

How deep is the rabbit hole? – A deeper exploration of the position of interior design in South Africa

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Abstract: In this paper the movie, *The Matrix*, is used as a reference to the current situation experienced by the interior design profession in South Africa. In particular, reference is made to the scene where the reaction leader Morpheus presents the hero, a computer hacker Neo, with two options. He needs to choose between taking a red or a blue pill. The blue pill will allow him to continue the existence that he knows within the computer simulated world; whilst the red pill will take him on a journey of discovery beyond the world he knows and enable him to explore – how deep is the rabbit hole?

The paper commences with an explanation into the current debates around the identity and position of interior design in South Africa and thereafter attempts to explore a deeper understanding into the role of interior designers in the design sector in South Africa. Through this deeper exploration, the paper attempts to identify the gaps that exist in industry which require the attention of the interior design profession as they undergo a process of professionalization. With this discussion two main research questions are presented. Firstly, what is the matrix which determines the current position of interior design in South Africa? Secondly, what will the interior design profession gain if it explores deeper into the real needs that exist within the industry in South Africa?

The paper is positioned within the context of the interior design profession in South Africa that has undergone drastic change over the past 10 years. This context is briefly explained and contributes to the main theme of searching and constructing identity within a profession that is in a state of flux.

Key Words: Professionalization, identity, retail design sector, South Africa Interior Design Profession

Introduction

The expression 'down the rabbit hole' refers to Alice's Adventure in Wonderland¹. The story commences with a girl, named Alice, that falls down a rabbit hole which takes her on an adventure into an unknown fantasy world – Wonderland. This expression is also used in the movie *The Matrix*² (Wachowski and Wachowski, 1999) when the reaction leader Morpheus presents the hero, a computer programmer and also secretly a hacker - Neo, with two options. Neo needs to choose between a blue and red pill. The blue pill will allow him to continue his ordinary life, whilst the red pill will take him on a journey of discovery beyond the world he knows and enables him to explore – the depth of the rabbit hole. The world that Neo knows is a computer simulation (*The Matrix*). In contrast to Alice, he does not have the opportunity to experience a fantasy world but the realities beyond the computer simulation in which he resides. Neo opted to take the red pill and he found himself immediately in his real body trapped in a liquid-filled pod. Confronted with the immediate

¹ The original novel *Alice's Adventure in Wonderland* was written in 1865 by Charles Lutwidge Dodgson under the pseudonym Lewis Carroll.

² Wachowski, A (director) and Wachowski, L (director). 1999. *The Matrix*. DVD. USA:Warner Bros. Pictures.

angst of reality (the reality as constructed in the story of the Matrix), he starts his journey into the truth of the Matrix.

In my opinion, the Interior Design discipline is at a crossroad in South Africa (SA) and at a point of taking disciplinary decisions that would contribute to the future identity of the profession. This position is compared to the point of decision that Neo faces in the movie, *The Matrix*. A clear decision is required which will either establish the profession further in the super-controlled, monopolised environment of the architectural profession or remove decision makers from this position, beyond the boundaries of the architectural discipline, into the deeper realities of the interior design profession. The paper therefore commences with an explanation of the current debates around the identity and position of interior design in South Africa and attempts to explore a deeper understanding into the real needs identified in industry through focusing on a particular design sector – retail design. With this discussion two main research questions are presented. Firstly, what is the matrix which frames the current position of interior design in South Africa, whilst it attempts to gain professional recognition? Secondly, what will the interior design profession gain if it explores deeper into the real needs that exist within the design sector in South Africa?

