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COURSE FOCUS

The science of utilising space

By SRIMAYEE SEN SARMA

TO many, interior design means arranging the interior of a space in a way that is pleasing to the eye. In reality, interior design is much more than furniture arrangement or aesthetics. To make a space more practical, safe and more delightful, is a combination of art and science.

Look around the room you're in. Notice the way the furniture is placed, location of the ventilation outlets and lighting fixtures. If the room has adequate lighting, is airy and the furniture does not get in your way, it was probably arranged by someone with some sense of interior design.

With modern living pushing for people to live and work in more confined spaces, the demand for good interior design is on the rise.

It takes more than just artistic skill

According to Sharifah Suzana Syed Hassan, honorary secretary at Malaysian Institute of Interior Designers (MIID), unlike what many aspiring students believe, designing is only a small part of interior design.

She says, "Understanding material, colour matching, construction and project management are some equally important aspects of a career in this field."

Siti Zaahira, an interior and furniture designer, agrees, and emphasises the need for good communication skills.

"Having artistic vision and an amazing design idea is all good, up until the time comes to sell the idea. That's when communication skills come into play. As an interior designer, it helps to have good communication skills and deep understanding of a subject to educate and sell ideas to others.

"My advice to aspiring students would be to hone their

Your job scope as an interior designer can be wide and far-reaching, so make sure to explore different areas of the industry. Who knows, you may just find your niche.

presentation skills, both verbal as well as visual. Learning how to market ideas well to people is a skill that comes in very handy in this field," says Siti.

Taking note of the importance of communication skills and seeing how Malaysia is a multicultural and multilingual country, understanding different languages would be an added advantage for people looking to market their skills.

She adds, "You will work with difficult people, from clients to contractors. Things might go wrong, too. Hence, it is important to learn to deal with people, manage time and exercise patience."

As with any other career, interior designing comes with its own set of challenges. Since this is a consumer-centric field, one of the biggest challenges is dealing with clients, balancing between their requests and personal design preferences, ideas and industrial trends.

"Tight budgets and deadlines set by clients can hinder creativity, which can be frustrating. While it is important that designs be

practical and logical, tying down the creativity of interior designers with typical styles and traditions is commonplace, and this can happen often when dealing with conservative clients," says Siti Zaahira.

MIID council member Teo Kui Soon agrees that dealing with clients with a more traditional mindset can be testing for professional interior designers, but he also mentions some other equally challenging roadblocks, such as material availability and affordability as well as the unavailability of advanced machinery to support more advanced detailing.

"The other barriers are the requirements that interior designing graduates must fulfil, such as registering with the Board of Architects Malaysia (LAM) before they can call themselves interior designers. There are also the requirements under the Uniform Building By-Laws 1984.

"These are just some of the rules and regulations that interior designers in Malaysia need to know and abide by before they can operate in Malaysia," adds Teo.

At present, sustainability is the next big thing and future interior designers are expected to keep up with these changing trends. In fact, using sustainable and green materials for interior designing is a challenge that every new and experienced interior designer must face as the world progresses towards becoming more eco-friendly.

Assoc Prof Dr Zalina Shari, acting head of the Department of Architecture at Universiti Putra Malaysia, is optimistic about how future Malaysian interior designers will fare. "It is more probable that students who undertake professional degrees with accreditation from LAM have what it takes to design sustainably (environmentally, economically and socially) because LAM requires architectural curricula to be integrated with not only design, but also environmental, technology, and culture courses."

Assoc Prof Zalina highlights technology as another trial that future interior designers will face when they enter the workforce. With more and more interior designing firms embracing virtual and augmented reality to demonstrate the look of their design ideas to clients, professionals who do not update themselves with the latest technology and design tools stand to lose potential business.

Not just space decorators

Siti Zaahira explains how interior designers can get into a number of different fields of work and she is all praise about her scope of work.

"Working with a furniture and soft furnishings company introduced me to a different field of interior design, which I found equally enjoyable. While I may have graduated with a course in interior design, my work now is focused on developing new furniture designs for projects and retail.

"Universities and design schools now offer courses in furniture and product design and are worth looking into because furniture design is an area that requires detailed understanding of workmanship, materials and design," she adds.

According to Sharifah Suzana, other careers for interior design graduates include retail display designer, colour consultant with paint companies, project manager in designing spaces and illustrator.

She also advises students keen on pursuing this as a career to not just concentrate on the destination and instead focus on the journey because continuous learning is a crucial part of interior designing.

"Be prepared to work hard. Be a sponge and absorb information because every day is a learning experience in this field," she stresses.

All said and done, Siti Zaahira believes that interior design is a very fulfilling career. "It is an exciting process, from brainstorming ideas and experimenting with colours and textures on different mood boards, to educating the clients about it, because it is important during this stage that clients are impressed by the choices you are presenting on the mood board and are on the same page with you.

"Then there is the conceptualising stage, which is always the fun part, and ultimately the satisfaction of seeing your work validated and appreciated. All this and more makes for a career that is satisfying to say the least."

There can be nothing more pleasing than seeing one's ideas taking shape and garnering the appreciation of people. Interior designers are more than just artists because they also apply science to create a well-designed space that is both practical and aesthetically pleasing. If you think this is attractive, consider this as a career option.



Designing a space takes more than just an artistic eye; it also requires interior designers to understand material, colour matching, construction and project management, among others.