

# Interior Architecture in Australia and Canada

## *Part One: A comparative study of a developing profession*

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### Introduction

This paper is the first in a series. The series will compare development in Interior Design/Interior Architecture in two commonwealth countries—Australia and Canada. These countries are of a similar population, size, language, mother country and age in terms of western development. And, the countries therefore share, in terms of design development, some of the same opportunities and barriers.

Little documented research exists concerning the recent developments in interior architecture in Australia and Canada. Thus this paper was written to provide an anecdotal overview of the profession in the two countries over the period described. It is acknowledged that this is by no means an exhaustive piece of research of this period, but rather an overview and starting point for more in-depth research.

The purpose of this first paper is to establish the professions' history as a base—to compare parallels and differences for the purpose of gaining an insight into development. From this base discussions are possible on future directions.

The paper focuses on the past twenty years from the seventies to the nineties. Interior Architecture is put in context of the economic events underpinning both countries. It focuses on Australia and Canada from 1977 to 1999, and provides a background on the influences of time, place and economic factors on the interior design profession. A number of the events are global issues, thereby putting the developments into an international context. The paper concludes with possibilities suggested by the current state of the profession and recommendations for further research.

**Australia's** main centres where Interior Design is practiced include Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth. Each city went through periods of intense building activity, downturns and leveling out periods between 1977 and 1999. The country's population grew from 14 to 18 million (Yearbook... 1977) (Almanac... 1998) between those years. Refer to figure 1 for a map.

*Figure 1: The map indicates the five main Australian centres where Interior Architecture is practised. The majority of the population resides around the perimeter of the continent, with the greatest population in the Eastern States. Although the continent is similar in size to Canada the population of Australia is only eighteen million as compared to 29 million in the Canada.*

*Source: Authors/Glow Studio*

Henderson (1985-a) believed that during the 1970s the profession of Interior Design came into its own. Firms found they were successfully tendering for larger interior fit-out projects, particularly in specialist areas such as shopping center and office tenancy projects. With their strengthening role in the industry, Interior Designers became confident in taking on larger commissions, at times usurping the role of the architect, particularly in building renovations. With the upsurge of the economy in 1984-85 Interior Design practices increased in numbers.

In Australia, following the stock market collapse of 1987 and the resulting recession, Interior Design practices suffered. Fees dropped, many practices reduced their staff to a core group or closed their doors. International practices, suffering the same fate looked overseas for potential work. The emerging Asian “tiger” market became their target. Branch offices sprang up in Hong Kong, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur and Jakarta. Australian design firms had to share this market with their European and North American counterparts.

In the 1970s to 80s Interior Design practices within Australia competed statewide or nationally, with the exception of a handful of international practices who developed branches in the Australasian region. Local Interior Design practices were aware of their competitors and able to compete based on their knowledge and experience gained within their specific area of expertise.

They knew their market and therefore could be competitive on fees. Now practices find they compete on a larger scale with unknown competitors, and their clients encourage competition between practices nationally and internationally. Clients are more sophisticated and informed in Interior Design practice, and are demanding greater service for lower fees. Clients in large corporations "...look for skilled and experienced design practices that show them how strategic use of design enhances their business units and corporate strategies" (Zaccai and Badler 1996, pp. 54-59).

As businesses are also competing more often on an international level, their practice is developing and changing at a faster pace. These changes impact on our social, physical and spiritual well being, influencing the way we live work and play and therefore affecting our physical environments. Clients need to be satisfied that the Interior Designer is up to date with these changes, understanding the trends within the business, social and political environment, and has the knowledge and skills to address these issues, and implement appropriate design specific solutions.

In 1998 the Australian economy is taking a beating with the fall of markets in Asia. This decline has affected Australian design firms with branches in Asia. Additionally, Australian design/development is affected as the investment in building by Asians has dropped dramatically. The bright area for design is in Sydney where development of facilities to house the *2000 Summer Olympic games* are keeping designers busy.

