

Why Shashi Caan Is Overhauling Interior Design Education

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Shashi Caan has two seemingly contradictory aims: to improve interior design education by integrating discourses from other fields, and to establish interior design as a specialty with its own body of knowledge. Caan, who since fall of 2002 has been the chair of the Interior Design program at Parsons School of Design, is eminently suited to question the design canon: She holds a Bachelor's degree in Textiles and Interiors from the Edinburgh College of Art, as well as Masters degrees in Industrial Design and Architecture from Pratt Institute.

After working at Swanke Hayden Connell, Gensler Associates, and Skidmore, Owings and Merrill (the latter as an associate partner), Caan founded her own multidisciplinary firm, the Shashi Caan Collective, in the spring of 2002. Aside from the collective and teaching, she sits on the board of directors for the International Interior Design Association (IIDA) and Interior Designers for Legislation in New York State (IDLNY), the latter of which champions establishing specific standards for being considered a licensed interior designer.

We spoke to Caan after touring the forthcoming New York showroom for carpet and flooring company Mohawk, the interiors of which she is overseeing. Excerpts from our talk follow.

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The Interior Design department at Parsons was founded in 1906, making it the oldest interiors program offered by an American academic institute. How did that history affect your goals for the department?

Parsons has a great history. From the mid-1920s to the 70's you have the who's who of the interior and decorating world graduating from the school. I want to be able to put in place whatever that fosters that in the next decades.

But for me, what's also important is addressing the malaise that is in the interior world today. To do that, we need to look at the future. And the future is: How do we responsibly shape human behavior? How, as designers, do we understand and know our vocabulary well enough to shape behavior? We have these gaping holes in our education. We know nothing about decorating in a rational sense—decorators have an incredible visual literacy, but the average designer doesn't. We know nothing about light and color. We use words that are meaningless. We say we collaborate: none of us really do. We say we strategize: we don't. So part of my job in shaping the interior design department at Parsons is grappling with these issues.

And then, where do interiors sit in the context of architecture? I believe interiors aren't really related to architecture: they existed before architecture. That interior history and theory needs to be recaptured. Not invented, nor shaped, just recaptured.

How do you propose to do that?

The current model of education is based on credits. So you have these stand-alone classes and you have a studio, with the theory that the knowledge you learn in all these peripheral classes comes together in the studio.

Truth is that at age 19 or 20, you don't have the skills to bring it all together. Plus if I want incredible [practicing] designers to teach in my program, there's the flipside that they often don't have a lot of time to spare and are not trained educators. They know how to design, but they don't know how to challenge the students to bring it all together. So there is a series of practical issues that needs to be addressed.

So for right now, I've instituted studio concentrations, whereby you have two different kinds of faculty dovetailing on projects.

What do you see as the difference between architecture and interior design?

The architectural field has been formalized; the same isn't true for interior design. We've borrowed all of our conventions from architecture. So the drawings that we use are the same planes, elevations, sections, and models that are used for architectural methodologies. We have to develop our language, develop our commonality.

I also think the way interior designers represent our work must dramatically change. When architects are designing buildings, it's not feasible to do it any other way than to scale it down into a model.

Interiors, though, are dramatically different. When we are designing, it is possible to use today's technology to have clients stand inside the space. After all, if what interior designers do for living is make experiences, then those experiences ought to be experienced and not seen, especially if a client is to understand them.

So I'm exploring the technological means of projecting an image of a space at full scale. I'm interested in creating something immersive, like a diorama, where you can feel like you are inside the space. I don't know how far we will get with this—the school has no budget for this—but we're trying.

The other thing I'm exploring is collaborating with illustrators, to learn how they use images to tell a story. I also want to collaborate with filmmakers, because that's obvious and yet none of us are doing that yet.

What about working with the number of computer programs on the market that offer a walk-through of a space? Some simulate real-time lighting, depth, gravity, et al.

I want to go full-scale and not monitor because in the monitor, you are still looking at a picture.

There are several big things that happen when you blow up an interior to scale, apart from really feeling like you are inside of it. You challenge the designer to think about connections—how things come together—and to think about textures and materials. The project becomes very real.

The second reason is it makes you think about how to make people feel dignified in the space, feel they know exactly where they are, and that they are the most important element in that space. Plus how do you embody the personality of your client in that space, from corner to corner and vertically, through different rooms and buildings? The interior designer has to do that, because the branding expert or the graphics expert or the architect doesn't. Somebody's got to deal with this realm.

Do you ever have the students do real-life projects?

Yes, we do. This past semester we collaborated with St. Vincent's hospital, where we looked at their rehabilitation unit, and with Starwoods. For the latter, the Starwoods design team talked to our seniors, assigned them a project, visited at intermittent levels, and then juried the finished projects.

Looking forward, what are some of your future plans for the program?

We have started to build a really wonderful faculty. It would be fantastic to get to the level where we have more really thoughtful people who are asking the right questions. Right now, we're not there yet. I'm just grappling to get my arms around how we capture this body of knowledge that's so elemental.

There are a lot of graduate programs in interiors, but they are more like continuing education: There isn't a serious research-based or masters-level one among them. So I'd love to design a base [undergraduate degree program] that is broad but interior design-focused. Then, at the graduate level, come up with a curriculum for a masters degree that dovetails that base, but where different kinds of individuals come in and ask critical questions [about the profession]. That would get it to a whole different platform.

One last thing we haven't discussed is the Interior Design Title Act, a proposed piece of legislature for New York state that would have codified certain education, experience, and examination requirements for those who want to call themselves interior designers. Gov. Pataki vetoed the legislation earlier this year. Would you like to say a few things about the Act?

For interior designers, it's kind of a chicken-and-egg situation: Interior designers don't get taken seriously because the world doesn't recognize them as a profession, and therefore there's no need to elevate the bar of the profession.

I'm very pro-legislation. It's really necessary for the field to be recognized. In New York state, we have a voluntary certification, which is step one. So I can pay a fee, get a state license, and call myself a certified interior designer. I don't have to be trained in interior design, I don't have to be trained in anything.

Then there is someone like me who has three degrees and is passionate about the interior, wanting and struggling to improve it. This other person who has no training can be sitting with me at the same table. That's what's happening.

Plus there is the architecture profession. Architects believe that interior is their domain, and that interiors should never be separated from architecture. They, as stakeholders in the legislation, mandated they wanted to be grandfather in [and be legally considered interior designers] for up to 25 years. So they would not have been affected by our proposed legislation.

In any event, the short and tall of it is, we didn't get the law passed. The governor vetoed the legislation, and we have no idea why. I mean, isn't that a cockamamie thing to do?