Research and Methodology for Interior Designers.

Paper written and prepared by Robert Haddad, Associate Professor of Design, FAAD, at Notre Dame University, Lebanon.
Abstract:

Every design is a hypothesis and a practical experiment. By its very nature, design aims at solving problems by intervening in a particular way. Both the design hypothesis and intervention need to be articulated and together they are the foundation for research. Many designers may find it difficult to verbalize design because much of the design process is intuitive and non-conscious, relying on metaphors and implied knowledge rather than explicit and logical thinking. The present paper intends to shed some light on the necessity of research as an integral part of the design profession. Also this paper addresses designers with the possible approaches to methodologies and techniques in the practice of interior design.
Reasons for research in interior design:

Today and more than ever before clients are developing a “show me” attitude and demanding justifications for design decisions.

Clients are now looking for designers who have strong knowledge and background in research methodologies for testing design outcomes, they also developed the so-called performance-based contracting where the architect/designer is not paid in full until after post-occupancy assessment. What clients wanted from an interior designer fifteen or twenty years ago is different from what they are looking for today. At present, clients look first at the designer’s experience with their type of project, then at firm’s experience. They next evaluate the ability to complete the project on time and within a set budget, and the accuracy in making estimates and specifications. Also down the list of their considerations is the kind of design work the firm does, the firm’s quality of management, the size of the firm, and the in-house capabilities. Today in Europe, the interior design profession focuses on Knowledge and the capacity of managing this Knowledge is increasingly important in the activity and the team based office, it is considered so important to the point that it can make or break a company. Therefore the knowledge of employees in a design firm becomes an active part of the evaluation process involved.

So, the first reason for research in interior design basically relies on the clients attitude to know who the firm is, what the firm does, how long it has been in business, where is the office located, what kind of services is the firm able to provide, and what types of consultants and other professionals would be brought to the project. They will want to know about recent jobs done that are similar to their project and how those projects were particularly successful. There can be three basic client concerns: Quality, schedule and budget. Ball (1995: 27) says:

“The initial conference should include an idea of the scope of the work. Then you may suggest some similar jobs you or your firm have completed. For a really large project the client may wish to interview several firms before making a decision. If a good record has recommended your firm, you need not worry that this will cost you the job. It may make it for you.”

Another compelling reason for research is the growing interest in “learning organizations” simply because learning is built upon a systematic inquiry, information gathering and testing.

“A learning organization is a place where people are continually discovering how they create their reality and how they can change it.” (Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Dimension*, p. 13. New York: Doubleday, 1990.)

While professional organizations in the design industry see education as a key concern and are offering Continuing Education courses. And according to some “Professional Organizations” like the American Society of Interior Designers (ASID) and the International Federation of Interior
Designers/Architects (IFI), the professional interior designer is described as a person qualified by education, experience, and examination, who:

“1. Identifies, researches, and creatively solves problems pertaining to the function and quality of the interior environment.
2. Performs services relative to the interior spaces, including programming, design analysis, space planning and aesthetics, using specialized knowledge of interior construction, building codes, equipment, materials, and furnishings.
3. Prepares drawings and documents relative to the design of interior spaces in order to enhance and protect the health, safety, and welfare of the public.”


Finally there is an urge to demonstrate the existing link between the design profession and the strategic goals of business organizations. Evidently since facilities are closely linked to business issues, designers are constantly challenged to show they are successful both from a strategic perspective as well as from an aesthetic dimension.

**Design Research Methodology:**

Every design is a hypothesis but unlike scientific researches the design hypothesis are rarely expressed in projects. Instead, they remain imbedded in the designer’s mind. There are assumptions that design hypothesis can be made more explicit and for that at least two routes can be identified in the design research:

1-Design evaluation: oriented towards real settings in assessing what works and what does not.
2-Theory development: focused on understanding of basic relationships and concepts.

The design evaluation reiterates the numerous techniques for the existing post-occupancy evaluations ranging from sophisticated methodologies to simulations that provide a feedback of the design process and implementations.

The design theory or concept development is based on reviews of scholarly researches that can be used to generate new ideas and approaches to design problems. However, the design researcher needs to know where to look, what question to ask and how to interpret data from other fields in light of particular design context.

