

Thinking Critically

In September 2008, the banking industry nearly failed in the United States, resulting in a massive worldwide recession. Some predicted that the economy would take years to recover. What does this have to do with the interior design profession and learning how to *think critically*?

The design and construction industry were particularly hard hit. Homeowners lost their homes to foreclosures. Builders lost the opportunity to obtain credit for construction loans. Many companies went out of business, reducing opportunities for commercial design work. Thousands in the design/build industry lost their jobs or their businesses. Interior designers and design firm owners were faced with critical decisions about how to operate during this challenging time.

Developing critical thinking skills is essential in the complex world we live in today. It is a necessary skill in both your professional and personal life. Thinking critically is what design business owners, practitioners, industry members, and students must do to sustain their positions in the industry through good times

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as well as bad. Every day you must make sense of what is happening amidst an onslaught of information via the media. Who to believe? Who has the “correct” information and ideas? Design professionals must think critically to design projects for clients, grow professionally, and make critical personal decisions. Design firms fail even in good economic conditions.

Thinking critically impacts design decisions made during the project process, the operation of a design practice, and personal decisions. What codes impact the design of an interior? What is the best way to evaluate products that claim to be sustainable? How should a business owner set up design contracts to ensure that the client will pay his bills? How do you know that the information on which you rely is accurate? Where did the information come from?

Answering questions such as these will require thinking critically, as there are few easy answers anymore. The world and the design profession have become incredibly complex. You are bombarded with information from numerous sources. Thinking critically is a vital skill in your daily life and your profession. As you will see, thinking critically impacts many of the tasks associated with the interior design process.

WHAT IS CRITICAL THINKING?

Critical thinking is highly valued by the business community, including, of course, the design professions. Students, entry-level, and practicing designers need to learn to think more carefully and critically. Thinking critically impacts you in many ways, including determining client needs, solving difficult space plans, making business decisions, and dealing with clients and others with interests in the project.

So what is critical thinking? *Critical thinking* “consists of an awareness of a set of interrelated critical questions, plus the ability and willingness to ask and answer them at appropriate times.”¹ It is thinking oriented toward consideration, evaluation, and the synthesis of information, resulting in a decision. It helps you in all sorts of decision-making scenarios and involves:

- Asking appropriate questions
- Sorting out information
- Evaluating options
- Making an informed decision

Of course, not all thinking is critical thinking. When your mind is in “operation,” you are *thinking*, which essentially is active use of your brain. When you decide where to go to lunch, you are engaging in thinking. Agreeing on which events to schedule for the association you belong to involves thinking. Determining which products you would like to specify for a project involves thinking. Of course, some may argue that these examples also represent critical thinking.

You likely will be involved in many issues that will require your ability to problem solve and think through what is happening around you. Making sense about what is going on in the larger scheme of things is important to the interior designer. Events and decisions by others impact the profession and what goes on beyond an individual’s immediate world. Understanding that outside world is central to today’s successful professional.

Critical thinking should not be thought of as criticism or something that is negative in connotation. When you think critically, you are not being asked to find fault with the subject at hand, nor is it assumed that you are looking to do so. Criticism is very

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different from thinking critically. More about this perception appears later in this chapter.

WHO IS A CRITICAL THINKER?

Developing critical thinking skills will help make you a more valuable employee and a more prudent individual. Are you clear about how the legislation of design practice (or the lack of it) impacts your work as an interior designer in your jurisdiction? What will you do when you are certain a colleague behaves unethically? Are you concerned about the lack of direction on the environment? Maybe right now you are thinking only about how to complete the project you were recently assigned in studio or whether to go out with friends this weekend.

Your complex world requires you to seek information and make decisions beyond the most obvious. Your great grandparents didn't have a lot of choices on many of the things that you take for granted today. Deciding where to go to for groceries is an example. If the neighborhood store didn't have it, your great grandparents didn't get it. Today, there are numerous options, with huge selections of products to purchase. Because of this, even which store to frequent involves thinking critically.

Designers are critical thinkers because the many decisions that are made during the process of designing an interior and operating a business are not simple. The vast majority of those decisions directly impact clients and users of interiors. That in itself is an awesome responsibility. Making a wrong choice on fabrics, for example, can affect the health, safety, and welfare of the clients and other users of interiors. Violating local laws by deciding not to obtain required licenses impacts the individual, her business, and her professional standing—and the client.

Critical Thinking Behavior

Someone who is a critical thinker has some basic behaviors. Many behaviors might have been cultivated from childhood. Yet all can be developed over time. Here are several basic characteristics of a critical thinker:

- Be inquisitive and always be open to learning.
- Don't be afraid to ask questions.
- Don't feel self-conscious when you don't know something.
- Objectively evaluate information.
- Don't accept information on face value.
- Realize that quick decisions are rarely correct.

