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Negotiating interior design's contextual relevance: Redefining the role of interior design in contemporary South African society

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Abstract

Interior design in South Africa has largely been shaped by hegemonic trends from the Global North, resulting in a practice that often prioritises aesthetics and function over cultural relevance. This approach neglects local spatial concerns and fails to incorporate cultural nuances, limiting the discipline's potential to address societal needs and contribute to cultural preservation within the African context. While "African" design has gained visibility, it remains largely superficial defined by decorative cultural symbols rather than by meaningful cultural practices or spatial traditions. Frequently curated by non-African designers and driven by global visual cultures, these representations reinforce reductive and biased interpretations of African design. Consequently, interior design is often perceived locally as a practice centred on visual consumption, rather than as a medium for cultural expression and social engagement. In response to these challenges, this study interrogates how South African educational institutions and professional bodies perpetuate Eurocentric design standards. It introduces decolonial and context-responsive frameworks as critical tools for reimagining interior design pedagogy and practice. These frameworks prioritise indigenous knowledge systems, participatory processes, and community agency, drawing inspiration from emerging non-institutional platforms such as the African Life-Centred Design (ALCD) manifesto, Interior Identities, the Research Collective for Decoloniality and Fashion (RCDF), and Andani Africa. Through literature reviews and case study analysis of design briefs from a Private Higher Education Institution (PHEI), this research highlights both the challenges and opportunities of incorporating culturally relevant pedagogies into interior design education. The study reveals that while some educational institutions have begun integrating social design and active citizenship into their curricula, engagement with decolonial perspectives remains insufficient. By applying the principles of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), the research advocates for curricula that prioritise cultural relevance, critical reflection, and inclusivity. It argues that meaningful transformation in practice must begin with education through pedagogies that challenge dominant narratives and equip emerging designers to be socially responsive and culturally grounded. In this way, interior design can shift from producing globally influenced yet locally detached spaces to creating artefacts that celebrate, preserve, and generate contextually resonant design languages. Ultimately, the study calls for a redefinition of interior design as a socially embedded, culturally resonant practice capable of addressing South Africa's complex spatial and socio-political realities.

Keywords: Interior design pedagogy, decoloniality, context-responsive design, cultural relevance

Introduction

According to the International Interior Design Association (IIDA 2024), interior design creates environments that respond to and protect human needs, contributing to uplifting humanity and civil society (IFI, n.d.). South African higher education programmes commonly aim to train designers who navigate the intersection between human behaviour and spatial structures. Interior design scholarship increasingly addresses social, cultural, technological, and environmental conditions, positioning designers as co-creators of a better future who embrace ethical and cultural contributions, particularly those related to the interior artefact (Königk 2015).

Interior theorists (Anderson *et al.* 2009; Breytenbach 2012; Königk 2015) argue that for the field to achieve professional legitimacy distinct from architecture, it must engage with intangible cultural practices expressed in public life, such as conversation, casual interaction, and spatial rituals (Königk 2015). Despite this, interior design in South Africa often remains limited to aesthetic concerns or narrowly defined public good projects. This limitation may result from legislative frameworks that overlook the discipline's social compact (Königk 2015) or from global trends that commodify interior artefacts as transient, image-driven products (Königk & Kahn 2015). Visual culture accelerates this trend, encouraging rapid consumption of interiors based on style, status, and aesthetics rather than critical reflection on cultural meaning.

This paper explores how globalised narratives shape interior design practice in South Africa. Through a literature review, we examine the definition of interior design in relation to cultural production and identify key spatial challenges relevant to the discipline. We also present a case study analysing student briefs from a Private Higher Education Institution (PHEI), offering insight into how educational approaches may support a shift towards contextually relevant, socially engaged interior design. Ultimately, we advocate for a pedagogy that supports critical citizenship (Prinsloo 2011) and positions interior design as a vehicle for social transformation.

Study objectives

Given the prevailing globalised narrative shaping interior design in South Africa, it becomes imperative to explore what the discipline currently is and what it could evolve into. This study begins by delineating interior design as articulated through professional institutions and educational frameworks, examining how it has become tethered to functionalist and aesthetic priorities. The current state of African design reveals a crucial dilemma: the lack of recognition of both pre- and post-colonial spatial practices in African communities and traditional artefacts as design, leading to their replacement with objects and practices considered universally acceptable as useful and commercially viable interior artefacts.

