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Shifting trends in interior design careers: the graduates' story 1977 to 1998

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Abstract

Introduction/Background - This study is a retrospective investigation of the career paths/patterns of interior designers over a 21-year period, between 1977 and 1998. The aim of the study was to document major influences and trends in their career development. In particular, the effects of global changes that contributed to career change were examined. It is important that educational institutions prepare new graduates for the reality of the rapidly changing workplace, while providing experienced design practitioners and post-graduates with research that may increase their understanding of careers possible with an Interior Design education.

Research Design - Little documented research exists concerning the career development patterns of graduate Interior Designers/Architects. Thus, this applied research project was designed to contribute new knowledge in this important area. The research and analysis was primarily a qualitative/interpretive use of life history, supplemented by a survey questionnaire that was used to gather preliminary qualitative information from a comparative sample of Canadian and Australian interior design graduates.

Key Findings - Seventeen trends in career development were identified, confirming the importance of the "building block" years-one to five. Additionally, as global change affects careers significantly, the need for career counselling in the profession was confirmed.

Keywords: design careers, interior design, interior architecture, professional development

"My message to graduate designers: There is tremendous diversity in the range of possibilities design offers you. If you... feel you don't fit the mold, forget it and create a new way to mold a design career-follow your heart" [Interior Designer, writer, researcher and design educator (1997, UM77/28, p.11).]

Figure 1 Manitoba77 Graduates (Source: Architecture Faculty of U and M 1976-77 Yearbook)
Introduction
This study is a retrospective investigation of the career paths/patterns of interior designers over a 21-year period, between 1977 and 1998. The aim of the study was to document major influences and trends in their career development. In particular, the effects of global changes that contributed to career change were examined. It is recognized that the study has limitations due to the small sample size.

It is important that educational institutions prepare new graduates for the reality of the rapidly changing workplace, while providing experienced design practitioners and post-graduates with research that may increase their understanding of careers possible with an Interior Design education.

Section one deals with the research design, section two gives selected examples of data analysis resulting from the study. The paper concludes with career development trends emerging from the study and recommendations for further study.

Background
This research project developed out of my 22 years of experience in the Interior Design (ID) profession. The first 16 years were spent in practice. Over that time I hired and coached a staff, affecting their “career development.” I have been an educator for the past six years, directing the Interior Architecture Department in a school of the built environment. My work involves the development and teaching of undergraduate and graduate programmes.

Graduating students look for practical advice on how to land their first professional job. I found that generally, they underestimated their capabilities, and had a defeatist attitude about their ability to land an interesting and challenging job. I recognized a need to outline the broad career potential of an ID education as well as the need to link individual interests and goals to career direction.

Career paths in every profession have changed in the last two decades due to convergent forces of globalization and information technology. However, preliminary research into the area of career planning and job search strategies for Interior Designers revealed little specific information.

The Interior Design profession is not well understood or respected by the general populace. Anecdotally, the general perception seems to be that Interior Design skills lie in the ability to select colours and arrange furniture. A limited self-perception tends to be shared amongst designers themselves when considering career change. They cannot see other applications for their broad set of skills. However, many design skills are transferable across career domains.

I had a strong intuitive sense that critical building blocks of a lifelong career were developed in the period between the senior undergraduate years and the first five years in the design field. This thought evolved into a notion that a preliminary study could develop into the underpinning for future research in the area of career development. The resulting information is intended to inform and inspire students and graduating designers as well as experienced designers considering a career change.

Section One: Research Design
Hypotheses
To frame the basis of this study clearly, the hypotheses are as follows:

- The formative years (one to five) of a career are crucial to long-term success.
- Career myths exist that are outmoded in practice, yet practice and tertiary education continue to support these myths.
- Planned career development in the Interior Design profession is virtually non-existent.
- Therefore, career planning guidance in undergraduate education and professional practice can be valuable to Interior Designers/Architects.

