

The Designer Client Relationship: Learning to Identify, Assess, and Articulate Client Needs

In my first year interior design studio I often find myself spending substantial class sessions on clarifying students' views of what design entails, and the responsibilities that interior designers undertake with each project. Students often show immense surprise when they hear about designers' responsibilities towards their clients health, safety and well-being. The oversimplified view of design that students bring to the program may be attributed to the role of television (Waxman and Clemons, 2007). To offset the inaccurate perceptions fostered by television programs, it is essential, among other things, to inculcate an awareness of the value of the field of interior design.

This paper describes the design project developed for this introductory studio as an attempt to introduce students to an important aspect of professional practice in interior design, the relationship between designers and their clients. The project exposes students to various aspects of professional practice involving clients including, seeking clients, interviewing clients, aligning designer sensibilities with client preferences, communicating with clients, and presenting themselves as professionals.

Background Literature

Scholars have discussed the need for teaching architecture and interior design students to communicate with clients and have continually asserted the need to identify that there is a marked difference between designer sensibility and visualization and clients' abilities to interpret design ideas. Kaupinnen (1989) stated that architects' thought process during the design process and their perception of buildings can be very different from and may even conflict with the way the public views it. Deasy (1974) elaborated this concept using the example of the difference between the designers' orderly and systematic world against the human world which is in a constant state of change. There is a difference between the thought-process, visualization abilities, and concepts of designers and their clients. There is a need for architects to develop interpersonal skills in relationship to clients and other professionals, but also become better at listening and responding to, and communicating with building users and the public (Nicol & Pilling, 2000).

A variety of suggestions were made in the past decades as an attempt to bridge the gap between architects and their clients. Gutman (1972) proposed that architects will need to consult with sociologists at three stages during design development. These consultations include: (1) for guidance in understanding the clients' requirements, (2) to discuss whether the proposed or present structure of social organization complies with the objectives stated in the design brief, and (3) estimating space requirements for activities. Wittman and Wittman (1976) discussed a combined degree program in architecture and social work at Washington University in St. Louis, which aimed at improving architects' understanding of clients' values and aspirations, understanding their physical as well as mental needs, and improving their ability to work with clients and community groups.

In design studios, students work on projects assigned by faculty and faculty act as critics (Akin 2002). Traditionally set up design projects involve hypothetical clients with profiles either conceptualized by students or provided by instructors. Marmot and Symes (1985) suggested an approach to case-based instruction which involved three stages: design method, design negotiations and new roles for architects. The approach included a

project provided to the students at a crisis point requiring immediate attention and decision-making and was aimed at increasing student awareness about the benefits of applying research in design to problem solving during the design process. The process introduces students to the architect's role as a decision maker in the construction process, and to the constant changes in client needs and constraints.

Tsow and Beamer (1985) explored the need for enhancing students' communicative abilities. They stated that the four major steps that require communication with the client include project generation, acquisition, concept and design. The major tool of architects is graphic skills which the client is not fluent in reading and assimilating. Tsow and Beamer argued that it is essential for architecture students to learn to verbalize and write architecture and the thought process during design. This will help students to acquire better abilities to communicate their concepts and ideas with the clients. It will also ensure that the clients' requirements are effectively understood by architects.

In that context, the design project described in the following section is designed to expose students to the relationship they will encounter with clients when they step into professional practice in interior design. The attempt is to teach students the ability to effectively communicate with clients to acquire clients' requirements and present their own ideas to the client.

The Design Project

The final project undertaken in the *Introduction to Interior Design* Lecture/Lab class attempts to expose students to the designer-client relationship as integral to professional practice in the field of interior design. The project involves the redesign of a living, dining and kitchen space in their client's residence. The project is kept flexible in terms of budget and structural concerns since the underlying aim is to understand the design process and relationship with clients.

This section will discuss the steps undertaken in the project over a period of seven weeks and the corresponding learning outcomes expected at each step. The lab class meets for 2 hours and 40 minutes once a week after a 50 minute lecture. Students are encouraged to work during the designated lab time.

Step 1: Project Introduction

Students receive handouts listing the goals of the project, requirements, timeline, and grading criteria.

Step 2: Designer Pitches

Each student is given about one minute to pitch their strengths as a designer to the rest of the class. The instruction they receive for this stage is that they should, in 2-3 sentences, tell their peers why somebody should hire them as a designer for their project. The instructor comments on students' pitches helping them refine terms, and strengthen the portrayal of their abilities. Students talk about being good listeners, their patience, their preferred design styles, experience in interior design or related fields, their cultural background, and other topics.