Entering the rabbit hole – debates around the position and identity of interior design

An emerging and developing discipline

Interior design is described as an emerging and developing discipline across the world. Over 12 years ago, Lommerse and Spanbroek (1999a)³ performed a comparative study on the developing interior design profession in two commonwealth countries – Australia and Canada. South Africa also forms part of the commonwealth countries and when comparing the history and development of the profession in South Africa to Australia and Canada, some major differences are evident. Firstly, interior design programmes have been offered in both these countries at an undergraduate level since the 1920s in Canada and 1942 in Australia (Lommerse and Spanbroek 1999b)⁴. A gap of at least 30 years is evident between South Africa and Australia undergraduate programme offering. Secondly, postgraduate programmes are offered to a doctoral level in Canada and Australia. Although very few interior design educators are currently enrolled for doctoral studies, none has been awarded this qualification to date. This current situation impacts on the body of knowledge that could empower the profession. Thirdly, in Canada interior designers are acknowledged as part of the building design professionals through a licencing process. Lommerse and Spanbroek (1999a:13)⁵ explains that, 'Their signatures and stamps on drawings submitted for building approval have official status. This gives them a status similar to that of an architect'. In South Africa the interior design profession appears to be very far from achieving similar status, although similar status is urgently requested by interior designers.

A profession under threat

³ Lommerse, Marina and Spanbroek, Nancy. 1999a. Interior Architecture in Australia and Canada. Part one: a comparative study of a developing profession. IDEA Journal: 6-17. <http://www.idea-edu.com/Journal/1999/1999-IDEA-Journal>.

⁴ Lommerse, Marina and Spanbroek, Nancy. 1999b. Interior Architecture in Australia and Canada. Part two: a comparative study of the development of university education for interior designers/architects. IDEA Journal: 18-27. <http://www.idea-edu.com/Journal/1999/1999-IDEA-Journal>.

⁵ See footnote 3.

Research conducted both nationally and internationally indicates that the identity and territory of interior design have been contested both publically and in literature (Cuis, 2009⁶; König, 2010⁷). The search for identity further includes the need to establish a unified professional interior design organization. As foreseen, this process directs severe criticism towards the profession. Since 2009, the editor of Officeinsight Brad Powell, has reported on the need for the profession to create a unified professional organisation in their weekly online newsletter. This weekly newsletter provides a vehicle for people that design and furnish workplaces and it includes their related businesses, professions and markets⁸. After a two year period of reflecting on the position of interior design in the United States, Powell (2011)⁹ presented the following challenge to interior designers in an online newsletter article;

‘Here’s a challenge, and I throw down the gauntlet to all interior designers: Design Your Profession... and start by designing a new unified professional organization. If you don’t, someone will do it for you, for example, architects and the Interior Design Protective Council’.

Powell (2011)¹⁰ presents this challenge to interior designers because he sees the need for qualified interior designers in society. Although he considers the design of a new unified professional system as important, Powell is also aware of the threats that face interior design. He joins the lines of various discussion forums conferences and seminars when he comments on the position of interior design as follows; ‘More and more architects are beginning to ask whether interior design should be just a specialty of architecture and architecture education’ (Powell 2011: n.p.)¹¹.

Similar threats and challenges in South Africa, served as an incentive for interior designers to professionalise the occupation and establish a professional body named, The South African Institute of the Interior Design Professions (IID). In 2004, the South African Council for the Architectural Profession (SACAP) took steps to identify and monopolise architectural work. In a response to this process, the IID was formed in August 2006 (IID, 2006)¹² and indicated from the outset that this newly formed Institute would fall under the SA Council for the Architectural Professions, and therefore within the umbrella of the Council for the Built Environment. Since interior design is not given any formal professional recognition in SA, individuals within IID continued to focus on the professionalization of the occupation. In June 2009, the IID (2009)¹³ announced that the Institute was officially recognized by SACAP as a Voluntary Association. IID (2009)¹⁴ indicated in their press release to members that the voluntarily association with SACAP would allow for the work being done by practicing interior design professionals to be recognized alongside the Architectural Professions. It was a moment of great celebration and many expectations were created through imagining the possibilities that the Voluntarily Association could realise. In 2010, the Department of Architecture at the University of Pretoria and the IID (with collaboration by the Department of Architectural Technology and Interior Design at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University and the Department of Interior Design in the Faculty of Art, Design

⁶ Cys, Joanne. 2009. Finding a space for the practice of interior design. *IDEA Journal*: 20-31. <http://www.idea-edu.com/Journal/2009/2009-IDEA-Journal>

