PERSPECTIVE
DECOLONIZING INTERIOR DESIGN EDUCATION

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According to McKinsey & Company, companies in the top quartile for gender or racial and ethnic diversity are more likely to have financial returns above their national industry medians, building a competitive advantage in an increasingly diverse marketplace (Hunt, Layton, & Prince, 2015). Efforts to increase diversity are now embedded in many higher institutions' missions and initiatives, including programs of interior design. Such efforts are grounded in devising ways to increase the perspectives and experiences represented across gender, race, ethnicity, religion, economic background, geographical origin, sexuality, age, and ability.[1] Infusing cultural aspects of space in interior design curricula, the area of my work, is also endorsed by CIDA standards (Council for Interior Design Accreditation), such as Standard 4f (2020, p.16), which talks about "developing multi-cultural awareness."

Operating according to the premise of diversity, however, is not immune to controversy. Skepticism surrounds several of the concept's foundational positions. Take for example, the categories that typically represent diversity, such as race. According to the U.S. Census (n.d.), White is "a person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa." This broad category obscures differences such as the religious needs of Muslim veiled women or the trauma rendered by colonialism, war, and displacement in stories like mine. Similarly, increasing numbers of people from underrepresented groups does not inherently imply increasing representation, as power differentials can mean that people might not feel confident to voice their opinions. And lastly, diversity does not necessarily translate to connections and engagement—new forms of segregation might appear as counter-spaces of resistance that enable students of color to maintain a strong racial sense of self (Carter, 2007).

In this paper, I argue that concentrating on the notion of diversity is not enough. We, the interior design education community, can no longer avoid the tough questions, those that are lodged in the boxes and categories to which people are assigned. Instead, our metrics should be relative to the expectations we have for ourselves and the communities we hope to build. My goal here is to explore how far the concept of "decolonizing interior design education" can take us. In fact, The Open University identified decolonizing the curriculum as one of the top trends likely to influence teaching over the next 10 years (Ferguson, et al., 2019) and universities around the world are now trying to decipher the meaning and direction that "decolonizing" implies (Swain, 2019).

UNPACKING DECOLONIZING

According to Bong Joon-ho, the South Korean filmmaker behind *Parasite*, the spatial division afforded by stairs can act as a metaphor for the separation of class: the haves and have-nots, those that matter and those that do not (Nulf, 2019). As a refugee and an immigrant in the United States, my quest to map the "staircase" is a testament to the scars of colonization that have always marked my life.

Cyprus gained its independence from Great Britain four years before I was born–in 1960. The stories of what it took filled my childhood days–from school-age youth participating in riots to unfathomable loss of life and uncertainty. One of the first poems my father taught me to recite was that of Evagoras Pallikarides (1938–1957), a 19-year-old who was hanged for assaulting a

British soldier in defense of a helpless friend. He wrote this poem in jail while waiting for his execution:

> "*I will take an uphill road*
> *I will take paths*
> *to find the staircase that leads to freedom.*"

The staircase Pallikarides so eloquently and tragically referenced in this poem more than six decades ago is hauntingly relevant today as noted by Joon-ho. The struggle that ensued as Greek Cypriots navigated building a country and a nation was (and is) loaded with questions about our language, history, religion, ethnicity, and even the ability to craft our future. Muddling

Figure 1 This Xylotymbou school, designed and built by my great-grandfather Panagis Hadjiyannis in 1924 (1880–1962), is an example of how architecture could help reaffirm the island's Greek heritage during colonialism. Photo credit: Tasoulla Hadjiyanni

our efforts, the perception of "inferiority" instilled during colonialism could not be easily over-come[2] (Figure 1).

My pursuit of identity and belonging translated into my becoming an advocate for *Culturally Enriched Communities*, healthy and connected communities in which everyone can thrive (cec-design.com). For many years, my focus has been on accounting for the role of interiors in the production of inequality and marginalization in why we teach, what we teach, how we teach, where we teach, whom we teach, and who teaches (see Hadjiyanni, 2019 for a more detailed discussion). In spite of the pedagogical tools I can draw from, exposing students to the ways by which power differentials intersect with the design of interiors still puzzles me: How can I move beyond the "us" versus "them" paradigm? How can I foster connections between the past, present, and future that are relevant to students' lives? What kind of lectures and assignments can I structure that would propel students to unravel questions around race, gender, and power? And, with mostly White female students from the upper Midwest in my classes, how can I teach about inequality and marginalization in a way that is meaningful to all?

Keele University (n.d.) defines decolonization as:

> "…identifying colonial systems, structures and relationships, and working to challenge those systems. It is not 'integration' or simply the token inclusion of the intellectual achievements of non-white cultures. Rather, it involves a paradigm shift from a culture of exclusion and denial to the **making of space** [emphasis added] for other political philosophies and knowledge systems…."