*Figure 2: Australia "The Lucky Country" is an ancient continent with an infant Interior Architecture community. The country is rich in aboriginal history, cultural diversity, color and materials to draw on for design context.*

*Photographer: Chris Geoghegan*

Major **Canadian** centres where Interior Design is practiced include Montreal, Toronto, Winnipeg, Calgary and Vancouver. As in Australia, each city went through periods of intense building activity, downturns and leveling out periods over the 20 years, while the population expanded from 23 to 29 million (Yearbook... 1977) (Almanac... 1998) Refer to figure 3.

*Figure 3: The map indicates the five main Canadian centres where Interior Architecture is practised. The majority of Canada's 29 million residents reside within 500 kilometres of the Canada United States border. Similar to Australia the greatest population is in the Eastern Provinces of Ontario and Quebec. Canadian Interior Architecture is heavily influenced by the United States—due to proximity and that Americans manufacture the majority of building product, fixtures and furniture due to their large population base. The majority of design publications are in North America are produced in the States.*

*Source: Authors/Glow Studio*

<sup>1</sup>Up until the mid-1960s corporate or institutional owner-occupiers primarily built buildings. Architects designed the buildings and the interiors in terms of partitioning and millwork. In many cases, the architects specified finishes, and furniture dealers provided interior layouts and furniture. At this time, furniture and product dealers were the primary players offering planning

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<sup>1</sup> Much of the following background of Canadian Interior Design comes from personal correspondence (1998) with Donna Cummings. Donna is CEO of *MarshallCummings* a leading Interior Design firm established in Toronto in 1975 (with branches in New York and London, UK). She has practiced since 1969 and is considered a leader and expert in the profession.

and interior design services to sell their products across Canada. High-rise architecture began in eastern Canada in the mid-1960s. Expo 67 brought about a major change in the Interior Design industry. The World Exposition in Montreal brought architects, Interior Designers and industrial designers to Canada from around the world. With these built-environment designers, came an expanded knowledge of international products including furniture and textiles.

In 1969, several interior design firms in Toronto pioneered office planning independent of furniture dealers. *Sloan Branton* and *AD Pollard* were two of the first, although the largest firms were still the dealers such as *POI* and *J.C. Preston*, both representing *Steelcase Furniture*. Other stationery/copier suppliers such as *Grand and Toy* also represented furniture manufacturers and started offering design services. Large department stores such as *Eatons* and *Simpsons* opened departments across Canada offering office planning as an extension of their residential, hotel and retail design business. In Toronto, *Nienkamper* started representing European and international furniture lines, eventually manufacturing furniture such as *Knoll* under license. Teak furniture and *Mary Meiko* type fabrics were available to the domestic market, which was part of the German and Swedish influences initiated by Expo 67.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, developers such as *Cadillac Fairview* and *Olympia and York* built speculative high-rises. Banks, law firms, accounting and insurance companies were all expanding and looking for space across Canada. This created a boom for Interior Designers with expertise in the area, very similar to the situation in Australia. In the US, architectural firms like *Gwathamy Seigal*, *SOM* and *Gensler* were growing in parallel, developing strong Interior Design arms. High-rise buildings in New York and Chicago such as the *Hancock*, *Sears*, and campus buildings for *Weyerhaeuser* and *IBM* were being built.

This was the time of “space-planning” selling space for developers and realtors. The industrial designers were also busy. *Steelcase*, *Sunar*, *Hauserman* and many other American furniture suppliers were reinventing office furniture. During that time *Herman Miller* developed the *Ao2 Open Office System*, and *Westinghouse* produced a similar open-plan system, with the use of vertical space that the user could adjust to their liking. Seated and standing surfaces were used with a honeycomb-like layout with shared panels that used space efficiently. Hans Niewerth brought the philosophy of the German *Quikbourner* team to Canada, opening offices across the land. This was the era of “open landscape” planning with plants, desks and fabric landscape screens proliferating. Meanwhile, *Steelcase* was selling a ton of the *moveable wall system* and developing new systems furniture. The state of technology was still in word processing areas and mainframe computer rooms with card punching areas for data entry. Cummings (1998) expresses *Marshall Cummings's* experience that is indicative of other practices:

By 1975—we were in an era of the corporate office reflecting the company image. More attention and money was spent on interior architectural details and finishes. Suddenly experience in programming and space-planning became a very saleable commodity. Knowledge of furniture and how to interpret work needs into functional office environments was needed. We probably have always learned from the large furniture companies as they did the research for their products and taught us. At this time schools were still teaching what—color, some design problem solving and history?