While professional bodies present holistic views of interior design as protecting human needs (IIDA 2024) and contributing to civil society (IFI, n.d.), these ideals often remain abstract within local practice, particularly when interior design struggles to establish legitimacy as a socially impactful and culturally embedded discipline. Mignolo (2009) outlines clear reasons for this. Globally, interior design has been moulded from Eurocentric epistemology. Thus, interior design solutions for the African context don't stem from culturally relevant design problems; having forcibly or organically adopted design thinking from the Global North as a universal framework for problem solving, interior design in South Africa often sidelines the latent potential of how African communities respond to local challenges rooted in cultural, societal, and historical realities

We aim to highlight how universally accepted practice devoid of indigenous design thinking has stunted the potential found within alternative or expanded definitions, categories, and approaches.

Additionally, measures for success or failure remain embedded in design standards from the cultures of colonising nations. Interior designers and spatial practitioners in South Africa are uniquely positioned to address contextual challenges, including the erasure of intangible cultural practices from distinct communities, the aestheticisation of cultural symbols devoid of meaning (Rapoport 1982), and limited engagement with informal and vernacular spatial environments.

Despite possessing broad skillsets, including knowledge of spatial dynamics, human behaviour, material culture, and sensory engagement, a gap remains in applying these capabilities to address urgent local realities and typologies (Potter *et al.* 2019, pp. 39–56). By surfacing these challenges, the study underscores the critical role interior designers can play in shaping inclusive, culturally significant, and socially just environments. This is especially pertinent in a society where space is a powerful marker of identity, memory, and belonging, and where the interior artefact holds potential to become a vessel for cultural continuity and societal transformation.

Through case study analysis, we highlight the dominance of a stylised, visually driven approach prioritising aesthetic appeal over cultural resonance. In parallel, the study explores design briefs and curricular outputs from a PHEI, tracing how interior design students are encouraged to engage with spatial issues in local contexts. This case study serves dual purpose: identifying recurring patterns and dominant themes in South African interior design practice and education and revealing opportunities for intervention where more grounded and contextually aware design approaches could take root.

Ultimately, the study advocates for transformative shifts in how interior design is taught, practised, and understood. Beginning with education, it calls for reorientation toward pedagogies centring cultural awareness, social responsiveness, and design activism. Such shifts would empower emerging designers to reflect critically on their work and embrace their roles as cultural agents and contributors to public good. Interior design can thus move beyond the reductive binary of function and beauty to assert itself as a discipline engaging with postcolonial, multicultural complexities, fostering cultural pride, ownership within the built environment, and contributing meaningfully to preserving diverse cultural heritage and crafting equitable spatial futures.

Ethical consideration

Ethical clearance for this study was obtained from the PHEI where the design briefs were sourced and analysed. As the research did not involve human participants or employ methodologies requiring direct human interaction, it posed no risk to individuals. In line with the principles outlined by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) and the National Research Foundation (NRF), the study adhered to the ethical imperatives of respect, integrity, and accountability. To protect confidentiality and maintain the objectivity of the research, all institutional identifiers have been removed. This ensures that the findings are presented in a manner that prioritises academic integrity while safeguarding the anonymity of the institutions involved.

It is acknowledged that, due to time constraints, the study was limited to the analysis of a single institution's dataset. While this may narrow the scope of the findings, the outcomes are positioned as an initial point of reference to stimulate further dialogue regarding issues of transferability and validity in future research contexts.

Significance of the study

As interior design practice relies on the application of design knowledge, thinking, and processes, this study engages with pedagogy through scholarly teaching approaches that outline critical themes, building the study's significance. Scholarly teaching implements critically reflective practice (reflecting on the discipline's current state), evidence-based methods (interrogating case studies), and theory-guided teaching (curricula analysis) (Gansemer-Topf, McCloud, & Braxton 2024). The main objective is to reflect on interior design practice and use findings to challenge interior design education pedagogy.

The concept of "Scholarship of Teaching and Learning" (SoTL) stipulates that shared value can be created where classroom projects serve as learning opportunities for transforming practice (Gansemer-Topf, McCloud, & Braxton 2024). This can be achieved by promoting transparency and conversation (Oygur & Orthel 2015, p. 448) around developing contextually relevant artefacts and unique visual identities. In SoTL, educators and curriculum developers must implement learning materials and methodologies publicly shared for critique (Gansemer-Topf, McCloud, & Braxton 2024) by design and cultural practitioners to foster contextually relevant practice. Much like a symbiotic relationship, practitioners influence education while current students help shift future practice.