But, what if research became an integral part of the design practice?

The assumptions are that the benefits would be far reaching on the following:

- The increased ability to diagnose client context and needs.
- The improvement of the design solutions.
- The development of a design-centered knowledge base as a foundation for any decision making process.
- The ability to provide clients with valid data from previous projects.
- The constant improvement of measuring criteria to decide on how data will be used.
- The planning to control pre and post design phases and the readiness to respond to possible design changes.

**Basic Research Methods and Techniques in interior design:**

1- **Subjective technique vs. Objective** can be based on assessment and communication methods like:

- Questionnaires.
- Interviews.
- Focus groups*

The **subjective** techniques assess feelings, thoughts, perceptions, attitude and state of mind. While the **objective** techniques by contrast exist mainly in the physical features and characteristics of objects.

2- **Qualitative techniques vs. quantitative:**

Qualitative techniques are based on methods used to assess subjective qualities of experience such as: Interviews and observations. Its outcome is a verbal analysis such as: identifications of themes, concepts and issues. While **quantitative techniques** are based on methods directed to assign numbers to something being measured also meant to provide rating scales and categories. But, quantitative data can include both subjective and objective measures.

**Communication Based Methods and Techniques in interior design:**

Communication is a critical element of the entire design process especially in the schematic design phase or the so-called comprehensive phase. Since the design concept relates to the initial client’s interview that states the quantitative and qualitative goals, therefore, the success of the project directly relates to the designer’s ability to listen and to respond to the established goals.

Suggested communication methods:

1- **Programming and Planning Phase.**

The Programming phase could also be called Info Gathering. The designer’s duty is then to describe all the services required to obtain the data, documents, and information needed to determine if the project is actually feasible and also to be able to begin preliminary conceptual planning and specification.

The Planning of a project is when one defines what must be done, who will do it, how long it will take, and how much it will cost.

In short, the requirements for programming and planning are:
- Assess client’s goals and needs.
- Establish dialogue with entire project team.
- Team session series of sketches and discussions.
- Image sharing.
- Obtain scaled floor plans or survey the site if plans are not available.
- Ascertain potential building codes, standards, regulations, barrier-free, life safety, etc.
- Determine if there are no restraints that may affect the feasibility of the project.
- Call on experts and consultants, suppliers, manufacturers, contractors, engineers and specialty consultants.

Knackstedt (1992: 337) defines the Planning phase as follows:

“Planning is establishing priorities. Planning provides a map and direction to for the activities that lead us to achieve our goals… Planning makes decision making simpler because it provides a yardstick to measure against. Without a plan, it is easier to fall into the habit of making no decision”…

The Planning phase is also called a responsibility-center management that acts towards setting the goals, objectives and strategies.

Whether a project is a residential or a contract interior, it is advisable for the designer to run a credit check on the prospective client by learning what the client’s objectives are and whom the other professionals involved in the project are? Who are the principals of the firm? Who will be in charge, and what are his accomplishments and interests? It is also advisable for the designer to check the building reports and the possible design budget and to consider the planning of the client’s interview as a necessary step during the initial meeting. The designer then needs to determine the scope of services, the client's requests, the scheduling, the financial expectations and any restraints.

It is also advisable to set the location of the initial interview on the job site if possible so that the designer can see some of the particulars and assess them and gathering all the visual clues possible.

Planning what to wear to the interview is also critical; clients may find it difficult to relate to the designer if he looks from a different world.

The following interviewing techniques are part of the art of communicating in official interviews adopted in Europe and the U.S.A. and if observed can greatly influence Lebanese designers to determine the acceptability of a client:
- To trust oneself gut reaction;
- To probe the humor index;
- To assess the empathy level: Every designer has stories about something that went wrong on a job. He may test the client's reaction and look for a viewpoint that reflects tolerance.
- To use the “what if probe”. This strategy is intended to determine the potential client's reactions to frustrations and disappointments.
- To listen to the prospective client's words. The words you need to be most aware of are "should," "ought," "must," and "have to." The "must" and "should" betray a lack of flexibility and a penchant for unreasonable demands.