In this study the research and analysis is primarily a qualitative/interpretive use of life history using a grounded theory approach. Survey research was selected as the most
To test the hypotheses, a questionnaire was developed (Because of its length - 14pp - the Questionnaire is not published here. It was, however, used in the presentation of the paper and is accessible via the author. [marina@arch.curtin.edu.au]). A small sampling of graduates of Interior Design/Architecture Bachelor degrees from Canada and Australia was selected from three sites: Manitoba77, RMIT82 and Curtin92-96. Respondents from Manitoba77 and RMIT82 had between 16 and 20 years of experience. Respondents from Curtin92-96 had two to five years' experience. Table 1 illustrates the site locations, population, size and sample response rates to the questionnaires. It is recognised that the study has limitations due to sample size and non-triangulation of data collection techniques.

**Questionnaire Construction**

The questionnaire was divided into three sections and focused on the following:

- A pattern in job changes and career changes;
- Whether the patterns of job and career changes were through self-direction or external circumstances. Did individuals plan their careers or did circumstance/chance play the primary role?
- What factors played a role in the development of an individual's career? Was timing of these factors significant to the development of an individual's career?

**Section Two: Selected Examples from the Study**

**Sample One: Individual’s Job/Career Changes, and Breaks**

**Job and/or Break Patterns**

To explore the trends in job patterns, those surveyed were asked to describe each period of their job and/or breaks post-graduation. Periods started from the individual’s graduation with BID and ended in 1997. Each change of job, or a break defined a period for that individual. Different individuals would have distinct numbers of periods, and unlike timeframes for each period.

Specific information was sought for each period including: start and finish, job description, type of firm/institution, specific job role(s) held, duration and position conditions. Table 2 on the following page summarizes the findings. The left-hand column indicates the choices made by respondents from the range offered on the questionnaire. The centre three columns describe the majority responses in each site. The right-hand column compares similarities and differences of the sites, outlining trend analysis overall.

**Number of Position Changes over Career**

In Manitoba77, the maturest site, the respondents changed job positions on average every 3.75 years, and averaged 5.33 positions in 20 years. The minimum position change was four, the maximum 14. RMIT82 showed similar trends. It is too early to compare Curtin92-96 to the other sites.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questionnaire Choices</th>
<th>Manitoba77</th>
<th>RMIT82</th>
<th>Curtin92-96</th>
<th>Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General description of job/occupation</td>
<td>Majority of graduates started as Interior Designers in their first period and continued as such throughout all periods.</td>
<td>Same as Manitoba77.</td>
<td>Same as Manitoba77. Those that started in unrelated jobs, succeeded in getting an Interior Design position by period three.</td>
<td>A high ratio practice in the area for which they trained (65-70% graduates).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of Firm/Institution</td>
<td>The majority worked for Interior Design firms, then the next largest group worked for other types of employers as Interior Designers. i.e. Department store, as display designer; retail chain, as a store designer; Ministry of Transport, as an airport designer; insurance firm, as space planner; development corporation, as a planner.</td>
<td>Majority worked equally for two categories: Architectural firms or multidisciplinary firms throughout all periods.</td>
<td>Majority worked equally for two categories: Architectural firms or Interior Design firms in first two periods.</td>
<td>In Manitoba77 there is a variance between employers. It appears in Australia there has been a growth in Interior Design firms in the last decade increasing positions within these firms for graduates. Where available it appears Interior Designers prefer working for Interior Design firms or corporations rather than architectural firms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Position held</td>
<td>Respondents reported that in their first to third periods they were primarily carrying out design assistant or designer roles. By their fourth period their job descriptions were diversifying. In addition to their design duties they were acting as technicians, project managers, managers and marketers.</td>
<td>Respondents reported that in their first to third periods they were primarily carrying out design assistant or designer roles. By their fifth and following periods their job descriptions were diversifying similar to Manitoba77.</td>
<td>Respondents reported that in their first to third periods they were primarily carrying on design assistant or designer job positions and in addition marketing roles. A number reporting part-time lecturing or tutoring in first or second periods. In contrast to other sites these respondents appear to be taking on broader roles within a year or two of graduation.</td>
<td>As a natural progression designers take on a broader role than design in the functioning of firms as they progress through their careers. Broadening of roles beyond designer into project manager, manager, marketer appears to be moving earlier into careers starting in the nineties than previously.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration</td>
<td>First and second jobs 7 months-2 years average. Second job on 13 months -5 years average.</td>
<td>First job 7 months-2 years average. Second job on 13 months-5 years average.</td>
<td>First three periods, lengths evenly distributed between: 0-3 months; 4-6 months; 7-12 months; 13months-2 years.</td>
<td>Pattern indicates that the nineties graduates are starting with shorter job durations than other sites.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Position Conditions</td>
<td>Majority of positions starting out of school were full-time permanent and continued as such throughout all periods.</td>
<td>Same as Manitoba77.</td>
<td>For first 3-4 periods the pattern for respondent was: - 60% full-time permanent - 40% contract or hourly</td>
<td>Pattern indicates that the nineties graduates are starting in more contract and hourly positions than earlier graduates.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 Job/break pattern, all sites - periods are self defined by each respondent to the stop/start of each period of employment or break.
Table 3 illustrates the range of career approaches pursued by respondents. Indications are that 53% of the Manitoba graduates have pursued \( \equiv \) multiple careers since graduation and 47% have remained in Interior Design as a single career. In contrast, only 25% of RMIT82 graduates have pursued multiple careers. Of RMIT82's graduates 75% remain in Interior Design as a single career. Early indications in the Curtin92-96 group show a high percentage (74%) in one career. Of interest is that within five years of graduation, 22% of the Curtin92-96 graduates are in multiple careers. This trend is seen much earlier than in graduates from Manitoba77 and RMIT82. Manitoba graduates took up their second careers between four and 19 years after graduation, with the median time being nine years after graduation.