Although the paper focuses on interior design's role at practice level, SoTL suggests practice is influenced by how educators and students perceive the discipline (Oygur & Orthel 2015, p. 459), especially considering the annual influx of graduates into the market. Therefore, while challenging pedagogy, this paper highlights practice and works backwards to propose how this knowledge can be applied at training and education levels.

To improve interior design pedagogy, critical aspects related to practice must be addressed:

- The debate about the discipline's body of knowledge (Power 2016) and its contribution to contemporary society
- Misconceptions about the interior design profession (Marshall-Baker 2005), how it is perceived, and how this affects pedagogy and practice
- Pedagogical questions about skills training versus knowledge-based education (Königk 2015)

As decolonisation of design curriculum continues at various higher education institutions, decoloniality practices emerge as challengers of dominant and globalised narratives (Martins 2023) that influence interior design practice, depriving interior artefacts of inclusivity and cultural diversity. These practices guide recommendations for strategy and practical guidelines within interior design education that can be carried into practice, thus redefining interior design's role in contemporary South African society.

A 2023 study (Martins 2023) at a private higher education institution revealed that most interior design students either lack interest, have limited knowledge, or perceive decolonisation as irrelevant to interior design. This could be attributed to insufficient inclusion of decolonial perspectives and observed experiences of South African interior design practice, evident in current interior design artefacts that can be described as "physically located on the continent but epistemologically situated in Europe and America" (Martins 2023). If students do not perceive this relevance, they will likely transition into industry without seeking practice that prioritises contextual relevance and responds to social dynamics. Therefore, in challenging globalised trends, practice can shift beyond creating aesthetically valuable spaces rooted in regional identity toward creating interior artefacts that preserve, celebrate, and generate contextual relevance (Martins 2023).

Discussion

Expanding the definition of an interior

Based on current practice, interior design continues to be associated with interventions confined within buildings and spaces defined by existing permanent structures. This limits not only interior design research but also what is perceived as the appropriate scope for interior practice where "enclosed space" is not apparent (Power 2016). However, as the profession, education, and research mature, the definition of interior space can be expanded beyond these limitations, allowing the discourse to contribute beyond the inside of buildings and extending the discipline's purview to modes of inhabitation that exist beyond typical interior definitions as manifested in contemporary built environments (Power 2016).

Interiority (McCarthy 2005) defines the extent of an interior to include spaces clearly defined within solid or permeable boundaries, outside spaces that relate to the inside, those forming part of enclosures, intimate spaces, or those existing between building interiors and exteriors (de Beer 2012). As a spatial framework, interiority challenges interior design practice to engage with spaces characterised by liminality, temporality, and fluidity, even when traditional interiors are not evident (Power 2016). For example, in vernacular domestic environments, a stoep¹ would be considered exterior space or architecture; however, due to its immediate interaction with both building envelope and exterior, and its intended function fostering social interaction in domestic typologies, it can be considered within interior design's scope.

This concept is important as it justifies interior design practice in South Africa, evolving to respond to local spatial and user needs and cultural challenges. The definition of interiority suggests interior designers can contribute to urban spatial projects such as informal trading, transport nodes, and informal housing, like backrooms, dominant in South African townships. Additionally, typical projects such as domestic interiors can be reinvented to intentionally consider cultural influences in the design process beyond aesthetic appeal. After all, social space results from cultural interaction and should offer tangible cultural nuances serving as vehicles for cultural practices (Königk 2015). The concept of place-making in relation to interior design and preservation of cultural identity will be discussed in detail in the following section.

Interior design, place-making and culture

The relationship between place-making and culture is reciprocal: cultural practices inform spatial design, while spatial design reinforces and sustains culture (Königk 2015). For interior design to support cultural preservation, it must incorporate cultural influences throughout the design process. Space, defined as physical enclosure, becomes place when it holds personal or communal meaning (Grobler 2006). Lefebvre's spatial trialect outlines this transformation through three dimensions—material space (first space), conceptual space (second space), and lived experience (third space)—highlighting human interaction's importance in shaping meaningful environments (Nanjala 2019). However, interior design often prioritises first space, overlooking its social and cultural implications. By viewing culture as a semiotic process, design becomes a communication medium where meaning is both created and interpreted. This positions interior spaces not merely as aesthetic artefacts but as contributors to social behaviour, cultural identity, and the shaping of lived experiences (Königk 2015).