2-Presentation methods and Presentation techniques.
It is important for a client to understand something about the design business and the scope of services available. The interior designer’s duty at this point is to develop adequate techniques for helping his client’s perception of the space and guide him through the transition period.

Presentation requirements:
- Preliminary schematic.
- Final comprehensive file.
- Discuss client’s function, vision and budget.
- Use of images and words.
- Explain diagrams, organizational charts and visual concepts.
- Recommend preliminary layout solutions, construction methods and material and finally recommend furniture.
- Use of models and present perspectives.

Designer may use different probing techniques like the use state-of-mind probes, echo probes, i.e., to repeat what the client says to encourage him expand on a theme, to return to an issue already discussed and ask a reflective question, aiming for simplicity and clarity in everything said. Many clients do not understand the design vocabulary, when discussing sizes; the designer can always relate them to any item familiar that they can visualize.

When making a presentation, clients don't want to hear only talks about the designer’s old projects; they are interested in their own. They want to hear the designer say: "Here is your problem, and this is our solution." They also like a designer who shows understanding for their viewpoint, they need encouragement from their designer and often need to know how products work and will fit into their lifestyle.
For example, when using new technology in a project, there is a need to reduce the complexity of technical data in the presentation so that it is easier for the clients to understand. The smartest designers can explain things in the simplest terms.
Here below are some tips that some designers may consider useful to improve their presentation techniques:
- Making sure that the presentation is completely thorough, well organized, and exciting demonstrating proof of faith, intelligence, aggressiveness, and talent.
- During the presentation, the designer can describe the expertise and knowledge of his staff and explain how they will interact on the project.
- Can provide references to previous clients who have used the same services for similar jobs.
- Can explain how his design firm is different from its competitors. Revealing the strong points the firm can offer that others cannot.
- Can rehearse the presentation and trying it out before the actual one takes place.
- Can prepare an analysis, a built model, some sketches, or take some photographs. Some designers often completely design a space before even being awarded the job. Clients like to feel that time has been spent on their project.
- Can dress in businesslike clothing. Generally it is better to be a bit on the professionally neutral side than to seem too artistic. The way the designer looks is part of his presentation; his appearance usually fits his personality and design tastes. Ball (1995: 73, 74, 76) advises the following:

  “…Interior designers are very busy people, and their clothes must be able to stand the pace…However, business is not school … A good rule is that when in doubt about Clothing for special occasions, dress simply rather than ornately. Your clothes do matter, but if they are neat and in keeping with conventional taste and if they have that attractiveness which your artistry can suggest, they will indicate a person of intelligence and sincerity rather than one of high fashion… And now we come to the last and most important personality trait you will need to become a successful interior designer—moral stamina. This quality and the need for it do not change with time. It means, in the present context, that almost involuntarily you cling to two basic ethical principles: honesty and fairness. The interior design profession has an ethical code in which honesty in conducting your own business and fairness in respect to your dealings with others are basic principles. Such a code cannot be an occasional cause for observance. It must come first in all that you do. And, when necessary, it must be clearly expressed.”

3-Budget estimate and Schedule.
The budget is often the responsibility of more than one person. Because interior projects usually involve construction, design and furniture, general contractors can estimate the specified construction works.

Also because interior designers should not and cannot get directly involved in structural load-bearing constructions, they can still budget wall and ceiling treatments, floor and window coverings, lighting fixtures, furniture and other movable items.
Scheduling is a control function whereby it is necessary to assign various activities in a practice and ensure that the appropriate work is being done, to see where and when each person is in the course of the work plan and moreover ensure that the project deadline is met.

Budget and Schedule requirements:
- Design concept reflected in the budget and schedule.

- Project budget presented as a preliminary estimate according to phases:
  - Phase 1: Construction cost.
  - Phase 2: Furniture cost.
  - Phase 3: Incidental expenses.

There are many decisions that must be made for any project to stay within the construction time frame and budget.
Clients expect from the interior designer to advise them on the trade in discerning values of aesthetics cost and time. Even though there are always certain limitations based on the budget, there
is no right way to design except to consider what is right for the client. Clients always request well-made, beautiful, long-lasting furniture and fair prices. But designers could also be aware that elaborate finishes and special finishing techniques are more in demand, and that the cost of raw materials and labor to produce quality goods is always rising. Sometimes the investment a client makes to create an outstanding interior could go over budget. Many consumers, and specially those who have not purchased goods for sometime, may be astonished at the current prices, not to mention that there are more and more products available, varying in quality and price, which makes the role of the designer more essential.

