

Interior Architecture in Flanders: Gendered Perceptions and Professional Realities

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Abstract

Like elsewhere in the Western world also in Flanders the responsibility for the interior decoration of the home is seen to be more a responsibility of women than of men. This female gendering of the field carries over into education: the numbers of female students in the interior architecture programs are steeply increasing since the 1980s. Nevertheless the profession itself is rather dominated by male practitioners: the number of men active as professional interior architects roughly equals the number of women, and they tend to receive greater visibility in terms of publications and awards. This article maps these issues on the basis of an explorative survey (November 2012) directed at potential clients of interior architects and on an analysis of some quantitative data regarding the professional culture of interior architecture in Flanders.

Keywords: interior architecture, education, professional culture, gender, Flanders



1. Introduction. More than ever before, it seems, people in Western countries are expected to pay attention to the Interior design of their homes. All kind of different media, especially magazines and television shows, spend a lot of energy in providing people with ideas for their interiors [1]. There is clearly commercial potential in this, since the available budget for home improvement projects is ever becoming larger. There is an ever growing availability of different kinds of furniture, kitchen equipments, wall papers, flooring materials, paint, lighting fixtures etc. in every price range. People appreciate receiving guidance and new ideas, and they consume with great gusto ever more life style programs and magazines.

This frantic focus on the interior generated an increased interest for the profession of interior architecture gets in the spotlight. Nevertheless, in spite of the great amount of attention interior architecture gets in today's media, "the value of interior design is largely undocumented, unsubstantiated, and yet, undeniable" [2]. We can say that the profession of interior architecture, for a great amount of people, is relatively unknown. Moreover for a general public the subtle differences between interior architecture, interior design and interior decoration are hard to recognize, as Sarah Globus mentions: "Our profession has grown beyond decorating, but unfortunately its representation has reinforced its perception as decoration" [3]. In Flanders there is an official difference between an interior designer (interieurvormgever) and an interior architect (interieurarchitect): an interior designer has obtained a bachelor degree (professionele bachelor) whereas an interior architect received a master degree (academische opleiding) [4]. This distinction is not everywhere as institutionalized, but also in Flanders it doesn't give rise to a clearly different professional reputation among the general public.

Historically the decoration of the interior is constructed as a women's job, as is evidenced e.g. by this quote from Elsie De Wolfe: "We take it for granted that every woman is interested in houses [...] And we take it for granted that this American home is always the woman's home: a man may build and decorate a beautiful house, but it remains for a woman to make a home of it for him. It is the personality of the mistress that the home expresses. Men are forever guests in our homes, no matter how much happiness they may find there" [5]. Also in France the upcoming bourgeoisie in the 19th century established clear gender roles, where the female responsibility stretched towards the decoration of the interior [6]. Likewise in Holland, England and elsewhere women were seen as

caretakers of the house [7]. In Flanders three recent publications have analysed how ‘home cultures’ were being constructed in the 20th century. Sofie De Caigny [8] dealt with the interwar period, Fredie Floré [9] with the 1940s and 1950s and Els De Vos [10] with the 1960s and 1970s. All three of them focused on publications and practices that intended to offer guidance and examples of how to live well in a well-appointed home. These publications and practices were mostly initiated by women’s organizations and were addressing women, confirming that also in Flanders the culture of the two spheres [11] was still paramount at least until the late 1970s. Men were only addressed in these publications as helpmates who were to pitch in whenever physical labor was required to carry out DIY-projects proposed by their wives.

There are reasons to assume that this long history of the gendering of the interior as a female interest and responsibility extends into the present: “The magazines [featuring interior design articles] are addressed to and aimed at a female readership, they present articles about other feminine concerns, such as fashion, alongside their features on stylish interiors and, in both, they encourage an identification of women’s bodies with homes and of women’s identities with the development of style. The home also becomes a showcase for the display of possessions, a space of entertainment and a sign of the heterosexual couple’s shared tastes and style” [12]. Against this background, this article sets out to document and map current sensibilities and concerns regarding the gendering of interior architecture and design in Flanders. It is based on the one hand upon an explorative survey that investigates how members of the general public think about the role of men and women with respect to the decoration and improvement of their homes, and on the other hand on a brief inquiry into the professional culture of interior architects, looking for clues about the relative status of male and female practitioners.