⁷ König, Raymund. 2010. Interior design as architecture's 'Other'. MInt(Research) dissertation. University of Pretoria: Pretoria. <http://upetd.up.ac.za/thesis/available/etd-07272011-143350/> > Interior design as architecture’s ‘Other’

⁸ Officeinsight. 2012. About officeinsight. <http://www.officeinsight.com/about.html>

⁹ Powel, Brad. 2011. A Random Walk: A Challenge To Interior Design: Design Your Profession. *Officeinsight 4.19.11*. <http://www.officesite.com/1345>

¹⁰ See footnote 5

¹¹ See footnote 5

¹² IID. 2006. Formation of the IID. <http://www.iidprofessions.com/press/IID-Formationof IID-Aug06.pdf>

¹³ IID. 2009. IID receives SACAP recognition. <http://www.iidprofessions.com/press/IID-SACAPRecognition-Jun09.pdf>

¹⁴ See footnote 9

and Architecture at the University of Johannesburg), finalised and submitted the interior design registration categories to SACAP (König, 2010a)¹⁵. The categories were drafted using the professional registration categories of the architectural profession as a framework. Three professional registration categories were identified namely: professional interior designer, professional senior interior designer and professional interior architect.

However, in 2011 the relationship between SACAP and IID became strained due to the implementation of SACAP regulations that favoured the architectural profession. The regulatory action taken by the Architectural profession clearly indicated that the interior design profession would not gain the expected professional recognition if it was in association with SACAP. Although, IID is investigating various alternative options at this stage, no final decisions have been made and it is therefore not possible to present an accurate reflection of the status quo in this paper. This process of separation will however be discussed further in this paper.

Architecture's 'Other'

In South Africa the postgraduate studies and research publications of an interior design lecturer at the University of Pretoria, Raymund König, provide insight into the identity struggle that interior design faces in South Africa. König (2010b:2)¹⁶ investigates 'questions concerning the being of interior design' and presents its current position as - architecture's 'Other' which he explains as an unfavourable position. König (2010b:3)¹⁷ includes the construct known as the 'Other' to study the identity of the profession – in particular the relationships between closely related disciplines and the binary positions related to the relationships between these disciplines. In his study interior design is presented as architecture's abject 'Other', where abjection is described as 'the process whereby an object is expelled from a subject without attaining a separate 'Otherness' (König, 2010b:3)¹⁸. The process of separation is described as traumatic, because whilst the new identity is being formed it has only one quality – that of being opposed to the object that it is separating from. This summarises the current position of interior design in South Africa. Due to the external pressures that the profession experiences, in the monopolising of work by the architectural profession, it is forced to focus on the differences and similarities between the professions rather than the unique qualities that will contribute to the establishment of a separate identity.

The philosopher and psychoanalyst, Slavoj Žižek (1999)¹⁹ also includes the construct 'the Other' in his discussions and analysis of the movie, *The Matrix*. Žižek (1999:n.p.)²⁰ explains the Other as follows;

'What, then, is the Matrix? Simply the Lacanian "big Other," the virtual symbolic order, the network that structures reality for us. This dimension of the "big Other" is that of the constitutive alienation of the subject in the symbolic order: the "big Other" pulls the strings, the subject doesn't speak, he "is spoken to" by the symbolic structure'.

¹⁵ König, Raymund. 2010a. The professionalisation of interior design in South Africa. <http://web.up.ac.za/sitefiles/file/44/1026/2163/8121/Innovate%235/The%20professionalisation%20of%20interior%20design%20in%20South%20Africa.pdf>

¹⁶ König, Raymund. 2010b. Interior design as architecture's 'Other'. MInt(Research) dissertation. University of Pretoria: Pretoria. <http://upetd.up.ac.za/thesis/available/etd-07272011-143350/> > Interior design as architecture's 'Other'.