For this study two variations of multiple careers have been defined. One is working in the Interior Design business and then getting an interest/opportunity in a field either related or unrelated. The individual makes a switch, essentially leaving the initial career behind (for the time being anyway). This is a distinct career change. The second is a blended version where the individual picks up interests, education and/or experience in a number of career domains. The person then blends these careers. Often their work overlaps, or runs in parallel. Some futurists refer to this as a portfolio career, and they suggest many will follow these multiple approaches in the future.

To illustrate some possibilities of career paths, some archetypes from my study are coined as follows:

"The Grazer" developed a portfolio career with a mix of self-employment and full-time positions, mixing his capabilities in museum curating, exhibition design, drafting, contracting and building, rendering and graphic design.

"The Traditionalist" developed her career in various corporations and Interior Design firms, doing corporate office design during the first seven years, then went on the typical "European tour." Afterwards, she established an Interior Design practice as sole practitioner...
with 12-15 employees. She runs a successful corporate firm, with award-winning projects, which is recognized as a top Canadian firm. She balances a financially stable, successful practice with a home life of spouse and three children.

"The Sampler" says he is a four-to-five-year man. He’s charming, extroverted and talented. He won the gold medal for his thesis at the University of Manitoba in the early 80s, and was scooped by a top Calgary design firm on graduation. After four years of design with some teaching, he accepted a position to head up an Interior Design programme; and make some needed changes. Five years later, he’s back in design, working for an international firm, working out of two offices, dabbling in high-end retail and hospitality design. Currently he’s working for a leading edge manufacturer, rubbing shoulders with dynamic thinkers of the decade, and marketing in the local market. Recently he told me, "I’m enjoying what I’ve done in my current job, especially the training I get, but I’ve got a five year pattern and I wonder what I’ll do next."

Sample Three: Importance of Initial Career Years

Analysis of information in Table 4 reveals that the majority of respondents feel strongly that the first five years were important to their career. Table 4 below analyses the various reasons respondents felt they were important.

Examples of Why Individuals Thought First Five Years were Important

Respondents gave the following examples of why they perceived the first five years important to the overall progress of their careers:

"The first five years are when I made big

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes or No to first five years important</th>
<th>Manitoba?77</th>
<th>EMUD?72</th>
<th>Curtin91-96</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes important</td>
<td>17 (90%)</td>
<td>3 (75%)</td>
<td>12 (65%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not important</td>
<td>1 (5%)</td>
<td>1 (25%)</td>
<td>2 (10%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not applicable</td>
<td>1 (5%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9 (50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Respondents</td>
<td>19 (100%)</td>
<td>4 (100%)</td>
<td>23 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4 Importance of first five years, all sites - analysis reveals that the majority of respondents feel strongly that the first five years were important to the career. Each diamond represents where in the scale given; each respondent felt the influence affected him or her personally
decisions and set the course for what was to follow: for both my careers," says Jeanne (1997, UM77/35, p.10).

