It's been said that
Interior Design educators
exist in a bubble, separate
from the "real world" of design. True? *Perspective* spoke
with several successful professors to get the whole story
behind this stereotype.

DeAnna Radaj was building a career in retail management when she decided to quit her job in order to become an Interior Designer. Her first step was to enroll in the Interior Design program at a local university in Milwaukee. Radaj wanted to follow her passion — eco-friendly and healthy home design — but the reception she received in school wasn't quite what she expected.

As the green movement was gaining traction, she recalls, the coursework didn't seem to be keeping up with the trend, and there was little talk of eco-friendly or universal design. "Thinking out of the box was really not encouraged," she says. "I designed a dog-friendly hotel that I was told I should reconsider as it would be tacky." Since then, green design has sky-rocketed. The program did start offering green and eco-friendly design classes, and pet-friendly lodging has become a hot trend in hospitality, according to World Travel Guide.

Today, Radaj runs a Milwaukee-based business, Bante Design, LLC, where she focuses on designing healthy spaces — primarily residential — for clients who suffer from mental and physical disabilities and want to live a more eco-friendly life-style. But the experience left her with the impression that Interior Design educators aren't as in touch with the practical side of design as they should be. Moreover, when hiring recent college grads, she feels they often lack basic business skills, contributing to this notion.

"[Many] programs have no business element to them," Radaj says. In response, she has begun leading workshops for students, recent grads and seasoned designers alike on networking, marketing, business etiquette and presentation skills.

Unfortunately, Radaj isn't alone in her beliefs on education. The opinion that many Interior Design students are short-changed because programs — and some professors — are out of touch with the real world of design is shared by others like Stephanie Henley, Principal at Beasley & Henley Interior Design in Winter Park, Fla. "We find that new grads don't have a clear idea of how much paperwork and computer time is involved in Interior Design," Henley says. "And they could all use an etiquette and personal presentation class."

Most importantly, Radaj says, some educators fail to highlight the importance of communication skills in their programs. "You can create the most beautiful functional space, but if you can't verbalize it or sell it to clients, it doesn't matter," she says.

Fair or not, Interior Design educators — like educators in all fields — struggle against accusations of ivory tower syndromes.

It's more critical than ever for Interior Design educators to prove the stereotype wrong, says Michael Ancheta, Managing Director of Education Services and Programs for IIDA. "Especially now, if educators are living in an ivory tower, they're going to lose contact with what they really should be teaching and lose sight of what they are as educators," he says. "Their students will suffer and not be prepared [for jobs when they graduate]."

But is the entire Interior Design education system in need of a complete overhaul? Or is the stereotype completely unfounded? When it all boils down, the truth lies somewhere in between.

BARRIERS TO BRIDGE-BUILDING

To be fair, nearly all Interior Design programs take steps to introduce the real world into the classroom through internships and studio practice. In addition, it's common for educators to invite practitioners to speak to students, and many adjunct professors are also practicing designers.

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Milwaukee

Making the Grade   By Clare Curley

But building a solid bridge from the world of Interior Design practice and Interior Design education — and keeping up with evolving trends like digital fabrication, 3-D modeling and sustainability — isn't as black and white as it may seem.

Michelle Carroll, Assoc. IIDA, LEED AP, a recent graduate of Illinois State University in Normal, Ill., says geography poses some limitations to the continuing development of educators. A design and sales assistant for a kitchen and bath design studio in Geneseo, Ill., she says, "I do think that there are tendencies of some Interior Design professors to be out of touch with the current industry. The Interior Design profession in Bloomington-Normal, Ill., is not quite as booming as that in Chicago."

Negative stereotypes of professors probably also aren't being helped by a new challenge to the profession: an overall shortage of educators. Denise A. Guerin, Ph.D., IIDA, FASID, FIDEC, a Distinguished Professor in the University of Minnesota's Interior Design program

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and President of Interior Design Educators Council (IDEC), says an expansion of programs and the aging population of educators are causing the shortage.