¹⁷ See footnote 11

¹⁸ See footnote 11

¹⁹ Žižek, Slavoj. (1999). *The Matrix, or two sides of Perversion*. *Philosophy Today*; Celina; Volume: 43/ Supplement: Extending the Horizons of Continental Philosophy. <http://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-9912/msg00019.html>

²⁰ See footnote 14

Žižek (1999:n.p.)²¹ further explain that in the theoretical work developed by the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, he struggled to define the action that follows the process of alienation and described it as a separation counterpoint. This process as developed by Lacan is presented by Žižek (1999:sp)²² as follows,

‘[A]lienation IN the big Other is followed by the separation FROM the big Other. Separation takes place when the subject takes note of how the big Other is in itself inconsistent, purely virtual, "barred," deprived of the Thing — and fantasy is an attempt to fill out this lack of the Other, not of the subject, i.e. to (re)constitute the consistency of the big Other’.

It should be explained that in the work of Lacan (Lacan: The mirror stage, 2012)²³ he distinguishes between two constructs of ‘the other’ - the Other (with capital letter) and other (with lowercase). The Other refers to ‘other people’ and in the work of Lacan it also includes systems that precede the individual human being’s existence such as language and the conventions of social life. In the case of interior design the Other is therefore referring to the systems that were put in place by the architectural profession, not only in South Africa but across the world, over an extensive period of time. For this reason clear and strong perceptions exist within society with regards to the architectural profession. The other, with lower case ‘o’, is the Ideal-I that is an image of the ego. In the theories of Lacan (Lacan: The mirror stage, 2012)²⁴ it is explained that in order for the subject to interact with other subjects, the subjects need to employ the language and law systems defined by the Other. In the current debates around the identity of interior design it should therefore be accepted that the interior profession would refer to or operate within the regulation systems already developed by the architectural profession as well as the wider built environment system, in order to have a meaningful existence within the established professional community.

In this paper I argue that the process of separation commenced for the interior design profession in 2006, when it realised that the acknowledgment of a separate identity is of importance to the recognition and survival of the profession. The formalisation of an the interior design professional body (IID) is considered as the point of entry into the rabbit hole which commenced the journey and search into developing and strengthening a separate identity. The rabbit hole is used as a metaphor for a process that describes a search into deeper meaning that could contribute to a stronger professional identity. The profession does not only separate itself from the Other (architecture profession) but attempts to break-away from the network that supports the identity of the Other. In my opinion, this very slow separation process reached a climax in 2011 when the relationship between SACAP and IID became strained and it was evident that interior design would not benefit from remaining part of the “big Other”. Although the architectural network (Matrix) contributes to the identity of the interior design profession, it also attempts to control future development of the identity.

How deep is the rabbit hole? – Exploring the reality of a separate identity

The second research question, presented in this paper, aims to understand the benefits that the interior design profession will have, if professional focus areas (that are not distinctly associated with the dominating architectural matrix), are explored and strengthened. These areas would comfortably form part of a Frame of Work for the profession and could also assist in forming a clearly distinctive interior design identity. In exploring this question, the paper will focus on the outcome of a research investigation done within the retail sector in South Africa by an interior design lecturer at the University of Johannesburg, Ilse Prinsloo (Prinsloo, 2011)²⁵. This research study and the qualities of the retail sector are considered as an appropriate example of an area

²¹ See footnote 14

²² See footnote 14

²³ Lacan: The Mirror Stage. 2012. Accessed February 23, <http://www.english.hawaii.edu/criticalink/lacan/terms/other.htm>

²⁴ See footnote 18

that is not traditionally associated with architecture but mostly with retail management and retail store design. In this research investigation, the aim was to identify the role of interior designers within the South African retail sector and Prinsloo (2011)²⁶ strived to understand the contributions that these designers make towards the retail sector, which is dominated by the business sector. In the literature review Prinsloo (2011) identifies that international researchers consider retail design as a domain that is well-established in the interior design discipline (Murialdo, 2008:2²⁷; Petermans and Van Cleempoel, 2010:22²⁸). The retail sector is also described as a complex, multi-dimensional activity that involves various role players who contribute to the successful development and implementation of a retailer's identity (Mazarella 2010)²⁹. The complexity of the retail design sector therefore indicates that several professionals are involved in the development of a retail identity through strategic brand positioning of the retailer (Quartier, Christiaans and Van Cleempoel, 2008)³⁰.