2. A survey among the general public. With a small explorative survey we wanted to explore who is thought to be responsible for decorating the home among the general public, and how people feel about possibly hiring an interior architect. In Flanders there is a rich tradition of individual home-building by commissioning an architect, which might imply that also the threshold for hiring an interior architect might be lower than elsewhere. Are there in fact many people that hire an interior architect, or do people prefer to decorate their own homes? And what are their experiences with decorating their interior?

The survey consisted of two parts: a written questionnaire [13] and face-to-face interviews of the questionnaire were people who own or rent a house. The questionnaire was handed out to random customers in a newspaper shop and to the staff of a primary school in Zaventem (Sterrebeek) and Huldenberg (Ottenburg), both places belonging to the region of Leuven in the Flemish-Brabant Province, in November 2012. This way we tried to collect as much information as possible in a short amount of time and this while still having a certain social diversity among the respondents. At the end 305 anonymous people handed in the questionnaire. The results were processed and analyzed with a statistical program (SPSS) [14]. The majority of the respondents were female (more than 60%) and approximately half of them were between the ages of 41 and 60 years.

The second part of the explorative survey intended to supplement the quantitative data gathered through the questionnaire with qualitative data that might facilitate the interpretation. To that end we complemented the questionnaire with some face-to-face interviews. For these interviews three interior architects were randomly selected. Each of them brought us in contact with three or four of their customers. In order to compare, we searched for ten similar families that designed their own interior. In the interviews we asked for their motivations and experiences with interior design.

The analysis of the questionnaire showed that in about one third of the households, women are held responsible for the interior decoration of the house. Only in less than 10% of the cases men are said to take the responsibility of decorating the interior – the other respondents report a shared responsibility. With these results in mind we can say that in more or less 50% of the households both partners make the decisions about the interior decoration together. It is also mentioned that if one of both partners takes care of decorating the interior, in most cases, the other one still has a say in the final design. This division of roles, between men and women, is about the same in the different categories of age. So when we only take the results of the questionnaire into consideration it seems that a majority of respondents no longer sees women as the sole caretakers of the home, since they assume a shared responsibility among partners. We are however still far from a completely symmetrical situation. Significantly, in one third of the cases it is the woman who is reported to take on that role whereas only in 10% of the cases the same is true for men (and these cases turn out to be about bachelors or divorced men). The age old gendering of interior design thus tends to be confirmed, although partners might now be more involved then half a century ago. When we, in the interviews,

asked about the division of tasks we've received a more detailed answer that gives more insight in the statistic results of the questionnaire. These respondents claim that both partners have a say in the interior design of their house but that it is, in most cases, still the wife who does most of the work. She often makes the suggestions and her partner or family give their opinion about it. If they don't like it, it's again the wife or mother that rethinks the whole design. So whereas women might no longer be the sole decision makers, it is still up to them to explore the possibilities, develop proposals and put them up for discussion among the family members.

When we look at the execution of the physical work that needs to be done in a redecorating project (painting, papering, flooring...), we see a different pattern – but also one remarkably consistent with that from the 1960s and 1970s. In almost one third of the households it is the man who takes the responsibility for the physical jobs that need to be carried out. Only about 20% of the respondents hire professionals (painters, plumbers, ...) to take care of these practical matters. Again more than 50% of the respondents answered that the realization of the ideas is a family project. It is significant that for the execution of the interior design 10% of the families hire professional help, whereas only 7% of the respondents chose to hire an interior designer or an interior architect to develop the ideas. Does this mean that the general feeling is that professional builders provide more added value than professional interior designers or architects?

3. Interior architects in the media. The wide-spread presence of interior designers and interior architects in life-style magazines and television shows is experienced by some practitioners as less than beneficial. Whereas they do realize that this popularity contributes to a demand for their services, they nevertheless are not happy with what they see as a distorted image that is presented of their profession. In Dutch speaking Belgium are at the moment several television shows on air. Most of them (for example: 'De Huisdokter' (the house doctor), 'Grootse Plannen' ('Big Plans'), 'Dit is mijn huis' (This is my Home) [15] are broadcasted on 'VIJF' and 'Vitaya', two channels that cater to a mainly female audience, These television shows convey, as in other countries, a fairly stereotypical of interior architecture. Lucinda Havenhand's observations in this respect apply also to Flanders: "In spite of its many efforts to clarify its definition, the public perception of interior design still remains largely askew. Television shows such as *Designing Women*, *Will and Grace*, and now *While You Were Out*, *Trading Places* and *HGTV* perpetuate the image of a feminized, self-expressive, decorative, and superficial kind of interior design" [16].

