DESIGN

Val Clugston, *Director of NOMAD-RDC,* looks at the issues facing a young discipline trying to grapple with its own identity.

'Shabby Chic: An eclectic mix of Bohemian things'

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This is a definition given in a slightly facetious manner to an architect who recently asked us 'just what is shabby chic?' The truth is that we are not particularly bothered about Shabby Chic or any other stereotypical style statement. And the reason for our sarcasm? Well, to be frank, after a while the whole 'Changing Rooms' thing gets a little tedious.

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Interior Design should never be confused with Interior Decoration. It is as bad as referring to an architect as a bricky. Yet the confusion surrounding the role of interior designer persists. The numerous DIY programmes on TV compound this. This lack of clarity is not only confined to the general publics perception of our profession. Many in the building industry have a lack of understanding about what we do and why we might be necessary on a project. To add further confusion there is a host of other design professionals choosing to dabble in the odd interior.

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Fundamentally, interior design is about enriching both the environment and function of an existing or new building, We believe that as a young and developing profession, perhaps 100 years old (if one goes back as far back as Mackintosh & Morris) compared with 2000 years of architecture we are still exploring evolving and defining our role. Interior Designers are naturally multi-disciplinary designers; mixing and integrating architectural work with product design, engineering, environment psychology, graphic artwork and of course not forgetting an element of decoration.

The main difference between the interior designer and the decorator is that the interior designer will engage with elements of architectural work, while the difference between the interior designer and an architect is that more often than not interiors will be divorced from the exterior. They will be superimposed on their structural envelope or they may transform the function of an existing interior. Given the above it is a wonder that there is any clarity at all.

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Does the problem lie therefore in the name? This has been a matter of controversy and angst for years and educators students and professionals have agonised over this point. The fundamental problem is that just about anyone can call themselves interior designers and many interior decorators do.

Should we change the title then to Interior Architect? This is probably the most popular suggestion over the years, maybe because it implies a seriousness that will distance the designer from the decorators and many colleges now carry this as a course title.

We believe not, this merely shifts the confusion a blurs the line between architects and interior designers instead. And anyway this is all just a red herring. The problem actually lies in defining clearly what we do. We must evolve our profession in order to make ourselves heard.

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In our experience clients are increasingly seeking out interior designers as problem solvers. This is where we see the interior designer making a significant difference. This is particularly true in the public sector where Local Authorities and educators alike are using the services of interior designers to create 'accessible', 'safe', 'exiting', 'inspiring', interiors, suggesting that in addition to the obvious aesthetic benefits good design may also have a beneficial effect on the behaviour of users. This view is becoming more prevalent of late. Even the very decorative Colin and Justin have hinted at the power of enriching space to change attitudes in their TV show, 'Colin & Justin on the Estate'

As a result many designers, ourselves included, are now engaging in new methodologies that are inspired by pioneers such as Rodney Fitch and Francis Duffy who revolutionised interior design in the retail sector and in the workplace respectively. Broadly speaking these new methodologies involve field research techniques and participatory design.

This process of careful examination of our client's spaces and user needs leads us to find answers to their spatial problems and to some other problems that our clients were not aware of. It is also providing us with a wealth of information, putting interior designers in the unique position of having an insight into the ways in which people use and behave in a space. It can tell us what their preferences for form, colour and texture are, how they work or learn most effectively, or how they find their way about a space. The end result of an interior base on such research should mean more inclusive spaces and happier, more successful clients.

Interior designers have always worked on a more 'human scale' and it makes sense that we work more closely with those we are designing for. The end product of any interior should be a combination of the designer's expertise, the client's needs and the users influence. The benefit of working in a participative manner is that the users themselves feel invested in, rather than having a building imposed on them, they have interest in 'their' design and will care for it.

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Finally and critically we are not suggesting that we throw away style and identity. Rather that when working on a public building we should build an informed infrastructure on which an identity or style can hang. William Morris said, 'Have nothing in your house that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful.' We believe that a good interior designers job is to provide both.

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