A shopping mall disaster (roof collapse in Surrey, BC) in the 80s created waves with regard to liabilities. Plan examiners found inconsistencies in the drawings. An engineer was found to have stamped the drawings without having checked them. He lost his business and his license. This experience underscores the need for culpability of building design professionals and fast-

forwarded the need for Interior Design licensing<sup>2</sup>/registration in matters of public health and safety issues. Cummings (1998) continues their story:

By 1980—image became a big thing. Our experience in period furniture and style became the saleable thing. The corporation with the most marble, the thickest carpet, matching paneling and largest art collection won the prize. Knowledge of products gave us the edge, as well as space-planning and decorative finishing both contemporary and traditional. By the 1990s—some client companies were losing ground. The Canada/US Free Trade Agreement (CUSTA) was implemented in 1989, with the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) to follow in 1994. This increased competition for Canadian firms in Canada, but also allowed expansion into the US. The Federal Government implemented the Goods and Services Tax (GST), which came into effect in the late-1980s created a tax burden and an enormous administrative load.

The excesses of the 1980s, a slowing economy, the boom of technology and global competition forced clients to look at their bottom line. To reduce overhead, the first and easiest thing was to reduce people and space. The period was very economy driven, the designer who could reduce space and use it more efficiently per “profit producing person” was “king.” The focus of interiors shifted to acoustics, technology, environmentally friendly approaches and ergonomics, with much less emphasis on image and style. People were working harder for less and designers were trying to create environments that were more attractive, bright, colorful and warm, using few unnecessary details.

From 1995 on—technology ruled. Flexibility became the most requested design element. Work processes changed and companies couldn’t keep up with training and reorganizing; it became constant. Effectiveness was the issue. Technology and flexibility were the drivers. Access to information leveled out hierarchical structures within client organizations and physical space planning and environments had to change to reflect and enable this changed way of working.

Donna Cummings represented the corporate office design field on a panel of four design experts, discussing change and how the design industry can be a leader of change, at IDEX/NEOCON in October 1998. Cummings (1998) summarizes her views and questions put forward to the panel:

In the corporate world, in the late 1990s—culture and behavior are the hot topics. People and brains are the assets. Ways of working range from different work settings for different tasks, less owned space and more shared space, with planning concepts such as *teaming*, *caves and commons*, and *neighborhoods*. Mobility is provided through *plug and play* or *wireless* allowing freedom to work anywhere. Coming together with others may be to learn, be mentored or have formal or informal training. Perks (provided by client companies) are used to recruit and retain good people; i.e., food service still tops the wish list, next is fitness facilities, then daycare and other amenities. In contrast, as little as two years ago the wish list was still for technology, workspace, right to light and ergonomics.

Design skills require imagination, communication, investigative skills, innovation, collaboration with other disciplines,...sensitivity to human behavior and to color, texture, shape and light.

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<sup>2</sup> A number of provinces now license Interior Designers. Through licensing, Interior Designers become more recognized as building design professionals, as experts in the application of the code. Their signatures and stamps on drawings submitted for building permit approval have official status. This gives them a status similar to that of an architect, for the purposes of signing off on relevant drawings, which must be approved under building code provisions.

The future—more of the learning organization, people will still interact to be their most effective. Education becomes ongoing; more collaboration between business and schools will be needed to knit the training programs together. I think a hybrid “apprenticeship type” training will follow a basic “how to think” foundation.