Most of these shows indeed show only one part of the profession: they show a room that is given a 'make-over' by changing the color, furniture and decoration of it. They only rarely show how interior architects might do a lot more than just changing the color pattern, by readjusting walls, changing room sizes, alter circulation patterns etc. – in fact designing houses from the inside out (in contrast with architect, who often start by designing the exterior). Lisa K. Waxman and Stephanie A. Clemons formulate a similar concern in relation to the image of interior design and interior architecture in the United States: "Currently there are several high-quality, design related television shows, though the vast majority inaccurately depicts the profession of interior design. Developed primarily for entertainment purposes, the inaccurate portrayal of interior designers on television has created a challenge in terms of depicting interior design professionalism and their responsibilities for the health, safety, and welfare of the public" [17].

Television shows often also contribute to the stereotypic image of gay men who have chosen for a career as an interior architect. "These makeover programs (...) are also interesting in terms of their representation of gender and sexuality. They are notably 'macho free' (Medhurst, 1999) and favor the depiction of gay or camp men, both as designers and contestants" [18]. Also 'Queer eye for the Straight Guy' is a show that works with gay designers: "The premise renders gay men 'natural' domestic experts with inherent flair for tasteful domestic styling" [19]. Some people think that this image of male interior architects as most likely gay can contribute to the small amount of men studying interior architecture courses: "Until we eradicate sexism and heterosexism in our society, or change the public perception of our discipline, we will have few male students", Matthews and Hill were told recently [20]. It is indeed possible that because of the "widespread association of gay men with the 'trendy' renovations and aesthetic revitalization of inner city housing" [21] male students hesitate to choose for a career in interior architecture, opting for architecture where such associations are less likely to appear.

4. Educational programs. Since the 19th century the profession of interior architect has come into being [22]. Like other new professions, interior architecture has experienced a number of problems. One of these had to do with the definition of the profession, and with making the distinction between amateur and professional interior architects:

“The discussion of the value of interior design is especially relevant at this time when the marketplace is flooded with an array of people and businesses offering interior design services. The public, understandably, is confused. “My clients don’t understand what I do” is a frequent lament of interior designers” [23]. The confusion is partially caused by flawed communication: for most interior designers and architects it is quite clear what their profession involves, but this relatively clear image is not easily conveyed to the public at large. The image of the profession projected by institutions, organizations and publications is apparently rather diffuse, since they all rely on somewhat different definitions of the field. Lucinda K. Havenhand claims that interior architects and their organizations have worked towards solving this problem: “Interior designers do understand that they have a problematic and often misunderstood identity, although they have worked diligently over the past fifty years to identify and legitimize their field” [24]. An important factor in this process of legitimation is the development of good educational programs for interior designers and architects, next to the establishment of professional organizations [25].

As a scholarly field, interior architecture arguably is still in its infancy –until late in the 20th century it was mostly seen as a practice, a profession that did not necessarily give rise to elaborate theoretical reflections or complicated empirical investigations. Only recently the need is recognized for a better insight into the meaning, role and capacities of interior architecture for the enhancement of the quality of life of inhabitants and users of buildings, and thus for a more research-oriented underpinning of the discipline. A clearer definition of what an interior architect does and a more sophisticated theoretical foundation might enhance the awareness about interior architecture’s role in the built environment (and in people’s homes). The impetus for this most likely will come from the schools, where future interior architects are trained. The development of a good educational program has indeed been the most important factor to define the profession and to create a difference between professionals and amateurs.

In many Western countries, the programs for interior architecture attracted a lot of women. From the very beginning there was, in America e.g., a lot of female interest for these courses. There is a long history of interior decoration being dominated by women. “Throughout the early 20th century, interior decoration was one of the few careers considered appropriate for women to be engaged in outside of the home, as salaried work was largely reserved for men” [26]. Male-dominated architecture and female-dominated interior design have been at odds for years” [27]. Interior architecture was indeed historically constructed as the hierarchically less important counterpart of architecture. This hierarchical positioning, with its gendered overtones, translated into academic curricula which were supposedly less demanding, shorter and more geared towards female students. In Belgium and Flanders, this meant that interior architecture was taught at what are now University Colleges, and not at the university itself (a condition which is changing as of 2013, however, with the current integration of these programs into universities).