Decolonization is a process, one that is inseparable from questions of power and the implications of power differentials in people's lives. Unlike diversity, decolonizing compels all of us to take a stand as it calls for identifying systems of exclusion as well as working to change them. Being action-oriented, decolonizing nurtures graduates who are equipped to become agents of change, ones who connect with others, identify issues or concerns, and devise action plans. As a verb, decolonizing is a way of being and thinking in the world that encompasses all educators do—it is not a list of initiatives that can be undertaken on the side. In short, decolonizing re-centers the conversation away from *who* is around the table to the systemic forces that reproduce inequality and marginalization (see Hundle, 2019). Below, are four steps that can help us begin to chart a trajectory toward decolonizing interior design education.

ASSESS THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Theoretical constructs that examine interiors' role in exclusion alongside their capacity to inform social and political movements are central to decolonizing efforts. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Decolonising the Mind* (1986) advocates for African literature to be written in African languages as a means of expanding the mental space of those who lived through colonization. Others followed in his footsteps and added artistic forms such as song and performance to intentional acts of decolonization and recognizable signifiers of pan-African identity (Carter-Ényì & Carter-Ényì, 2019). Looking at interior design education through the lens of "decolonizing the mind" implies using theories that enable us to steer away from the "object" qualities of interiors so we can expand on their role as social, economic, and political commentaries.

Architecture's tendency to conceal spaces of domestic labor, securing divisions of class, gender, and race through invisibility can be a catalyst for thought (Escobedo, 2019). Walking through the Aiken-Rhett House in Charleston, South Carolina (1820), we can articulate how plantation architecture shaped the slave worldview. Using Frederick Douglass's autobiographies, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and *My Bondage, My Freedom*, David Lemke (2019) argues that "within the space of the plantation, slaveholders distort and limit slaves' imagination about life beyond slavery" (p.23). Plantations acted as "little Nations," depriving slaves' knowledge of the outside world and restricting their desire for a better life through a "forced ignorance" of what life could be. High walls enclosed the backyard where the slave quarters were located while the side stairs that connected the kitchen to the home's main dining room were a physical rendering of two worlds that were both connected and separated.

CAPITALIZE ON IMMERSIVE EXPERIENCES

Immersive experiences can provide students the traction needed to embark on self-reflection and explore how power relates to their story. A fascinating and promising study showed how a 10-minute conversation helped people envision the prejudice transgender people face by thinking back on the times they might have felt injustice. These dialogues reduced prejudice for at least three months and increased support for laws that protect against discrimination, even when people were presented with counterarguments for such laws (Broockman & Kalla, 2016). In the course *Design and Globalization*, my students engage with immigrant and minority groups to create digital stories that are part of The Mapping Resilience Project (Hadjiyanni, n.d.), a repository of everyday adaptations of interiors from the Greater Minneapolis/Saint Paul region—from markets to clinics, museums, and restaurants.

Sanjoy Ganguly (n.d.), one of the founders of India's Jana Sanskriti Centre of Theatre of the Oppressed wrote about theater, "…the journey from 'I' to 'You', from 'We' to 'Them,' lies at the heart of interaction" (p.11). The stories of groups of people such as Native Americans, African Americans, and Hispanics are often told from a narrative of failure, one that is accentuated through a language choice that dwells on words such as disparities, gaps, and interventions. Dance and theater performances can act as counter stories, stories about resilience and perseverance that redirect a student's attention toward the formation of stereotypes in a way that can be missed in a book. A decolonized interior design curriculum is, therefore, interconnected to decolonization efforts throughout the University. Interior design courses at the University of Minnesota rely on free tickets for the Northrop Dance Series and performances by Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and A.I.M by Kyle Abraham to help ignite students' intuitive consciousness.

RECOGNIZE THAT WE ARE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER

Much of the literature documents the benefits of decolonizing pedagogies and curricula to students of color who are empowered to re-define success, sustain cultural integrity, and contribute to their communities' needs (Kanu, 2011; United Nations, 2003; Watson, 2019). If we are to move beyond the "us" versus "them" paradigm, however, we must recognize that the responsibility of creating healthy and connected communities in which everyone can thrive falls on all of us. In a decolonized curriculum, interior design educators are called to assert that "We are all in this together." "The making of space" in a curriculum is, therefore, an invitation to slow down, to be intentional in how we bridge the local and the global along with the ways by which we purposefully examine whose stories we are focusing on and which ones we are leaving out.

