

A time to reassert

ANDREW TORRES speculates on what 2012 holds for the interior design profession



The forecaster

A designer and educator based in Barcelona and New York and an active collaborator with US-based sustainable design-build practice Forsite Studio, Andrew Torres graduated from Harvard University and is a Master of Architecture from the University of Texas at Austin. He has worked with SHoP Architects and Soluri Architecture in New York, Estudio Carme Pinós in Barcelona and Miró Rivera Architects in Austin.

We are living in dramatic times. The coming year and those that follow will likely be some of the more difficult we have encountered. And yet these are also exciting times. We are privileged to be part of a profession whose central challenge is to create the spaces in which life takes place. But to fulfill this mission, we as professionals will require a far broader base of knowledge than generations past.

Future interior designers will need a very high level of technical literacy, and will be expected to seamlessly and inventively incorporate technology, from complex environmental systems to user control interfaces like the iPad. And designers will increasingly be expected to manage not only the economic, but also environmental costs of their designs.

We are far beyond the point where sustainability could legitimately be considered optional in contemporary interior design practice. More than other areas of building, interior design lends itself to sustainability given the relative ease with which efficient fixtures, non-toxic materials, and renewable finishes can be specified, not to mention the reuse of existing structures. However moving forward, the conversation surrounding sustainability will shift. In the future, sustainability will be seen as a luxury not in terms of its cost but in terms of its benefits. Rather than being seen as an added expense often requiring some sacrifice in quality of life, sustainability will be recognised as an added value that can dramatically increase quality of life. Bjarke Ingels, the star Danish architect, refers to this as “hedonistic sustainability”. It’s not about what we give up to be sustainable, it’s about what we get. And that is a very attractive and marketable concept.

We have seen a dramatic increase in the exposure of design to a wider audience. A proliferation of design blogs, print and online magazines, and TV programmes has made interior design more

accessible than ever before. And as the public develops a more sophisticated awareness of good design, they will demand better design in their own lives. This is a double-edged sword. Certainly it is beneficial in terms of potential clients. But there is also a very real danger of amateur designers undercutting trained professionals, particularly in a down economy. A strong organisation will be needed to safeguard the profession, something that does not currently exist in the region. But as they say, a rising tide raises all boats, and in the end a burgeoning culture of design will be a net benefit.

This is not to understate the economic threat the profession faces. In the face of tough economic conditions, designers of all stripes will need to reassert the value of good design. Even in the best of economic times, design is often devalued as superfluous. As project budgets shrink or entire projects are cancelled, interior designers will need to be much more articulate about the value they add. This is perhaps the most essential individual and collective survival skill. In part this means being able to give a return on investment-type argument about the value added to a project by good design, but it also means reasserting our core values about why design matters at all.

It is cynical to think that design is merely a business or way to generate greater revenues for our clients or ourselves. Certainly successful design does those things, but it does so only because it first enhances the experience of its users. Design is more than a job; it is about more than simply turning a profit. We all know there are far easier fields to work in. Yet we do what we do because we love it and because we believe it matters. In the end, designers are naturally optimistic. We see latent potential in the world and seek to realise it. And it is that realisation of potential, that creation of new and wondrous spaces in which life is lived, that is the value of our work.