In Flanders there are now three different schools which offer a four-year educational curriculum in interior architecture. The program in Antwerp (currently integrated in the University of Antwerp) is the oldest. The first course in the domain of interior design was established during the Second World War in Antwerp [28]. In 1946-1947 this course was transformed into a full-blown five year full-time training program, which was reduced to four years in 1964-1965 [29]. The official title of the graduates became ‘interior architects’ as of 1977 (to the chagrin of many architects) [30]. The other schools in Hasselt and in Gent started courses in interior design in respectively 1955 and 1961 [31]. Also these two programs now offer the degree of ‘interior architect’ and are being transferred to the universities of Hasselt and of Leuven [32]. Given the specific history of especially the Antwerp school, established to offer young men training opportunities that protected them from being drafted as forced laborers by the Germans [33] it is not surprising to find that it catered more to male than to female students in its initial phase. According to Dirk Laporte [34], the number of students and graduates remained rather low until the 1970s, with consistently more male than female students. In 1973 for example, 11 students graduated: 8 men and only 3 women [35]. Somewhere in the 1970s this pattern changed dramatically: the amount of female students in 1980 had increased to 70% of the student body [36]. In the last five years (2008-2012), according to the numbers we received from the different schools, 740 interior architect students graduated, among whom 607 women (82%) and 133 men (18%). That means that since the 1980s the student population has been solidly and dominantly female – which is consistent with international tendencies.

5. A female-dominated profession? The dominance of female students in the educational programs however does not translate into a similar pattern within the profession. Whereas since the 1980s women make up the large majority of students and graduates in Flanders, the profession itself apparently has not been feminized to the same extent.

Although it is difficult to get an accurate picture on this point, a series of observations point to the fact that male, disproportionately more than female, graduates end up as important figures in the professional field.

First of all: not all graduates enter the field of professional practice as self-employed interior architects, since many of them rather opt for a low-profile job as employee in a firm, or use their talents in another field. Dirk Laporte estimated in the 1990s that only around 30% of graduates start working as interior architects [37] – and we have no reason to assume that this figure has changed very much in recent years. It seems however that among this 30% there might be proportionally more males than females. Given the dominance of women among the graduates, one would expect them to be overly represented among practitioners, but this is not the case. The results of our survey indeed showed another pattern: surprisingly, among the 23 families that reported hiring an interior architect, 12 worked with a male one and only 10 employed a female (1 family hired a firm). If the 80%-20% proportion would have transferred to the profession, one would have clearly seen other figures. Because of this remarkable result we tried to find some more statistics with the help of three small-scale explorative inquiries. First we looked at the interior architects who have an office in the city of Leuven or its surroundings and who are a member of the professional organisation AiNB [38]. Second we searched in the same region for male and female interior designers/architects in the telephone book [39]. And lastly we looked at how the work of male versus female practitioners was featured in publications.

For the region around Leuven, the AiNB has more female than male members: 10 female vs. 7 male interior architects. These numbers are likely if you look at the proportion of male to female graduates. But when we take the results of the other two small scale sample surveys into consideration we see some other results. Both inquiries showed a dominance of male over female practitioners. According to the telephone book, there are more male than female interior designers/architects who working as a professional in the region of Leuven: we found 7 female vs. 16 male practitioners. Similar results were found by checking out some magazines and books. These publications show a lot more designs of male interior designers/architects. For example: “Villas”, a Belgian biannual magazine, showed in the period between August 2011 and February 2013 projects of 16 male interior designers/architects, whereas only 7 designs by female authors were discussed. Another example is “Contemporary interiors of trend-setting interior architects” [40]: this book, published in 2010, included the work of 14 trend-setting, inspiring designers, 11 of whom were men. Because two other interiors were designed by a firm, there was only one design entirely made by a female designer.