The learning outcomes expected from this step include:

1. Identifying and presenting one's personal design style
2. Identifying and presenting one's strengths as they apply to the practice of interior design
3. Developing communication abilities

4. Recognizing the competition they will encounter when they enter the field
Most importantly students are expected to identify the variety of skills that are associated with and required to effectively establish themselves in interior design.

Step 3: Designer Selection

Each student in class selects one of their peers to be their designer. Students are encouraged to select designers based on the pitches and not based on friendships. The learning outcomes expected from this step include identifying the implications of a variety of strengths to the design process and the varied needs that clients bring to a project.

Step 4: Designer-Client Meeting

Each designer meets their respective clients for 20-30 minutes and are encouraged to give some thought to the questions they should ask their client to clearly understand the clients' needs and preferences. The instructor interjects meetings to guide designers regarding the questions they ask. Clients provide their respective designers with a measured drawing of their living, dining and kitchen space on graph paper. Graph paper is selected as the medium for drawing because most students in the class have not taken the architectural drafting class. The graph paper gives students an idea of scale and proportion.

The learning outcomes desired from this step include understanding the right questions to ask clients, learning to conduct a professional meeting, establishing contact and rapport with clients, and assimilating information gained from clients' answers.

All the above steps are completed in the first week. The following steps are undertaken over the ensuing six weeks of the semester.

Step 5: Programmatic Requirements

Each designer prepares a list of programmatic requirements based on the information gained from clients. Students are expected to learn programming criteria and presenting the same.

Step 6: Concept Statement

Designers develop concept statements for their clients' projects. They are encouraged to reflect their clients' social and personal lifestyle and aesthetic preferences in the development of their design concepts. Learning outcomes expected for this step include developing design concepts that are conducive to the clients' needs, preferences, and lifestyle; and communicating conceptual ideas to clients.

Step 7: Develop Schematic Design

The instructor guides students through the space planning and furniture layout of their clients' spaces, especially the living and dining space. Students are asked to design the transition spaces adjacent to the kitchen but are not required to detail the layout of the kitchen since this is beyond the scope of a project at this level. Students are expected to learn space planning, design considerations and translating client needs. They are encouraged to think about their design decisions and justify the same based on their client's needs.

Step 8: Client Meeting

A formal meeting is scheduled between the designers and their respective clients during a class session, usually the 3rd session of this project. Designers discuss their schematic designs with their clients and get their responses on the direction being taken.

The learning outcome desired at this step is the ability to communicate design ideas to clients.

Step 9: Client Meeting Summary

Each designer writes a client meeting summary based on their meeting with the client. The intention behind including this step in the project is to explain the importance of documentation to students.

Step 10: Design Development

Based on the feedback from clients each student further develops their designs and proceeds to selection of finishes for the spaces. Designers select flooring, wall finish, ceiling finish, drapery, furniture, upholstery, artwork, accessories, lighting fixtures, and other salient elements for their designs. Students are expected to learn the design process and justifications for selection of a variety of finishes.

Step 11: Presentation Drawings

Each designer prepares a set of presentation drawings including floor plan, elevations, and perspectives. They prepare presentation boards with their drawings, inspiration photographs, and materials selected for their clients' space. Since most students have not taken drafting or perspective drawing classes prior to this class, the drawings may be sketched or drawn on graph paper. The instructor presents a brief lecture on the basics of one-point perspectives and students are encouraged to attempt the same. Students are also encouraged to explore ways of making their presentations more appealing to clients by including color on their drawings, and organizing their boards to appeal to the viewer. Students learn to create title blocks, organize boards, present material samples, and techniques for design communication.

Step 12: Dress for Success Lecture

The Department of Family and Consumer Sciences, where interior design is located, also includes Apparel Design and Merchandizing. An instructor from this area gives a lecture to students about dressing for professional meetings, interviews and presentations. Students learn to be conscious of the way they present themselves and are expected to dress professionally for the next stage of the project, oral presentations to jury and peers.

Step 13: Oral Presentations

Each designer presents their design to a panel comprised of an invited interior designer from the area, the instructor and their client. Students get approximately 5 minutes to present salient aspects of their design. They get feedback from the panel on their design decisions and answer questions. The invited designer and instructor refer to the client regarding the requirements that were presented to the designer.

The learning outcomes desired at this stage include developing communication abilities and learning to "tell a story" as they present their designs and material selections to the panel and their peers. Students learn to identify the salient features of their designs, justify design decisions, and speak before a panel. They are also taught to understand the difference between critique and criticism, and therefore be confident about their decisions while identifying the constructive comments from the critique they receive.

Step 14: Peer Evaluation

Each student, as the client, is required to write an evaluation for their designers. This evaluation factors into the instructor's evaluation of the designs. The clients are asked to answer three questions:

1. Does the design cater to the requirements and preferences you presented to your designer?
2. Did the designer communicate ideas professionally and clearly?
3. Would you hire this designer again or recommend this designer to others?