Retail design in South Africa

Prinsloo (2011)³¹ describes the retail sector as an economically viable and growing sector in South Africa. In 2008, the total South African retail trade sales for textiles, clothing, footwear and leather goods were R96.2 billion (Statssa, 2009)³². Further data from Statistics South Africa (2009:[sp])³³ indicate clothing and footwear retailers contributed a total of 19,2 percent of the total retail trade sales during 2009 - second only to the general dealer retail sector – and this retail market grew at a compounded annual growth rate (CAGR) of 10 percent from fiscal 2005 to fiscal 2010, despite the economic downturn. This growth is mainly due to the expansion of the black South African middle class that have 'more than doubled in size since 2000' (Cobweb information, 2010: n.p.)³⁴.

Retailing in South Africa is dominated by store-based retailing and this sector is controlled by three large holding companies that constitute the greater part of the leading retail brands in the country (Euromonitor, 2009)³⁵. The three foremost South African clothing and footwear retail companies are Edgars Consolidated Stores, Foschini and Woolworths Holdings (Euromonitor, 2009)³⁶. Together these companies make up more than 50 per cent of the clothing and footwear retail sales in South

²⁵ Prinsloo, Ilse. 2011. Interior Designers: Unacknowledged role players in South African retail design. Sixth International Design Education Conference, University of Johannesburg; 7- 8 September

²⁶ See footnote 24

²⁷ Murialdo, F. 2008. Places and Themes of Interiors contemporary research worldwide. Paper presented at the Second IFS International Interior Design / Interior Architecture Conference Edinburgh. <http://www.interiorsforumsotland.com/userimages/Murialdo.doc>

²⁸ Petermans, A. & Van Cleempoel, K. 2010. Designing a retail store environment for the mature market: A European perspective. *Journal of Interior Design*, 35(2):21-36.

²⁹ Mazarella, F. 2010. Interior design: Whole building design guide. http://www.wbdg.org/design/dd_interiords_gn.php

³⁰ Quartier, K, Christiaans, H & Van Cleempoel, K. 2008. Retail design: lighting as an atmospheric tool, creating experiences which influence consumers' mood and behaviour in commercial spaces. Paper presented at Undisciplined! Design Research Society Conference. <http://shura.ac.uk/496/1/fulltext.pdf>

³¹ See footnote 24

³² Statssa. 2009. Statistics South Africa: Statistical release P6242.1 Retail trade sales preliminary June 2009. <http://www.statssa.gov.za/PublicationsHTML/P62421March2009/html/P62421March2009.html>.

³³ See footnote 30

³⁴ Cobweb information. 2010. SA Market Summaries: Clothing retail. Johannesburg: Gauteng Enterprise Propeller.

³⁵ Euromonitor. 2009. Retailing in South Africa. http://www.euromonitor.com/Retailing_in_South_Africa

³⁶ See footnote 33.

Africa (Cobweb information 2010:[sp])³⁷. Combined, these corporate retailers trade in over 3114 corporate and 160 franchise stores and jointly these clothing and footwear retail companies spent R866 million on retail store developments during the fiscal year 2010 (Edcon Holdings 2010:18³⁸; The Foschini Group 2010:35³⁹; Woolworths Holdings 2010:30⁴⁰).

Interior Designers – Unrecognised role players in the retail design sector

In the study conducted by Prinsloo (2011)⁴¹ the following findings were extracted that are considered as relevant to this paper. These findings are;

- It was observed in the research that the respondents that manage the interior design and implementation of retail stores are not qualified in interior designer – or any related design area - but in areas such as marketing, retail management, property management and law.
- The three companies differed greatly in the manner in which they manage retail design as a function. One company incorporates the store design department into marketing while another places it in the operation management portfolio. The other remaining company has their retail design function positioned in the Property Development Department.
- The retail design strategy and design concepts are implemented by different people in these companies. Two companies declared that they use subcontracted companies, usually from abroad, to develop new store design concepts. The respondents indicated that these concept designs seldom relate to the retail environment in South Africa and an in-house revision is required.
- Although the three corporate retailers employ interior designers to perform functions in their store design departments, it is not a prerequisite to have an interior design qualification to design retail stores for these companies. Furthermore, the functions that these interior designers are expected to perform differ greatly from one company to another. Some interior designers only develop concepts for retail stores and display fixtures, while others only produce technical drawings. None of the companies expected any of the interior designers to perform both functions.
- Five respondents did not associate interior designers with the retail design sector and indicated that very few people know the science behind retail design or understand the business of retail design. In this regard the respondents were reflecting on personal experience and opinion.