Interior designers can also be well aware of the reputation and quality of the products they recommend. Most clients only purchase furniture two or three times during their lifetime. And they know that there are many methods available, other than traditional retail sales, for individuals to purchase goods. Some products are even available to end-user, via different means, in an attempt to avoid the retailer or designer, and to pass savings onto the consumer directly. Weale (1982:4) said in this instance:

"Price is a sign-expectancy that is generally correlated with quality. The higher the price, the better the quality is believed to be. This belief is not always valid, but when it is, the interior designer should be able to justify the higher-priced line".

When a client concentrates only on price, he may not realize what he could be giving up and in long run spend more, much more than anticipated. In this context several questions could be raised: Why is there such difference in price? Is the discount based on the buying power of a firm, or is it of inferior quality? Will the client get the service he expected? Is he getting the best quality for his money? If problems of shipping arise, such as damage by a freight line, who will handle this matter and replace the damaged goods? How long does the client expect his furniture to last? And does the piece achieve the desired results in terms of scale, performance and durability?

If a client seems only interested in the bottom line, he will be talking to the designer only because he wants his services at another price. It is the designer’s responsibility to determine if his client is sacrificing quality, and it is also his duty to inform him of what he may be giving up and how these services are worth the difference in price. But when a client purchases well-made items which he adores, he will end up loving them for many years to come, and every time he looks at them he will be reminded of how the designer helped making his dream come true.

Methods used for establishing a schedule:

There are hundreds of scheduling systems to control all kind of projects. To name some: The Milestone Charts, the Bar Charts, the CCPM (Computerized Critical Path Method), etc… All have advantages and disadvantages but each project may be scheduled using the most suitable method according to its complexity. However, all types of projects must be sharing a minimum of characteristics:
A progressive assessment is then required in order to control and monitor accurately the project status all through the established schedule. One of the best methods in accomplishing this task was developed by David Burnstein and is called the IBSM (Integrated budget and schedule monitoring), this method is meant to:

- Estimate each task and progress.
- Compute progress.
- Control expenditures.
- Determine each and overall task and budget status.

This latter method offers all means to control and monitor various points throughout the project if closely adopted. This approach also helps in overcoming possible schedule and budget problems while still observing the project objectives.

**The “Design-built” Method.**

At last, interior designers often enter projects at the framing stage, only to discover major problems affecting the interior, problems that should have been easily remedied or corrected had interior design considerations been included from the beginning. One-way to avoid these problems exists relatively in a new trend within the building industry called the “design-built”.

The design-built method is the means to address the issues of integrating a job from beginning to end. This approach has been developed in an effort to reduce expenses and construction costs, while providing realistic budgets and continuity throughout the project. In any design-built situation, it is advisable that clients be considered as design team members or partners and may be provided with a list of recommendations and options so they could participate in the decision making process. When an end-of-phase is reached, clients may grant the designer their approval in a sign-off form that is to acknowledge the completed phases according to schedule and allowing the project to move forwards with the remaining phases.

When implemented, the design built method facilitates a smooth progression during a project by integrating architecture, engineering, construction, interiors and landscaping. The design-build team is formed for the benefit of the client. The expertise and experience of qualified individuals in this team are available to tackle every aspect of the project in uniformity, rather than independently.

This method acts as a balance system avoiding surprises along the way. It allows the time necessary to investigate solutions to problems in advance rather than under pressure in the midst of
construction. Most importantly, these specialists will be working from the start to provide the client with a fully designed, totally integrated project.

GLOSSARY:

Focus groups
A small group of people whose response to something (as a new product or a politician's image) is studied to determine the response that can be expected from a larger population.