If some schools aren't drawing as many high-quality educators as they could, the institutions themselves may be partly to blame. A 2006 IDEC report highlighted "an inability for professionally qualified Interior

Designers to pursue teaching opportunities" because, among other reasons, positions usually require at least a master's degree. Some educators want to change the requirements so practice counts for more in the hiring process.

And while in an ideal world, all educators would simultaneously remain part-time practicing designers, it's simply not realistic. "When people like myself pursue a career in college teaching, we're required to produce research or creative work in order to be tenured and promoted," says John Weigand, IIDA, a professor and Chair of Architecture and Interior Design at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, who practiced for 10 years before entering academia. "However, it's very difficult to meet this requirement by continuing to practice, given the time this takes. So what we do is switch gears." That new gear usually involves writing, presenting at conferences and focusing on subjects other than designing interior spaces.

SCHOOLING THE DESIGNER

Educators also say that when it comes to preparing graduates for the real world of design, the relationship between academia and practice is a two-way street.

"It is impossible to teach enough business or have students take enough business courses to be prepared for the business world. And it's not business skills that we teach; it's business knowledge," says Guerin. "Practitioners need to consider that somewhere they must take responsibility for educating their entry-level designers in business, too."

That's why many programs stay in touch by tapping the expertise of people like Eileen Jones, IIDA, AIGA, Principal and National Discipline Leader for Perkins+Will's Branded Environments Group in Chicago. While leading research and design development for clients, Jones has taught design studios, juried class projects and presented at schools across the United States.

In doing so, Jones doesn't see educators as existing in bubbles, but as professionals who want to stay connected to the field. "I believe there is a growing understanding that the academy and the practice are linked in their efforts to advance the profession," she says.

Others, like Radaj, agree that professional education doesn't stop the minute you get your diploma. Radaj adds that firms should do more to prep their employees, as well.

WHAT'S WORKING IN EDUCATION?

One way a handful of schools are addressing the issue of connecting academia with practice is through cross-disciplinary programs that give students a wider exposure to the profession. Weigand helped create one such program at Miami University. The program revolves around studio practice, with an emphasis on collaboration, including the participation of outside scholars, in-residence critics and guest lecturers.

That collaboration seems to be working, according to Daniel VonderBrink, an architecture graduate of Miami University who studied Interior Design. "A couple classes pooled architecture with Interior Design, graphics or fine arts. I think the program made me a stronger student and prepared me more for the real world because I was able to build upon the ideas and experiences of other students," he says, adding, "The best professors that I had did not always have the most industry experience. They were successful because they were able to change their teaching style to meet the students' needs."

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> John Weigand, IIDA, professor and Chair of Architecture and Interior Design, Miami University, Oxford, Ohio

Also helping ensure Interior Design programs and educators stay connected with the practice world is the National Council for Interior Design Qualification (NCIDQ), which mandates both formal education and practical experience.

In addition, an increasing number of schools are relying on adjunct professors to help with the teaching load, especially in studios. According to a 2008 IDEC survey of its members, about two-thirds had more than 10 years of practical experience. Most planned to continue practicing on a part-time or consulting basis.

But many professors point out that practicing Interior Designers shouldn't underestimate the significance of research in the role of educator.

"We are much closer to the profession, to the ability to apply theoretic constructs to everyday problems, than in some areas of academia," says Guerin, who spends much of her time analyzing post-occupancy evaluations of employees who work in sustainable buildings to identify their satisfaction and performance.

In many instances, educators have been instrumental in improving the way designers approach their practice. In healthcare, for instance, evidence-based design — the practice of basing design decisions on credible research to achieve the best possible outcome — became the standard, thanks to the work of Interior Design scholars.

Weigand says, "Interior Design is changing very quickly, and we need to teach students to adapt and to learn how to learn, not just teach them skills." It's the ability to "think critically and broadly" to write, communicate, understand ethics and work collaboratively across disciplines that really matters.

Some educators might be lagging, but forward-looking programs like Guerin's and Weigand's prove that many professors not only get it, they're dedicated to producing a more well-rounded, better prepared generation of designers. 🔁