At the seminar<sup>3</sup> we were all asked what the design world would be like in our various areas, in 2010. The retail design representative thought everything would be virtual; all shopping, dining and other experiences achieved through technology. The hotel designer agreed with the virtual experience for travel and sensations, but thought some “real” luxury experiences would be in demand. The facility manager thought technology and the “work anywhere” idea would result in a virtual office. I thought that technology would give us the choice to work virtually, something workers of the future will take for granted as we do the telephone, but humans will want to interact with others for warmth and sharing as well as intellectual growth.

In writing this, it is obvious the furniture manufacturing industry became the teacher of commercial designers. This is even more evident today. Is this because designers cannot afford research and development? Or because in most cases we use manufactured products rather than one-of-a-kind designs? Fortunately, some manufacturers share not only their product research but also their behavioral, ergonomic, and other scientific studies. A good career link is industrial and product design with the sales and marketing of products. Architects traditionally were trained to research and be more investigative. Is this happening today?

**Canadian Interior Design** is influenced by the United States as the majority of design publications and product manufacturing comes from there. Pooling resources has resulted in strengthened education and practice, however, the downside is that Canadian design has not developed a unique Canadian identity.

In summary, design management in Interior Design firms is a big issue in Canada, differing from Australia. Australia tends to follow the British tradition of project management and <sup>4</sup>quantity surveyors as middlemen in interior design and architectural projects.

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<sup>3</sup> Seminar was in Toronto at IDEX/NEOCON.

<sup>4</sup> Quantity surveyors estimate costs of building construction, through the counting of building elements, then estimating the amounts of each element through measurement of drawings.

*Figure 4: Canada “The Great White North” is part of a “new continent” by comparison to Australia. It is rich in natural resources and low in population. In parallel to Australia the Interior Design community is young, an adolescent compared to Australia’s infancy. Like Australia there is much to draw on in terms a national design context, “First Nations” cultural history, European settlement, and the natural and cultural environment. Canada’s design challenge is not to be overtaken by Americanism.*

*Photographer: Bako/Beck*

**Australian Interior Design** is influenced by British design in aesthetics and professional development. Australian Interior Designers have struggled to create their own identity separate from architecture. The region does not share borders with adjoining countries as in the European Community and North America where Interior Designers have joined forces and pooled resources. Fortunately, this situation is changing rapidly in the nineties. Communications, increased building activity in southeast Asia and Africa, and a stronger design organization are giving strength to much needed changes in education and public views of the profession in Australia.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations for Further Research**

The last 20 years have heralded an immense change in the profession internationally, touching all areas of the developing world. Economic downturns and changes in working/retail patterns have reduced the need for new buildings, slowing down the architectural business. However, swift changes in building occupancy, reengineering of businesses, and changes in life-working patterns have made Interior Design a more active area with a need for better-educated specialists in interior building design. Due to increased work in the area, the profession has gained momentum and influence. Communications has allowed the international development of a profession that is relatively small in each country. The smaller numbers and relative newness of the profession have



allowed for greater flexibility to maneuver the dramatic changes brought about by the information age.

There are a lot of similarities between the two countries in terms of professional development, such as: population rises, building booms and busts, and cultural and social basis as British Commonwealth countries. Differences of note are: Australia offers a more innovative national design identity and a strong multicultural design base with their work in, and immigration from, Southeast Asia.

### **Recommendations for further research**

We offer the following as possibilities for further research:

- Interior Designers have worked through the most rapid advancement of the profession ever, and will work through another 20 years of immense change. Changes point to the concept of a world-wide economic dependency i.e.: the current (1988) failing of Russia, and the “Asian flu” is sending ripples across the world, thus we must consider how we are connected to others globally. The impact and opportunities posed by this reality for Interior Architects would be a valuable area for further research.
- In-depth research on the development of the profession in the two countries.
- Research the potential strengths of Australian Interior Architecture in the context to “multi cultural design” vis a vis the growing migration *from*, and work *in* South East Asia.
- Research the relationships between the several fields of professional design activity, especially between Architecture and Interior Architecture.
- Compare the development of the commercial office area of Interior Architecture in North America and Australia. Comparing the difference if any of Canadians having the influence/benefit of the research of large North America manufactures and Australia with less of this direct influence.

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