11). This places ethical responsibility on the interior designer when choosing these objects and also in the

combination of them. The synthetic assembly of use objects and loose artefacts is an indication of the presence of an inhabitant. The inhabitant is connoted through the implication that she is responsible for the selection and combination of objects. In the private realm the selection of these objects are within the power of the inhabitant, in the public realm that power is exercised by the designer on behalf of the occupant. The interior designer can only exercise this power with adequate care if she is sufficiently aware of the implications and motivations in denoting occupation and inhabitation on behalf on another.

In the public realm this mechanism is illustrated when the designer isolates smaller areas of inhabitation within a larger interior or space, for example the provision of private seating areas for groups, or seating at bars or against walls for individuals in nightclubs. In restaurants the use of constellations (e.g. a dining table with chairs) allows occupants the ability to claim a portion of the larger space and indicate inhabitation (although it is only temporary). The act of inhabitation is noticeable when occupants rearrange loose objects in their environment.

In public interiors occupation is expressed through the temporary occupation of a portion of the interior. Through this action inhabitation of a space is articulated as a timely and temporary indication of the presence of that inhabitant, the inhabitant's claiming of ownership, and marking of a territory. Once a territory is occupied temporary inhabitation can be signified through the use of objects and ensembles or the visual placement of personal items. This temporary inhabitation is dependent on two factors: 1.) the existence of territory that can be occupied; 2.) utilising ways to indicate inhabitation. (e.g. occupying a space and claiming it as personal in the public domain). It is again within the power and responsibility of the interior designer to enable this process on behalf of another, and to do so in a way which will support and enhance their quality of life. This is important since inhabitation and the peaceful expression of territorial behaviour influences social interaction.

The designed interior is a vehicle for the dissemination of meaning, as example a restaurant acts as a form of communication which enables a patron to make informed assumptions about price, food, quality and level of service on entering, in more subtle ways the restaurant may also have intertextual references to other interiors or cultural connotations to other artefacts, all of which constructs the restaurant's identity. Interior designers must understand how users evaluate an interior and how meaning is conveyed (Perolini 2011, p. 164-165). Social space is the vehicle for the cultural life of society to take place (Perolini 2011, p. 167). Social space is produced by and influences cultural interaction. Space encourages or discourages certain behaviours and interactions and gives form to social structures and ideologies (Perolini, 2011:168). This is an account of the recursive relationship in which cultural practices inform place-making, while place-making, in turn, construct and maintain cultural practices. Interior design offers the tangible cultural spaces which serves as vehicle for intangible cultural practices (e.g. a restaurant acting as vehicle for a waiter serving dinner, with associated meanings of servitude and social position and additional connotations of commodity and expense). Developments in feminist and geographic studies investigate the relationship between particular bodies (such as male bodies and female bodies) and their environment; as a specific body is located its capacities and desires are expressed and (re)produced by specific spaces (Taylor & Preston 2006, p. 10-11). This supports the notion that an inhabitant chooses to consume a specific interior as an expression of their self-identity. The consideration for inhabitation could be expanded to include theories that are sensitive to human beings as embodied psychological phenomena, rather than living, physical objects (Hewlett in Perolini 2011, p. 169).

I want to support this argument through the use of an analogy with fashion design. As fashion is a method to convey our identity through the external signs on display; and as it serves as a method to mark membership within groups (Adamo 2011) so does the choice of interior to inhabit. My argument here is that in a similar manner as when clothing is chosen, when a person decides to enter an interior, they consume that interior through that choice. This implies that the user established a positive association between themselves and the interior. In their affinity with certain spaces or types of spaces the user can express themselves. As clothing is an effective and established method

to establish and convey an individual's gender (and societal role) publicly (Adamo, 2011) so are some interiors gendered (male, female, or neutral) which allows their inhabitants to establish associations between an interior and its product offering. Their consumption of the interior plays a similar role. This correlation between identity, product, and place is established through associations (between product and place, product and identity, and place and identity). The interior must provide its inhabitants with a sense of belonging and a sense of identity (Perolini 2011, p. 164).