Georgie states, "The focus of my first five years was independence and faith in my own design integrity that was nurtured under high quality well-managed firms. I would not accept shortcuts and neither would they. Fitting myself around my client's needs is still uppermost" (1997, UM77/18, p.10).

"I spent as much time working as I did examining my direction. I gained invaluable experience from an excellent company, although employment opportunities locally do not overly attract me. I worked for a small/medium firm which allowed me to see first-hand the professional/personal/lifestyle/financial implications of establishing my own business," states a nineties graduate (1997, CU94/8, p.10).

Section Three: Trends Emerging from Results

Trend 1: Big picture awareness was a critical influence on career direction.

Trend 2: Major growth was the reason for importance of first five years, delivered by a good mainstream Interior Design firm.

Trend 3: A special opportunity accelerated career, for example, a building boom or a world event.

Trend 4: First job accepted primarily for work experience not "fit." Majority took their first job (usually for a period of one year) to get work experience and a salary. They then looked for a new position offering an interesting learning opportunity with a good firm, good team environment and staff, or a particular type of work experience.

Trend 5: Initial job periods getting shorter. The nineties graduates are starting with shorter job duration than other sites. Curtin92-96 graduates often start with a duration of 0-3 months, 4-6 months or 7-12 months.

Trend 6: More contract and hourly positions. Pattern indicates that 40% of the Curtin92-96 graduates are starting out in contract and hourly positions. Whereas the majority of Manitoba77 or RMIT82 graduates held full-time positions during this period.

Trend 7: Job breadth given earlier in career. This broadening of roles beyond designer into project manager, marketer, manager and technical expert appears to be occurring earlier in the careers of nineties graduates than previously.

Trend 8: Multiple careers. Since the late eighties, a number of graduates from Manitoba77 and RMIT82 have developed multiple careers. Graduates from Curtin92-96 are already starting to develop portfolio careers in more than one career domain.

Trend 9: Mentors have the biggest influence on an individual's career as these people or teams of people provided expansion of knowledge.

Trend 10: Major career turning points occur and include "opportunity knocks", "forced change", the desire for growth, and a change in perspective/values.

Trend 11: Relationships and geographic preferences are leading influences on career direction, as these parameters establish starting points.

Trend 12: Children and extended families are influences on mature designers.

Trend 13: Two or more breaks over career. Designers tend to take two or more breaks of up to two years over their careers. Main reasons are: self-directed breaks for travel, mental health and rethinking of career/life direction, or, for lifestyle decisions, to have a child or move to a new location; and lastly, breaks caused by unemployment.

Trend 14: Graduate or double degrees became popular. Early indications show there is a trend to pursuing a double degree and/or graduate degree in the nineties. Few graduates from the seventies and early eighties pursued graduate degrees. Those that have, enrolled in the nineties. There is a noticeable difference
for the cohort graduating in the nineties; a number are already studying for a graduate degree.

Trend 15: Short-duration, further education programs are the most popular.

Trend 16: Broad based CPD topics are popular in Canada. In addition to software courses needed in the present climate, popular programmes are design expansion, management and drawing/Fine Arts programmes. Canadians appear to obtain a second degree from a broader based area such as the humanities or fine arts.

Trend 17: Narrower focus CPD topics are popular in Australia. Graduates from both mature sites: RMIT82 and Curtin92-96 pursued CPD topics that are necessary skills in the current market (computing software). As well, when individuals pursued double degrees, Australian graduates (particularly recent graduates) focused on subjects close to the arena of the design/built environment, such as architecture, furniture design and project management.

Recommendations for further study include: broadening the study to see how it applies to other design disciplines; developing a teaching package/programme for career strategies in design for a new age, to be offered to undergraduates and mature designers.

Due to the limitation of the size of this paper, only a selection of the data analysis could be presented. However, for those interested, further examples are available to support the trends identified in this paper.