¹ According to the Dictionary of South African English, originally found in Cape Dutch buildings – this is a raised platform or terrace running the entire length of the front of the house, often with seats. Generally, also known as veranda or porch that is open, covered or enclosed.

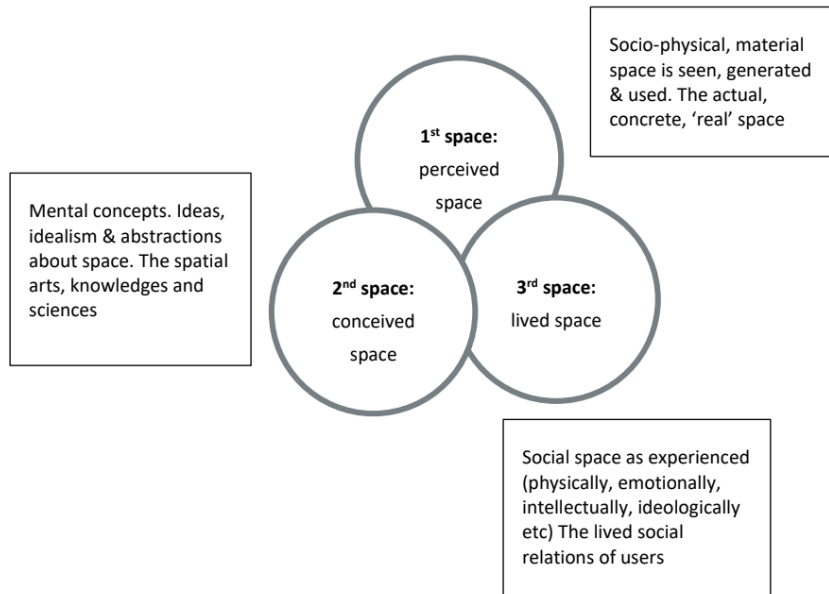


Figure 1: Spatial trialect (Lefebvre 1974) interpreted for the interior artefact (Nanjala 2019)

Decolonial and context-responsive frameworks

The development of alternative design typologies is pivotal in shaping the future of interior design scholarship, practice, and cultural preservation. These emergent frameworks offer counter-narratives to dominant global paradigms, foregrounding indigenous knowledge systems, community-led processes, and contextually responsive approaches that challenge the universality of Western design ideologies.

Before outlining a reformed framework for interior design pedagogy, it is crucial to acknowledge that current pedagogical structures remain largely tethered to imported design standards. These standards originate from ideologies of the Global North, perpetuating colonial cultural dominance (De Greef 2025). This dominance is mirrored not only in the theoretical foundations of design education but also in how design research is conducted—often devoid of user participation, particularly in projects contextualised within the Global South. The consequence is a profession that operates with methodologies, aesthetic values, and spatial hierarchies that remain disconnected from the lived realities of the communities it serves.

As Martins (2023) notes, public and private higher education institutions in South Africa have yet to fully embrace decolonisation in their curricula. While formal institutions offer value in structuring and transmitting knowledge, their ability to reform curriculum content is frequently hindered by infrastructural limitations, stakeholder misalignment, and a lack of context-specific data. These constraints diminish the confidence needed to adopt and implement alternative, locally grounded frameworks. Moreover, the slow pace of institutional transformation often means that by the time curricula are revised, the knowledge embedded within them may already be outdated or inadequately responsive to emerging spatial and cultural challenges.

In response, a growing body of design professionals, private studios, and data-focused collectives namely: African Life Centred Design (ALCD), Shane V. Charles, Research Collective for Decoloniality and Fashion Community (RCDF), and Andani Africa are establishing non-institutional platforms that

serve as digital think tanks. Using tools such as blogs, podcasts, websites, and social media, these platforms aim to disseminate knowledge and test pedagogical proof-of-concepts. Their work demonstrates how various design disciplines, from fashion and product design to branding, can meaningfully inform South African interior design education. These collectives function as agile, experimental spaces where alternative pedagogies can be tested, critiqued, and refined before being integrated into formal educational structures.