Subjective
1: of, relating to, or constituting a subject
2: of or relating to the essential being of that which has substance, qualities, attributes, or relations
3 a: characteristic of or belonging to reality as perceived rather than as independent of mind: PHENOMENAL -- known through the senses rather than through thought or intuition; concerned with phenomena rather than with hypotheses
   b: relating to or being experience or knowledge as conditioned by personal mental characteristics or states
4 … c: arising out of or identified by means of one's perception of one's own states and processes <a subjective symptom of disease>
5: lacking in reality or substance: ILLUSORY

objective
1 a: relating to or existing as an object of thought without consideration of independent existence -- used chiefly in medieval philosophy
   b: of, relating to, or being an object, phenomenon, or condition in the realm of sensible experience independent of individual thought and perceptible by all observers: having reality independent of the mind <objective reality> <our reveries... are significantly and repeatedly shaped by our transactions with the objective world -- Marvin Reznikoff>
   … d: involving or deriving from sense perception or experience with actual objects, conditions, or phenomena <objective awareness> <objective data>
3 a: expressing or dealing with facts or conditions as perceived without distortion by personal feelings, prejudices, or interpretations <objective art> <an objective history of the war> <an objective judgment>
   b of a test: limited to choices of fixed alternatives and reducing subjective factors to a minimum.

Quality
1 a: peculiar and essential character: NATURE <her ethereal quality -- Gay Talese>
   b: an inherent feature: PROPERTY <had a quality of stridence, dissonance -- Roald Dahl>
   c: CAPACITY, ROLE <in the quality of reader and companion -- Joseph Conrad>
2 a: degree of excellence: GRADE <the quality of competing air service -- Current Biography>
B : superiority in kind <merchandise of quality>
3 a : social status : RANK
b : ARISTOCRACY
4 a : a distinguishing attribute : CHARACTERISTIC <possesses many fine qualities>
b archaic : an acquired skill : ACCOMPLISHMENT
5 : the character in a logical proposition of being affirmative or negative
6 : vividness of hue
7 a : TIMBRE
b : the identifying character of a vowel sound determined chiefly by the resonance of the vocal chambers in uttering it
8 : the attribute of an elementary sensation that makes it fundamentally unlike any other sensation
synonyms QUALITY, PROPERTY, CHARACTER, ATTRIBUTE mean an intelligible feature by which a thing may be identified. QUALITY is a general term applicable to any trait or characteristic whether individual or generic <material with a silky quality>. PROPERTY implies a characteristic that belongs to a thing's essential nature and may be used to describe a type or species <the property of not conducting heat>. CHARACTER applies to a peculiar and distinctive quality of a thing or a class <remarks of an unseemly character>. ATTRIBUTE implies a quality ascribed to a thing or a being <the traditional attributes of a military hero>.

Quantitative
Etymology: Medieval Latin quantitativus, from Latin quantitat-, quantitas quantity
1 : of, relating to, or expressible in terms of quantity
2 : of, relating to, or involving the measurement of quantity or amount
3 : based on quantity; specifically of classical verse : based on temporal quantity or duration of sounds [Merriam-Webster Dictionary]

Bibliography:
Other references:

_____ American Society of Interior Designers, (ASID): (http://www.asid.org)

List of ASID DOCUMENTS:
B171 STANDARD FORM OF AGREEMENT FOR INTERIOR DESIGN SERVICE
B177 ABBREVIATED FORM OF AGREEMENT FOR INTERIOR DESIGN SERVICES
A171 STANDARD FORM OF AGREEMENT BETWEEN OWNER AND CONTRACTOR FOR FURNITURE, FURNISHINGS, AND EQUIPMENT
A177 ABBREVIATED FORM OF AGREEMENT BETWEEN OWNER AND CONTRACTOR FOR FURNITURE, FURNISHINGS, AND EQUIPMENT
A271 GENERAL CONDITIONS OF THE CONTRACT FOR FURNITURE, FURNISHINGS, AND EQUIPMENT
A771 INSTRUCTIONS TO INTERIORS BIDDERS
#403 CONTRACT FOR PROFESSIONAL SERVICES (Residential Long Form)
#404 CONTRACT FOR PROFESSIONAL SERVICES (Residential Short Form)
#001 COMPENSATION AGREEMENT—Presented Price
#002 COMPENSATION AGREEMENT—Hourly Rate
#003 COMPENSATION AGREEMENT—Fixed Rate
#004 COMPENSATION AGREEMENT—Percentage of Project Cost

Other works cited:

