

Allan Greenberg

Architects and Interior Designers: A Shotgun Marriage?

ARCHITECTS AND INTERIOR DESIGNERS inhabit distinctively different worlds within a framework defined by architecture. And there's some animosity between our professions: Some architects believe they are better decorators, and some decorators often think they design better houses. In either case ignorance is not only not bliss but the sure road to a second-rate project.

Inspired by the creations of Robert Adam, I believe there is a better way for us to approach our work. Adam, like Karl Friedrich Schinkel, Victor Horta and Gerrit Rietveld, was a rare phenomenon: a brilliant architect and an equally brilliant creator of fabulous interiors. As if this were not enough, he designed furniture, carpets and plaster decorations. To experience his architecture and interiors for Syon House, in London, is to become aware of design peaks most of us have yet to explore. His work is so harmonious, so visually satisfying and understated, that it takes an act of will to notice it all.

But in one respect Adam had it easy: He only had to negotiate with himself. Lesser mortals—most of us—cannot span the divide between the professions and therefore have to rely on others. The realm of architects is the design of houses, the preparation of construction drawings and operations on the building site. Our nightmares are about design changes, construction errors, delays and cost overruns. Interior designers, on the other hand, create furniture and furniture layouts, design draperies and select fabrics, furniture, fixtures and carpets. Their nightmares are about failures of coordination that result in poorly located outlets, light switches and light fixtures; architectural elements and room proportions that interfere with furniture placement; cost overruns; dimensional misunderstandings; and anything that compromises their design and undermines the atmosphere they intend for each room.

A typical distinction between the respective responsibilities of the architect and the



interior designer is that everything integral to the structure and included in the builder's contract is under the purview of the architect. Everything movable is the responsibility of the interior designer. But there are important areas of overlap: lighting, bath fixtures, hardware and wood species and finishes for floors and cabinetry, paint colors and special wall and ceiling treatments. These areas may be contentious and, for the architect, entail legal liability. On a project of mine, the interior designer persuaded the client to use a strikingly designed but very porous bathroom tile. When accumulated moisture caused the tile to blotch, the client blamed me.

The principal of both Allan Greenberg Architect and Allan Greenberg Interiors, with offices in Washington, D.C., New York City and Greenwich, Connecticut, Allan Greenberg is an influential architect and interior designer. ABOVE: Greenberg in his Washington office.

Although a paper trail showed that the client had refused to heed our warnings, the mishap added to the tension between interior designer and architect.

And interior designers have their own horror stories about problems created for them by architects. The antagonism on both sides can infect clients. Fortunately, there are those who, because of friendship,

mutual respect or professional courtesy, work productively together.

The relationship between the two arts is necessarily complex and, truthfully, interdependent. Great interiors add a new dimension to architecture, and great architecture enhances interiors. If this added dimension is something we seek for ourselves and for our clients, we have to rely

on others to help achieve this elusive goal. The challenge is how to combine the intelligence of interior designers and architects so that the sum of their collaboration causes one plus one to equal three. Serious collaboration should produce a bonus that leads to a superior outcome for our clients, one that would be absent if we continued to work with the minimal necessary level of collaboration. Embracing interdependency is surely a more difficult way, more time-consuming, more fraught with contention, but far more stimulating.

The dimensions of this interdependency cannot be defined by a rigid methodology. It will vary, depending upon the participants. To facilitate collaboration throughout a new house or apartment project, an outline of the scope of architectural and interior design work should highlight tasks that mandate collaboration and stipulate

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start and completion dates. Interior designers should be involved from the outset, when clients present their initial ideas for a residence and architects participate in decisions regarding color selection, room character and finishes. These consultations should entail active debates about design ideas and alternatives.

The scope of this alliance should be studied in schools of architecture and interior design through courses on the history of each other's work as well as interdisciplinary design studios whose work is reviewed by teams of architects and interior designers.

And, yes, all this will make our lives more challenging but also so much more exciting. To continue as we are means to remain stuck in a contentious realm that is not in the best interests of our clients or ourselves. The answer to the question, "Is there a better way?" is an unequivocal, "Yes, there is!" □