Decolonizing is a form of manifestation for studies that point to how the stress effects of losing one's cultural connections and sense of continuity carry forward for generations (Fullilove, 2004; Hadjiyanni, 2002). A poignant reminder of our history course's colonial roots is the date in the title —"History of Interiors and Furnishings 1750–Present". The year 1750 is an expression of history being viewed through the prism of European emphasis on this side of the Atlantic, nullifying the thousands of years prior to 1750 that this land was home to American Indians. The U.S. Department of Arts and Culture (n.d.) calls on "all individuals and organizations to open public events and gatherings with acknowledgment of the traditional Native inhabitants of the land." In a state that is home to seven Anishinaabe (Chippewa, Ojibwe) reservations and four Dakota (Sioux) communities, we pause to reflect on how and when American Indian experiences enter our curricula and reading lists. How would our understanding change if we talked about indigenous stories independent of European colonization of the Americas? What would it mean to examine the history of the United States from an Indigenous perspective?[3]

On the first day of class, we honor and acknowledge the land and indigenous people. One of the digital stories created in *Design and Globalization* fills the room with the healing sounds of the drum as a group of Native Americans gather in the Indian Health Board clinic in Minneapolis and under the guidance of Michael Norcross, they reclaim temporal, spiritual, and cultural connections (Carter, Clinite, Poole, & Whittaker, 2019) (Figure 2). Forced assimilation and forced

Drumming provides spiritual healing benefits that revitalize identity.

Figure 2 American Indian drummers at the Indian Health Board clinic. Photo Credit: Carter, Clinite, Poole, & Whittaker, 2019

acculturation have taken a toll on our Native communities who face some of the widest health, income, and educational disparities in the state. In Minnesota, the rate of death among American Indians is two to three times higher than Whites of the same age except for the elderly (Minnesota Department of Health, n.d.). Students proposed design interventions that underpin using spiritual healing practices in mental health approaches and treatments.

INTERROGATE PRACTICE, POLICIES, AND PROCEDURES

In a decolonized affordable housing studio, students are authorized to ask: Who determines where affordable housing is built? Why are so many people paying more than they can afford on housing (Harvard University, 2019)? And, how are policies dictating what a family or a household looks like? Critiquing occupancy standards used in the design and planning of residential environments enables students to interrogate how the "norm" came to be and why it can be exclusionary. In Minneapolis public housing, the maximum occupancy limit for a 2-bedroom unit is four people, for a 3-bedroom it is six people, and for a 4-bedroom it is 8 people (MPHA, 2016). Narrowing down to two people per bedroom sidesteps extended families, an instrumental means of adaptation and financial security for numerous members of new immigrant groups (Hadjiyanni, 2019).

A similar critique can take place in a decolonized materials class that serves as a forum for exploring colonialism's aftereffects and continued impacts. Along with examining the material properties for designing building systems, elements, and components, students examine whether those materials are ethically sourced or tied to forced labor, human trafficking, and environmental destruction both in the U.S. and abroad (Kim, Colicchia, & Menachof, 2018).[4]

In closing, decolonizing transcends diversity initiatives as it centers on identifying systems of exclusion as well as working to change them. Decolonizing implies creating shared spaces for dialogue, learning, and collaborative action in all we do, ones that penetrate into the question of how power relations dictate who is at the top and who is at the bottom of the staircase and why. With that knowledge, faculty, students, and design practitioners are empowered to take action and challenge institutional and societal structures that perpetuate inequality and marginalization. Interior design educators can: a) create support networks to orchestrate synergies along with critical and riveting discussions on how to decolonize interior design history curricula—from the titles of our courses to the theoretical frameworks we use and the partnerships we make; b) collect best practices to share; and c) advocate for CIDA standards that attest to the evolving, dynamic, and ever-changing qualities of our perceptions and assumptions and the need for action. For Standard 10-History, how would our nurturing of global citizens change if instead of "understand," Student Learning Expectations

channeled attention to "critique"—"**critique** the social, political, and physical influences affecting historical changes in design of the built environment" and "**critique** significant movements, traditions, and related theories" (CIDA, 2018, p.II-24)? Critique implies analysis and assessment; it asks educators and students to take a stand and decide if they are committed to a shorter staircase.

ENDNOTES

[1]The field of interior design can illustrate the numerous opportunities that lie ahead. Predominantly female (88.19%) and White (65.64%), the interior design student body has little representation from groups such as Hispanics (9.53%), Asian or Pacific Islander (6.88%), Black (6.74%), and American Indian or Alaskan Native (0.72%) (CIDA, 2017). Solutions proposed range from diversifying the faculty and offering underrepresented youth earlier exposure to design programs to active recruiting, mentoring, and support systems once there (Anthony, 2007; Sutton, 2017).

[2]David and Okazaki (2006) devised the term "colonial mentality" to capture the perception of ethnic and cultural inferiority among Filipinos, a form of internalized oppression, that results from centuries of colonization, "an automatic and uncritical rejection of anything Filipino and an automatic and uncritical preference for anything American" (p. 241).

[3]Power's study of Australian Palawa buildings (2016) reveals how the built environment could be entangled in colonial narratives: "The failure to "see" or recognize buildings and inhabitation of place contributed to the notion of *terra nullius*, meaning land belonging to no one, and the dispossession of Australian Indigenous peoples of their lands" (p.20).

[4]See also, the State of California Department of Justice's (n.d.) *Transparency in Supply Chains Act* whose purpose is "to educate consumers on how to purchase goods produced by companies that responsibly manage their supply chains, and, thereby, to improve the lives of victims of slavery and human trafficking."

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