If we add up all statistics of the different surveys we can say that it seems likely that there are at least as many male as female interior designers/architects. The visibility of the latter in magazines and publications is moreover quite poor: when it comes to getting recognized by peers and gatekeepers for doing cutting-edge and innovative work, many more men than women come to the fore – up to the point that the proportion of male versus female presence is reversed into 80%-20% (in contrast with the 20%-80% representation among the students). Although we cannot claim that these findings are the result of extensive and solidly constructed surveys, they are surprising enough to be considered symptomatic. Even if the overall figures would deviate with 10% or 15% from the ones we discovered in our small-scale probes, they still would show a disproportional dominance of men over women within the profession. What might be the reasons for this? The literature states several. In ‘The state of the interior design profession’ [41] it is mentioned that, for women more than men, it is hard to combine a job as an interior architect with a family: “The practice of interior is deadline-driven and often deals with substantial projects budgets. This can mean long hours of work that take time away from family and personal life” [42]. Of course there are a lot of professions where this is the case, but one of the architects we interviewed told us that she had chosen to work for an interior design firm so that, in normal circumstances, she knows she finishes her day at 5 p.m. and can spend the evening with her family – which confirms this reasoning.

Another reason that these authors quote as an example is that “there still is a pervasive assumption by those for and with whom we (*female interior architects*) work that, ‘because you are young and female, you probably don’t know what you are talking about’. Gender inequality is clearly present in the profession of interior design, and is perhaps the most pervasive bias because it affects half the population” [43]. It is also possible that in fact a lot of female interior designers are working as an interior designer/architect but as an employee. Debora Emert said: “I venture a guess that the majority of employees in interior design firms are female. But, this is not true in the upper ranks of firms’ management, which have been male dominated since interior design organized as a profession over 50 years ago. When you look at the majority of top design firms over the past 30 years, most were founded by men, and most are still managed by men” [44].

The first two reasons can explain why a number of women do not start a career as an interior architect, but for example start working in an interior shop or for a design firm. The last reasons may explain why there are so many designs made by men in magazines and books. It is possible that many of these designs are made by a design team and that these teams are led by men. The teams most likely consists also of female designers, but when the design is published most of the time only the name of the firm or the design team leader is published. Like us, Debora Emert is bound to observe: “that although the interior design management is male dominated, the majority of interior designers graduating from Council of Interior Design Accreditation (CIDA) accredited interior design programs are female” [45] (Emert, 2010). This discrepancy is arguably sharper in the field of interior architecture than it is in other fields – although e.g. the discipline of architecture displays similar disproportions [46].

Conclusion. It has often been argued that interior architecture as a field is gendered feminine. Our exploration of the situation in Flanders on the one hand confirmed this idea, but also generated contradictory evidence. We examined through a questionnaire filled out by 305 respondents whether long-lasting ideas about gender roles are still abound in Flanders with respect to interior decoration and design. This appeared, in many situations, to be the case: women are often still expected to take care of the interior design of their house, although the decision making usually is shared with husbands and family members. The role of men in and around the house, in general, might have changed more than the role of women. Whereas in the past it was expected that men were mainly engaged as breadwinners and for providing labor in 'do it yourself' projects, they are now reportedly more involved in making plans and in discussing ideas for home improvement projects. Today more and more Flemish couples indicate that they decide together on the interior decoration of their home and also the execution of the necessary work is a family project. Still the responsibility for the decoration of the interior of the home is ascribed more to women than to men – a real symmetry in this respect is clearly not established. From the interviews the dominant impression was that many men are quite content with the role they play – where it is only expected from them to give their opinion on the ideas that their partner has developed, and to help execute them. Despite the fact that many women in the private sphere of the home still take the lead in designing the interior and that a lot more women than men graduate as an interior architect, we still found that the professional world of interior design is dominated by men. Whereas it might not be surprising that there are so many female students in interior architecture in Flanders (consistently around 80% since the 1980s), given the gendered associations of the field, it is counterintuitive to find that the actual professional reality is dominated by men. There are at least as many male as female interior architects, and these male practitioners are disproportionately visible in professional publications. That means that the gendering of the field continues along historically long established lines – the interior being a feminine rather than a masculine concern – except for the very top of the field, where clearly men are setting the tune. One cannot help being reminded of cooking – also a largely female chore as long as it concerns an everyday kind of commitment, but the contested territory of men once it is publicly valued as ‘gastronomy’.

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