Table 1: Common threads of alternative knowledge building

Theme	How Each Institution Reflects It
Ancestral & Indigenous Wisdom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ALCD foregrounds indigenous knowledge and land. • Shane Charles evokes heritage through materiality. • RCDF builds on Indigenous fashion epistemologies. • Andani Africa, through their use of the Nsibidi symbols in the data analysis for the African creative industry.
Community-Centred & Decoloniality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ALCD and RCDF prioritise collective agency. • RCDF and Andani Africa push decentralised access to knowledge building and dissemination. • Charles explores individual style and design identity using community engagement to develop historical diasporic design typologies.
Regenerative, Holistic Design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ALCD's embraces biomimicry and co-design with nature. • Charles designs spaces that restore emotional well-being and encourage a connectedness to communal design legacies. • Andani African embeds a theory of change in their approach to data collection, storage and analysis.
Pluriverse Thinking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ALCD centres multiple localities in the development of their design principles and design manifesto. • RCDF explicitly rejects universality in doing so, the platform centres decolonial thinking and practice within fashion design. • Charles offers layered, multi-identity storytelling through her analysis of historic diaspora interiors. • Andani Africa explores the impact of African heritage through their platform, Open Restitution, where they build case studies around the repatriation of African artefacts from Western institutions and museums to their countries of origin.
Care, Listening, and Ritual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ALCD's ritual approach in developing a design manifesto for the African context. • RCDF's listening ethic in developing student work from global epistemologies (see: The Digital Fashion History Student Project) • Charles carefully brailles the histories of diasporic interiors to carefully select names for these collective bodies of work, using Patreon and IG stories to host engaging workshops that platform live stories from the community. • Andani Africa's newly developed data collection and African project management platform for the creative industry, Malaika, serves as a site for documenting, analysing and communicating creative inputs for community-first projects with care, helping provide clarity for stakeholders on a way forward.

In applying these themes to interior design education and practice, institutions could incorporate culturally responsive spatial planning into design briefs, emphasising indigenous spatial logics over imported typologies. Design research methods could be restructured to centre community agency, employing participatory approaches from the outset. Furthermore, mobile and deployable design strategies responding to urban challenges such as informal trading or displacement could be explored as core components of the curriculum. These applications not only enhance the relevance of interior design education but also reposition the discipline as a socially responsive, locally grounded practice capable of addressing the complex spatial needs of contemporary South African society.

Interior design’s response to South Africa’s spatial realities

Urban environments across South Africa continue to grapple with complex spatial challenges, many of which underscore the need for more contextually responsive design approaches. Within this context, interior designers possess the skills and insights necessary to contribute meaningfully to spatial justice and social transformation. Their potential impact can be observed in several key areas that intersect with pressing urban issues, such as culturally responsive residential design, deployable spatial products for displacement, mobile service infrastructure, and temporary structures to support informal economies. Each of these domains reflects how interior design, when framed through the lens of social design, can extend beyond aesthetic considerations to engage with lived realities in South Africa.

Social design is the field most often employed by students and practitioners across the built environment to address local issues arising from poverty, inequality, and lack of access to services. Unlike traditional approaches where design is defined by a tangible product, be it a service, building, or object, social design emphasises process over artefact, positioning design as a means of tackling complex social challenges. The intended outcome is not simply a finished product, but rather the creation of new social conditions that foster equity, cultural engagement, and justice. Within this paradigm, interior designers may find themselves addressing public spaces that encourage social interaction, working with local skills and materials to support economies, or creating projects that prioritise dignity and inclusion. This framework aligns with Asojo’s (2011; 2015) work on interior design in cultural contexts, which highlights key constructs such as: social dynamics, cultural juxtaposition, visual & performance arts, elements & principles of design, and sustainability, as essential lenses for meaningfully engaging with non-Western environments.