Through this step students are expected to learn to assess designs and design abilities of their peers. The evaluations are not shared with designers so that clients may freely express their opinions regarding their designers.

Summary of Desired Learning Outcomes

As discussed with each step above, certain learning outcomes are desired through this seven week project. It is essential to consolidate and summarize these learning outcomes.

Presenting Oneself

Several students approach me at the beginning of the semester with their fear of speaking to an audience. I present them opportunities, through various steps of this process, for varied forms of oral communication. They present their strengths as designers during designer pitches, communicate with clients one-on-one during various meetings, and finally present their projects to peers and a jury.

Establishing Relationships with Clients

Since this is the first semester of the program, most students are not acquainted with their classmates. Through this project they learn to establish relationships with clients they may be meeting for the first time. I encourage them to try and understand their clients' personal and social lifestyle to effectively conceptualize and develop the ideal design to suit their client.

Asking the Right Questions

An important aspect of this project is to teach students to format their questions to the client so they may get the appropriate information for their designs. Often I quiz the designers about their clients lifestyle, asking questions like, how often does your client shop for groceries, how often do they entertain and how many guests, do they barbeque in the backyard or sit around a formal table setting, and what are their regular activities. This helps students to understand the extent to which clients' lifestyles influence design decisions.

Translating Information

Students undertake several steps to acquire information and opinions from clients. Other stages of the project are geared towards teaching students to assimilate and translate the information they acquire into design decisions. Having identified their client's social and personal lifestyle, students learn to make the ideal design decisions to support the lifestyle.

Responsibility

Students take responsibility as a designer and as a client. They are expected to be present in class on the days of scheduled meetings, and bring the assigned work for discussion that day. I give the clients the option to fire their designers if the designer is being highly irresponsible. I encourage students to learn to resolve the issue of irresponsibility from their designers or their clients. Students identify that interior design is a profession and they are expected to act as professionals who are not remunerated if they do not produce assigned work in the stipulated time frame.

Challenges Faced

Although designed at the introductory level, this project is ambitious in the outcomes it seeks. It also provides several challenges to the students which add to the learning experience and hopefully prepare them for the remainder of their program and the profession.

Varying Aesthetic Sensibilities

Students are often selected by clients who have extremely different preferences and aesthetic sensibilities than them. As designers they are faced with the challenge of aligning their design judgment with the clients' insistence, desires, and likes. One student once brought a 400 square foot living, dining and kitchen space and asked her designer to create the lobby of the Bellagio in Las Vegas in that space. Other designers are challenged by color and fabric choices presented by their clients that do not align with their personal judgment.

Posing as a Client

Since the project involves design students posing as clients for their classmates, one of the challenges in the project is to get students to answer their designers' questions as a client would. Often clients are found giving too much direction to the client and making design decisions for them. The instructor interjects such meetings and requests the client to hold back design ideas.

Consulting the Client

One of the questions that I encourage the designers to ask themselves is how often they need to consult their client. Often, I find designers consulting their client after every decision. The designer will select the sofa for the client and get that approved before they proceed to select the coffee table for the space. This might be a consequence of the designers and clients being in the same room. I encourage designers to consolidate a certain amount of work and present a design scheme to their clients.

Future Research

Informal conversations with students and my evaluation of their projects indicated that most learning outcomes desired through this project are being met. However, it is essential to evaluate whether the learning outcomes are being met at each stage through research. As an extension, it will be interesting to evaluate how students who took this project respond to projects in their future studios versus those who took a traditionally set up design project with hypothetical clients.

It would also be appropriate to introduce projects based on the same concept at other levels in the design program. This will allow the program to assess whether the introductory studio is the most appropriate stage in the program to introduce this aspect of professional practice in interior design.

One of the challenges students face in the project is acting as clients and not giving too much design direction to their respective designers. Another challenge is for designers to resist getting every decision approved by the client since they are all in the same room. It will be appropriate to attempt a similar project with clients from another studio, preferably a higher level studio or even from the community. One of the reasons the project uses clients from the class is to provide certain uniqueness to every project. Finding 24 clients from the community, as 24 is the class size, may be difficult but the idea needs to be explored and evaluated to assess its appropriateness.

Conclusion

This paper discussed the design project developed for the lab associated with the *Introduction to Interior Design* class. The goal of the project is to help students understand the relationship between designers and clients in the industry, and develop communication abilities. Through several steps of the project undertaken over seven weeks, students learn to present themselves, ask the right questions to assess client needs, translate client needs into design decisions, and communicate their design ideas.

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