

A Sense of the Interior: Gender, Agency and the Professional Identities of Interior Designers in Multidisciplinary Firms



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The following is an excerpt from a longer piece. For the full text, please visit https://scholar.colorado.edu/concern/undergraduate_honors_theses/3r074w62n or scan the QR code.

I love to decorate, don't get me wrong, like picking out decorations, pillows, curtains, and things like that. But what I do is so much more than that.

—Renee

Sensing Ethnographic Needs

Interior design, as a recognized profession, paralleled architecture throughout much of the twentieth century in the United States. Some of the earliest university degrees in interior decoration and design were offered within architecture schools, where budding architects and interior designers engaged in much of the same coursework. Today, the two professions continue to be deeply intertwined. Yet, many of the hierarchies and power dynamics that have historically distinguished the two fields continue to play a role in commercial firm structures and, subsequently, the fundamental ways in which the design industry as a whole operates. While a decent amount of anthropological research has been conducted on architects and architecture as a career, little ethnographic research has explicitly focused on interior designers and how they create their professional identities in the context of corporate America, where power dynamics and gender inequalities continue to hinder the professional development and experiences of interior designers in some commercial multidisciplinary firms.

Despite the generally progressive and innovative image that the architecture and design worlds put forth, these industries are fundamentally gendered in ways that specifically impact interior designers. The design industry was, after all, founded on cultural perceptions of femininity and masculinity, and corporate structures have long been reliant on patriarchal power (Bolton and Muzio 2008). Today, specific trends can be observed that could be leading trained interior designers on professional paths within the industry that diverge from interior design, or driving these designers to leave the interior design profession altogether. By ethnographically investigating the professional development of women-identifying interior designers, this thesis reveals how gender and power dynamics affect interior designers, individual firms, and the design industry as a whole. Their experiences show how interior designers are often caught in a double bind between conflicting stereotypes fueled by patriarchal assumptions that leave them feeling undervalued and restricted in their efforts to build their interior design careers. Moreover, by understanding the detailed implications of social structures on these designers' professional development, we can better understand similar gendered hierarchical systems and their effects on other women professionals.

[...]

A few questions guided my research: How does the feminization of the role of commercial interior designers impact and produce emotional effects on female interior designers, and how do these effects shape how designers navigate their profession? Next, how do power structures influence interior designers' professional acknowledgment and agency? Lastly, how do the different social relationships experienced by interior designers influence their expression of their professional role? Such relationships include those between interior designers and those between designers and professionals from other disciplines within their project teams. In considering these relationships, it is also essential to ask how interior designers' emotional desires and responses shape them.

I examine the patriarchal nature of the corporate world and gender in the workplace by using concepts put forth by social scientists such as Grace Lees-Maffei (2008), Brian Moeran (2016), and Hilary Holbrow (2022). Lees-Maffei's exploration of interior design's path to professionalization and the associated gendered challenges helps illuminate historical power dynamics that influence commercial interior designers today. Moeran's ideas on the notion of worth within creative professions are productive for putting interior designers' experiences into perspective. Similarly, Holbrow's research studying the effect of women's integration into management positions on women in lower-level support jobs is helpful in assessing how interior designers may or may not be impacted by having women in leadership positions at their firms. In addition to these social scientific concepts, I also employ poststructuralist feminist concepts related to the feminization of work, feminist affect theory, and emotional labor as proposed by Sharon Bolton and Daniel Muzio (2008), Carla Freeman (2020) and Arlie Russell Hochschild (2012), respectively. My goal is to examine how the impact of power

structures (firm structures, industry norms, and local regulation systems) intersect with gender dynamics and emotional expectations of women-identifying interior designers and how those concepts shape the formation of women commercial interior designers as professionals. In doing so, this study can help to reveal the challenges and social negotiations necessary for interior designers to effectively and meaningfully practice within their field.

This ethnographic study is intended to provide a snapshot of the experiences of a distinct group of people during a specific time and place—a limited group of commercial interior designers working in a handful of multidisciplinary design firms in Colorado. This study isn't meant to generate replicable results that can be generally applied to similar groups of people in other places, but I do draw from previous academic research on similar concepts to help validate my participants' experiences. Still, ultimately, I hope this ethnography will not only serve as a way to express my participants' experiences but also help readers gain some understanding of the day-to-day lives of these designers. This study will create a space where participants' stories and experiences can help to highlight some of the challenges commercial interior designers meet as they navigate their careers and build their professional identities in the context of power and gender dynamics active in corporate structures at this moment in history in the United States. Additionally, I hope that interior designers elsewhere can use the results of this study to validate their professional experiences and possibly incite some positive changes within their firms and project teams. My intention is also to celebrate how these interior designers rise to meet these challenges and strive to create meaningful professional lives.

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To read the rest of the piece and see works cited, please scan the QR code.