

Ready for the shake-up? The technology driven future of interior design education and practice

What will the profession of interior design look like in five to ten years; and with that how will higher-education adapt? Furthermore, how can interior design education remain relevant in this rapidly changing, technology driven industry? Are we doing enough?

Recently, this researcher attended Digital Built Week North America, an event that brought together over 800 architects, designers, BIM managers, contractors, and engineers to discuss emerging technologies and the future of the Architecture, Engineering, and Construction (AEC) industry. Coupled with the event was Design Technology Summit, a full day round table experience which included only 40 selected attendees from the entire conference; this researcher being one of two educators in attendance. The session ignited discussions on the latest technology and how to manage the influx of new technologies while still being productive. Between topics of Assistive Intelligence, Culture, Product Management, Business Management, and Professional Development, it was made clear that the AEC industry is ripe for change in process, outcomes, methods, and means all as a result of advancements and implementations of technology. Whilst predicting an exacting future is impossible, there are some key shake-ups in the world of higher-education, technology, and interdisciplinary practice that, when analyzed, can help prepare us for this rapid evolution.

The current generation of traditional college students, categorized as Gen-Z, represent a new mindset on education. This generation prefers a student driven learning process with prioritization on skills, both hard and soft, over facts. They posit that technology is fundamental in the learning process and that it provides the much-needed immediate access to information, given that the average Gen-Zer has an attention span of eight seconds. Contrasting past generations, this group would rather find a mission than a major, and would prefer a personally designed curriculum, rather than a prescribed track. These unique curricula also foster interdisciplinary learning. With the rising cost of education, it is imperative that steps be taken to justify value and align with this generation's preference for training.

Congruent to shifts in education are shifts in technology. Machine learning, artificial intelligence, assistive intelligence, automation, generative design, virtual reality, algorithmic design, cloud-computing, metadata and big-data are all buzz words inundating the AEC industry. Furthermore, words like Dynamo, Grasshopper, Rhino, PyRevit, Unity, Unreal, Wombat, Lumion, Ladybug, Honeybee, Butterfly, and Dragonfly are the newest tools making waves in the workflow; this is only the tip of the iceberg. Based on a survey of recent interior design graduates, which can be found in the appendix, the technology being applied in practice only covers a small fraction of the tools that are available. The disciplines of architecture, interior design, engineering, and construction could very soon require a completely new skill set for emerging professionals. Furthermore, the practice of these disciplines could become obsolete, paving the way for computers and programmers to assume the role of "designer".

With all these changes coming down the pipeline, this researcher is investigating the impact on interior design, an area not being examined in great degree; and furthermore, how changes will impact the role of interior design educators in higher education. The AEC and design industries are set for changes in process, driven by technology. How will the interior design profession remain relevant? This roundtable will discuss technologies, workflows, and impending role shifts that will affect interior design and its interdisciplinary partners and how these changes will affect design education and the Generation Z student.

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