The analogy between individual identity and the identity contained in the interior can be further expanded: in commercial interiors the constructed place identity must find correlation with the personal identity of the individual who chooses to consume the interior by inhabiting it. This inhabitation is expressed when the individual occupies the interior temporarily. When the individual chooses to occupy an interior they indicate that interior as an outward extension of their personality. In this instance the interior functions as a signifier for personal identity. This merely indicates an association between the identity of the inhabitant and the place, and not a shared identity. This personal expression can be considered analogous to the use of fashion to construct or extend personal identity. Interior design fashions identity through artifice and participates in the staging of individual identities (Sanders 2006, p. 304-5). If the identity of the inhabitant is in correlation with the place-identity of the interior then the interior can be used by the inhabitant to project, construct, express, or inform their own identity. There is a connection between individual identity, and the identity of a place. In commercial interiors this constructed place identity must correlate with the individual identity of the person who chooses to consume an interior. The individual's identity 'meets' the place identity of the interior and may converge in a shared identity. If an affinity between the tangible identity of the place and the intangible identity of the user exists, it will establish connections in the mind between these identities. This facilitates the consumption of the interior as a meaningful and ontological device which facilitate the expression of personal identity through inhabitation.

## Opportunities

Interior design contributes to the establishment and expression of identities which could influence social interaction; this is relevant in the establishment of a principle-driven and human centered profession. The establishment and expression of identity is a cultural activity which finds expression in territorial behaviours and the temporary occupation of spaces found in the public domain. The interior design occupation's professional accountability and social obligation lies in the discipline's contributions to the cultural realm.

When these opportunities are considered it must be remembered that the 'interior' is traditionally conflated with the domestic interior (which is produced in a vernacular fashion by amateurs) and that this does not adequately address the public nature of commercial interior design (Lees-Maffei, 2008, p. 3). Interior design's commercial focus was established after the Second World War as interior designers increasingly worked in non-residential settings (Massey, 2001, p.142). It may be argued that this conflation with domesticity contributed to the difficulty the discipline faced when it tried to establish its social utility during the pursuit of professionalism. How can a profession be established if it exists in the realm of the amateur homemaker which includes activities such as "cooking, childcare, cleaning and maintenance of the home," (Lees-Maffei, 2008, p. 11)? If in contrast the commercial and public nature of the discipline is considered it supports both the discipline's specialist knowledge and its utility.

As a commercial practice in the public realm interior design may be theoretically equipped to consider the human being in a concrete environment (where aspects of public health and safety or environmental sustainability are in play), but also as a lived entity with abstract personal qualities (where aspects of wellness and socio-cultural wellbeing are in play).

Currently the interior design occupation in South Africa may be offered the opportunity to close the occupation. At this juncture it is up to individual interior designers, the discipline's professional institutions and the academy to consider this opportunity, its implications, and the power, role and responsibility of the interior design occupation. This transformative moment can be expressed as the need to transform "what is taught in creating an understanding of interiority, inner minds and inner dwellings, the working of consciousness and cultural difference," (Perolini, 2011, p. 166).

Once interior design reaches occupational closure the discipline will have greater opportunity to create environments of connected people, objects and spaces in which the interior no longer functions as a mere container for people and objects, or as a small-scale mitigation between architecture and human inhabitants. To do so the focus of the discipline should move away from professionalism, but it must do so in a way which maintains professionalism. The discipline must develop a larger sense of self and an understanding of the discipline within a larger world system:

We need to depend more on theory to be able to think critically in order to bring new understanding to how we practice. While any change seems threatening, it is necessary. The world in which we live, how we live, confront many and major challenges. We can not [sic] continue to be and be as we are. How we are, how we dwell, how we live are all implicated in interior design, (Perolini, 2011, p. 173).

## Conclusion

At the point of occupational closure the implication for interior design that is implied here is that the meaningful and cultural components, such as the expression of self and inhabitation, become a primary professional concern for the discipline. This challenges the role of the interior designer as a technologist who is primarily concerned with the production of a physical object which protects the health and safety of the inhabitant. The physical construction of the interior is relegated to a secondary professional role. This has implications for the establishment of interior design as a profession; the professional ground shifts to a concern with cultural aspects. A professional concern with the meaningful aspects of the built-environment and the subsequent relegation of the spatial aspects (or at the least a counterpoint to the spatial bias of architecture) provides a greater ontological separation from architecture and interior design is no longer 'a little bit of architecture'; it establishes a discreet practice. The interior design occupation, as a profession, should place greater emphasis on the theoretical underpinnings of its practice. Individuals must employ methods to denote occupation, inhabitation, and identity to mediate the boundary condition between themselves and others in the public domain. This practice has ethical implications since it affects the physiological and psychological quality of life. The professional practice of interior design is the best located occupation to facilitate this process in the public domain.

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