

INTERIOR DESIGN – A BRAVE NEW RESPONSIBLE WORLD

by Staffan Tollgård



“ INTERIOR DESIGN HAS HISTORICALLY suffered from a frivolous image, especially when held up against its stricter, solid (structurally) counterpart, architecture. The portrayal of our industry in the media (think Laurence Llewelyn-Bowen) is often dappily, hopelessly creative; set within a studio overflowing with fabric cuttings, paint charts and wallpaper samples. The word that springs to many minds is ‘faaaabulous’ and is then accompanied by ‘darling’.

This is not the reality of an architectural interior design practice. Just as BIDA has come of age and is now recognised as BIID, our industry is increasingly serious-minded. Indeed, many practitioners are not recognised unless they have undergone accredited training at institutions such as The Inchbald School of Interior Design.

All these designers strive to be responsible, environmentally aware, thorough, disciplined and efficient. And creative. This is not just down to a post-credit crunch dark age. The seeds of revolution were sown a long time ago. Partially within the eco/environment drive, partially (and conversely) within the very housing boom that led to the crash: as design became big business our industry was forced to grow up and think and act commercially.

Of course, acting commercially isn't the same as acting responsibly. The responsibility of the designer is a complex issue – it acknowledges the increased maturity of the industry, but also hints at the legal issues between client, contractor and designer, the obligation of the designer to his client to carry out his wishes to the best of his ability, and also at the wider answerability to the environment – both architectural and ecological – within which he is working. A web of responsibility, in other words.

There is also a chronology of responsibility that begins with the scope of the works discussed in initial meetings. One of the rules of thumb is ‘Just because you can do something, doesn't mean you should’. It's easy to promise the earth early on – especially to secure the job. Saying no, particularly to the highest end clients, isn't easy. Being honest, though, with even the most difficult clients, is the best approach. If planning permissions do not allow a fireplace in the house, bribery, coercion and a lot of shouting are not going to change the rules.

Making sure that clients are aware of the nature of the construction process – the reality that things will go wrong; that they will change their minds; that while costs could go down as well as up they actually always tend to go up: all these issues should be discussed as thoroughly as possible before contracts are signed.

Another rule of thumb we are all increasingly adhering to is ‘Think twice and buy once’. Investing in heirloom furniture is a way of living with beautiful, well-made pieces that should last a lifetime. This is certainly part of the post-crash lifestyle, but also a nod to the environment: throwing things away before the end of their life-cycle is irresponsible and cynical. We strive to help our clients reuse, recover, re-discover. It is rare to be asked to do a whole house from scratch, so most designers start our design journey with the artefacts that our clients have accumulated on their life's journey. We all now try to source materials more responsibly: either from the UK, or by thinking seriously about how best to streamline deliveries from Europe or further afield. Buying one chair from China is just not an option.

Finally, we think about our responsibility to the architecture within which we often find ourselves working. In the realm of the cutting-edge modern/traditional spectrum, the buildings and settings within which we create hold important clues to the direction for interior design. To ignore the historical authenticity of houses, or their ecological setting, is irresponsible. The perfect triumvirate of interior design, architecture and environment is where design from the inside out (responsibility to the client) is fused seamlessly with design from the outside in (responsibility to the fabric of the building and wider setting). It is not always possible, but we always strive towards it.”

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