These findings identify the following viable opportunities which can present the interior design profession an opportunity to develop and strengthen participation within this sector. These are;

- The retail sector in South Africa is dominated by the business sector although international research literature indicates a complex interaction of a far larger group of participants. The involvement and contributions of interior designers should therefore be made known to the sector through intervention and discussions by stakeholders such as the professional body (IID) or higher education institutions.
- The retail sector is a lucrative, economically viable and growing industry. Participation in the retail sector can present financially viable opportunities to interior designers in South Africa rather than subcontracting the projects to international designers who are unfamiliar to the national requirements.

³⁷ See footnote 32

³⁸ Edcon Holdings. 2010. Annual Report 2010.

http://www.edcon.co.za/documents/AnnualResults/annual_20report2010.pdf

³⁹ The Foschini Group. 2010. Annual Report. http://www.tfg.co.za/investor/annual_reports/ar_2010/download/downloads.asp

⁴⁰ Woolworths Holdings. 2010. Annual Report 2010.

<http://www.woolworthsholdings.co.za/downloads/downloads.asp#>

⁴¹ See footnote 24

- The retail sector lacks the participation of qualified interior designers although it is evident that a need for the profession exists. In a study performed by Prinsloo (2011b)⁴² it was identified all the higher education institutions, that has membership with IID, consider retail design as an important component in their curricula. In fact, some institutions indicated that they included a retail design project as early as the first year of study and increase focus and complexity in the third study year. Therefore, although retail design is included in the curriculum of the majority of education institutions in South Africa, interior designers are seldom employed in this sector.
- The sector does not understand the benefits and contributions that interior designers can offer the retail sector. Higher education and the professional body (IID) should further develop training and specialist fields for interior designers in the retail sector and aim to enhance the contributions of interior designers within the sector.

Conclusion

This paper presents a brief description of the identity and position of interior design in South Africa. In comparison to other commonwealth countries such as Canada and Australia, the interior design profession in South Africa is currently in an emerging and developing phase. The paper identifies that the one pivotal aspect that currently creates a state of flux for the interior profession, is its marginal position in relation to the architectural profession. The current overlap of boundaries between the professions threatens the future identity and existence of interior design to the point that interior design can be considered merely as a speciality within the architectural profession.

In the discussion presented in this paper reference is made to the movie, *The Matrix*, in order to formulate a possible solution to the current position of interior design in South Africa. It is identified that the framework and regulations of the architectural profession create the existing system (or *Matrix*) which impacts on the formulation and construction of interior design's current professional identity. In order to break away from this system, the interior design profession needs to venture into a journey of self-discovery and identify the areas that are unique to the profession. Although a complete separation from architecture would never be possible, due to the commonalities that are shared in the building profession, a form of self-expression and strengthening of professional identity is possible.

The retail sector is presented as an example of an area that could present an opportunity for the interior design profession for further exploration. It is identified that whilst retail projects are included in the curriculum of higher education institution, very few interior designers are appointed in this industry. The author therefore proposes in this conclusion that the interior design profession should shift their focus on areas that could benefit greatly from the specialised input of interior designers. This paper focuses on merely one area but many others exist such as shop front, hospitality and exhibition design. It is also suggested that interior designers should extend their interdisciplinary activities with people beyond the building profession and as a profession should call on the assistance of educators to articulate the role of interior design.

⁴² Prinsloo, Ilse. 2011. *The Role Of Interior Designers in Design and Implementation of Retail Stores: The Case Study of Edcon*. MTech: Interior Design dissertation. University of Johannesburg.