The last one is particularly important in this fast-paced world. Even though they are often demanded, quick conclusions or solutions are rarely the best answer. For example, text message code is easy for young designers to understand. These same messages confuse and frustrate older designers and clients. In the same vein, the first floor plan that seems to work is rarely the best solution. Additional solutions can result in space savings, better traffic paths, or room for more employees.

By becoming a critical thinker, a designer seeks to ask questions about the task or situation beyond previously learned experiences and beliefs. This is true whether it involves a professional issue or a personal one. The goal is to arrive at carefully considered options rather than jumping to quick conclusions.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THINKING CRITICALLY IN INTERIOR DESIGN

Your ability to think critically may be as important to your job as your creative skills. Many readers might argue this. However,

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time and again, employers and educators queried about this important topic report critical thinking as a crucial skill that designers must have in the modern design world.

Solutions to the problems involved in designing any type of interior space are not easy. Professional designers must consider a huge assortment of criteria beyond the stereotypical “picking out colors and fabrics.” Sustainable design, accessibility, product specifications, building codes, the internal environment, the client’s preferences and needs, and on and on, are criteria important in all projects today. Business practices are also impacted. For example, the manner in which the client is charged, accurate financial accounting, legal responsibilities, and employee relations all influence the continued life of a design firm.

On the job, critical thinking helps the designer when faced with objections by the client. Through the course of the project the designer has researched many issues and tried many approaches to the design problem. He or she has evaluated these approaches before presenting them to the client. Finally, the designer is able to present the best alternatives and reduce the impact of emotional decision making. Yet the client might object to the plan, the fabrics, color scheme, or any number of other items and issues related to the project. The designer must step back and critically think and problem solve to move the project along.

Interior design requires complex decisions with the necessity of determining choices that might be ideal, workable, and reasonable. This is commonly due to the budget. A client might desire to have an incredibly designed home with all the best furniture and finishes—the “ideal” great home. The budget just will not handle the costs. A restaurateur may fall in love with design ideas that are “over the top” but can’t handle the extra expenses. The designer’s job is to help the client achieve the ideal workable

and reasonable solution even when the dollars are not available for buying the very best. Being able to think critically helps the designer solve these crucial problems.

Every day, designers must consider information provided by numerous individuals involved in a design project. The information is not always objective. A client might not disclose that the couple is about to get a divorce or the business is on the verge of bankruptcy. A vendor may influence the specification of a particular project based on price increases rather than the item being the “best” for the project.

How do you evaluate the information provided by others? By asking questions, being observant, and evaluating the information related to the needs of the project and client. Thinking critically helps you keep the project on a profitable and effective track.

Creative Thinking

Creativity and *creative thinking* is imagining something new from something that already exists. It is looking for new ways to do something, new answers, or simply changing what exists in one context to a different context that is hopefully better. It might be astonishingly new, as some might say the Apple iPod was when first introduced, or something that is simply better than it was, such as a kitchen remodeled for someone suddenly permanently in a wheelchair.

Creativity is not the same thing as being “artistic.” Some very creative people say they couldn’t draw a stick figure, let alone produce a painting. Yet they create new products and new solutions to old problems, solve difficult business challenges,

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and yes, design interiors. Interior designers naturally consider themselves to be creative thinkers. The purpose of design, they are often told, is to create. Creative thinking is certainly essential to interior design problem solving.

Creative thinking is not the same as critical thinking. Critical thinking involves analyzing and planning and is quite objective in focus. Critical thinking also encourages the application of logic and left-brained thinking. Creative thinking encourages willingness to change and see things differently, generating new ideas and flexibility. It is subjective in focus and is quite right-brained.

Naturally, creative thinking is important for interior designers to solve the problems of their clients. Critical thinking is necessary to analyze and evaluate information that is received from clients, vendors, colleagues, and stakeholders to a project. Today's complex world needs designers and employees in general who have the ability to be comfortable in both worlds.

IT IS NOT CRITICISM

One thing that thinking critically does not involve is criticism. Students are familiar with the concept of criticism, since studio projects are regularly criticized and graded by instructors. When a "crit" occurs, instructors are trying to determine how well the student has accomplished the required tasks and makes objective judgments on the design interpretations.

Let's be clear as to what *criticism* is by looking at a dictionary definition of the word: "criticism: the expression of disapproval of someone or something based on perceived faults or mistakes."²

Criticism of or by leaders, managers, clients, and even peers is not what thinking critically is about. Disapproving of the client's ideas about design might be something you would criticize, but it is not critical thinking. Not being in favor of legislation for interior design practice might be criticism of the concept, but again, it is not the same thing as engaging in a meaningful discussion and thinking critically about the pros and cons of legislation.

