

Interiors advocate

Don't judge the book by its cover



Collaborative designer

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He earned an AB from Harvard University and a Master of Architecture from the University of Texas at Austin. He has worked with SHoP Architects and Soluri Architecture in New York City, Estudio Carme Pinós in Barcelona and Miró Rivera Architects in Austin.

It's a sad fact of the profession: interiors never seem to garner the same sort of fame that buildings do. When most people think of a famous building, the image that appears in their mind's eye is typically the exterior. We're not conditioned to recall an amazing interior environment in the same way as say an iconic form or striking façade.

It's also a sad fact that many architects view interior design as something of a frivolous pursuit. In an architectural office where I used to work, there was disparaging talk of interior design as 'pillow tossing'. Of course we know that good interior design is more akin to interior architecture, involving knowledge of form, materials, light and building systems to create the desired environment. Pillow tossing would be something interior designers might snidely deem 'decoration', something obviously quite different.

But these professional, often petty, rivalries aside, interiors do seem to get shortchanged in terms of recognition, even excepting a few designers who've become 'rockstars' in their own right.

The problem of interiors is ultimately one of perception. At a basic level, interiors are experiential in ways that buildings are not. Interiors are not objects that we can look at or regard from a distance like sculptures in a museum as buildings often are. Rather, interiors place us, the user, at the centre and envelope us.

Designers like to speak of 'experiencing space', but this has very little meaning to the average user. 'Experiencing environments' might be a more meaningful. The best interior design creates an immersive environment establishing an alternate reality, whether spare and modern or lush and baroque. A major part of experiencing that reality is how the user feels, not just what they see or touch. The recollection of that interior is bound up with the feeling of the space, not just its formal qualities, and thus much harder to convey in glossy magazines or postcards to a friend.

Good interior design is also sympathetic with, and at times indistinguishable from, the architecture of a building, making distinctions is difficult for most observers.

And of course there is also a problem of attribution. It is commonplace to describe a building as being designed by a particular architect, as if that one person designed everything from overall concept to minute interior details. It's convenient shorthand but clearly inaccurate as it excludes the often vast teams of design collaborators required to realise a complete building.

So really, the prominence of interior design is more about the ways in which people recognise and experience interiors as identifiable constructed environments with unique authors. Clearly broader general design literacy would help, as in a greater public awareness and appreciation of the designed spaces and things that surround us. But barring that lofty goal, simply a greater appreciation for the interior spaces we inhabit could go far.

In this way, the Middle East is a rather favourable venue. This is almost inevitably an interiors-focused region. Thanks to debilitating summer heat, a lack of walkable cities and a car culture, the interiors of buildings are all most users are really concerned with. Exteriors are hot and dusty and mostly seen from the car.

Additionally, the interiors of buildings in the region are often far more deserving of attention than the architecture that encloses them. Let's face it, there are some hideous new buildings about. Dull monuments to wealth and power expressed with trite architectural clichés and cutting-edge 1990s' design. But inside some of these clunky glass curtain-walled behemoths, the interiors very often impress thanks to the efforts of talented designers and well-funded, willing clients. So with these inherent advantages and the striking interiors work that continues to be done in the region, the profession here seems remarkably well situated.