Criticism can also end up being mean-spirited, even hurtful. That hurt can come directly from the words used by the person making the criticism or be an internal effect on the recipient. "Sally did a terrible job of presenting to the client," said one design colleague to another. Sally may already feel awful because she knew deep down that she had really blown the presentation.

To repeat, critical thinking is not criticism. It is thinking clearly. It is considering facts. It is looking at options and determining the best course of action or in other ways to make a decision or take a stand.

CONCLUSION

Developing critical thinking skills is essential for design professionals in today's complex world. Obtaining an education in design, learning the skills required in the profession, and gaining an appreciation for the art of design, as well as learning the vast amount and kinds of technical information that apply to design are naturally all very important. They are among the tools that the professional designer needs to critically solve problems for clients. It makes little difference (other than scale, perhaps) whether the project is a large (or small) private residence, hotel, office, or other type of commercial space. Thinking critically expands the designer's value to clients, improves business performance, and indeed makes a better citizen.

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These discussion items and scenario cases require you to use critical thinking to solve one or more problems. In many of these items and cases, you must take the role of a design practice business owner or a practicing designer. There is no *one* right answer to any of these discussion items or scenarios.

1. List some ways critical thinking impacts the work of an interior designer involved in a residential project; a restaurant project.
2. Describe an interaction with a client and designer where critical thinking is necessary to avoid an argument with the client.
3. Explain a situation where you were reluctant to ask one or more questions to clarify an issue or statement you didn't understand (or disagreed with). Was this a person in authority such as a boss or professor? Would that have changed your reluctance at all?
4. Designers are constantly forced to make choices in the products they specify for a client. Locate information and two different fabric samples suitable for seating in a model for an assisted living apartment. Decide which items you think will give the best wear for the use. Be prepared to discuss why you are choosing this item.
5. Try to re-create the decision you made that resulted in the purchase of an expensive item such as a television, computer, or car. What was the process you used to come to the decision you made? Whom did you ask for help? What factors impacted your decision to buy the item you purchased?

Cases for Discussion

1. A man walks into your showroom (or studio) and begins handling expensive accessory items you have displayed. He is dressed in denims that are dusty and dirty, a dirty-looking T-shirt covered by an unbuttoned long-sleeved shirt, and sandals. His hair is mussed, and he has what appears to be a three-day growth of beard. He says, "I'm looking for some crystal items to give to my mother for her birthday. I want something expensive, as it is her 75th birthday."

■ How would you greet this individual? What would your impression of him be?

2. Beverly and Todd are the owners of a six-person interior design firm in a West Coast city. They specialize in high-end residential work, but also have occasionally obtained projects for office spaces. Beverly and Todd have about 25 percent of their studio organized as a retail display space.

They have spent a combined 65 hours over the last three weeks preparing sketches and preliminary product specifications for a residence for a celebrity. The contractor and architect need approved design development drawings and materials finishes within three days to keep the project on schedule. Keeping on schedule is a critical issue for the client.

The designers have met with the client several times, as well as the client's assistant, since they began the project three months ago. During those meetings, they obtained approvals on the project ideas and proposed products.

The client and her assistant have scheduled a meeting with the designers for this evening. The purpose of the meeting is for a final review of sketches, drawings, and specifications. Earlier today, Beverly told the architect she expected to get the

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approvals later today. The architect emailed the contractor to go ahead with the drywall prep work for the wall coverings that Beverly said were being proposed.

That evening, the client came in and out of the meeting (at the client's hotel suite), leaving the discussions to the assistant. Finally, the client sat down and looked at all the samples and screamed, "What the heck are you trying to do to my reputation! This will be hideous! Didn't you hear anything I said during all those other times we talked?"

- What are the issues involved in this case?
- You are Beverly (or Todd). What will you do to resolve this sudden turn of events?
- What information is missing to help you decide what to do?

3. Glenda and John are both very competitive in class. John always gets better grades than Glenda on studio projects. One day, John left his laptop on his desk to go to the sample room to get some fabric items. While he was gone, Glenda looked through his files for the project they were working on. She saw a very creative solution to the part of the project that she was having a lot of difficulty with. She made a fast drawing of the solution and subsequently used the essential elements of that idea in her project. There were two other people in the studio at the time who saw Glenda look at John's laptop.

- If you were one of the other people in the room at this time, what would you do?

NOTES

1. M. Neil Browne and Stuart M. Keeley, *Asking the Right Questions*, 7th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2007), 3.
2. *The Oxford American College Dictionary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 325.