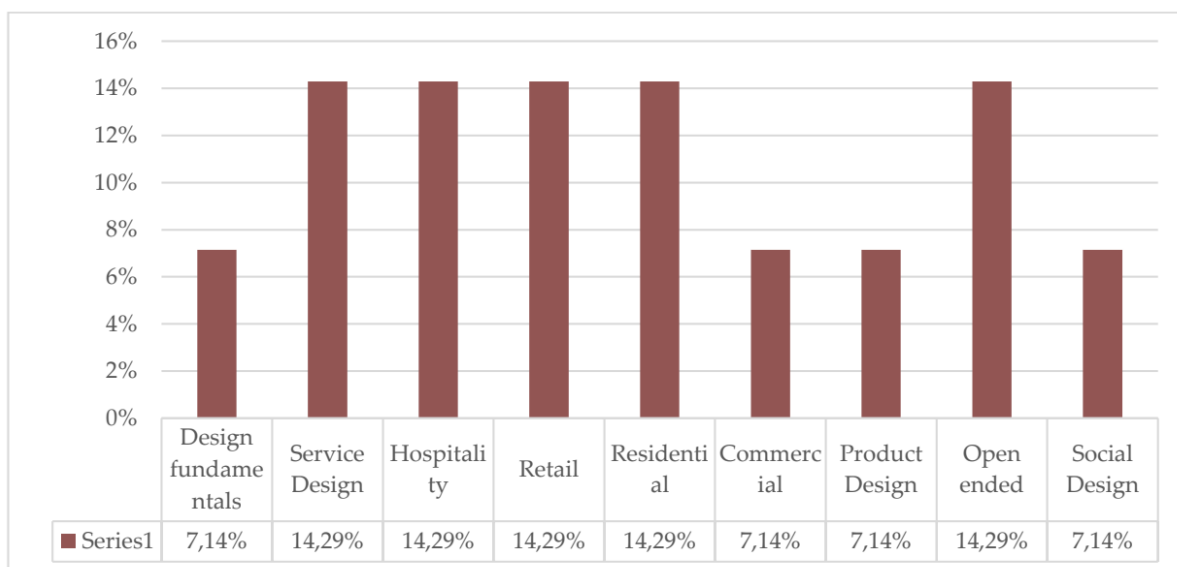


Figure 2: Interior typologies briefs distribution across three years in the bachelor’s programme

The case study explored how one PHEI integrates such constructs in its curriculum, particularly through the design briefs given to undergraduate interior design students. Over a three-year bachelor's programme, students typically complete an average of twelve to fourteen major briefs, complemented as shorter, skill-focused exercises. The analysed sample included the full breadth of briefs, ranging from residential and retail projects to hospitality, product design, and civic-oriented

assignments. Among these, approximately 7% of briefs were explicitly framed around social design objectives, with themes such as cultural identity, decolonisation, or active citizenship forming the central focus. At first glance, this appears to be a limited proportion, suggesting that social design is not consistently foregrounded as a pedagogical priority.

However, the analysis also revealed that in open-ended briefs where students select their own programme or site, those with personal interest in social or cultural issues often direct their work towards socially responsive outcomes. If a student were to choose this route twice, including in their final third-year project, their engagement with social design themes could reach 21% of their overall project portfolio. This demonstrates that the curriculum offers scope for engagement yet does not structurally guarantee it. Students tend to avoid themes relating to decolonisation and subcultures when given full freedom of choice, echoing Martins (2023), who notes that socially transformative projects are often underexplored unless deliberately integrated into the brief structure.

To better understand how these briefs align with Asojo's framework, each was evaluated against the constructs he identified:

Social dynamics emerged most strongly in competition briefs and residential projects, where students were required to consider household structures, patterns of interaction, and multigenerational living arrangements. While these themes were addressed, the absence of explicit guidance on how to analyse or articulate social dynamics meant that much of the engagement remained surface-level. Incorporating targeted prompts could push students to critically explore issues such as kinship, ritual, and family dynamics more intentionally.

The juxtaposition of traditional and contemporary culture was most often visible in open-ended projects, with students introducing cultural references into otherwise contemporary design schemes. Yet this juxtaposition was rarely problematised; students tended to treat cultural symbolism as a decorative layer rather than interrogating how traditional practices might reshape spatial planning or user experience. This suggests an opportunity for briefs to encourage deeper questioning of cultural overlaps and their implications for design outcomes.

The elements and principles of design were consistently integrated as part of foundational training. However, their application to local cultural contexts was underdeveloped. Students documented visual and spatial qualities through photography and observational tasks but seldom demonstrated how these principles could be embedded in their design processes. More emphasis could be placed on requiring students to explicitly translate these observations into design decisions, reinforcing the link between cultural awareness and spatial outcomes.

Sustainability was present in nearly all briefs, though predominantly framed through an environmental lens, particularly in relation to material choices. Social and economic dimensions of sustainability were rarely foregrounded. For instance, while students specified recycled or locally sourced materials, little attention was given to how material choices could support local economies or serve as tangible carriers of heritage. Embedding sustainability in a holistic sense, considering not just environmental but also social and cultural cycles would significantly deepen the scope of these projects.

One notable example of social design potential was found in the product design brief, which addressed ergonomics and anthropometrics. Current datasets for these fields are widely critiqued as Eurocentric and exclusionary. With appropriate support students could be encouraged to reframe furniture design in relation to South African body ratios, lifestyles, and cultural practices, thereby reimagining the

ergonomics of daily life through a local lens. Similarly, the residential project brief showed evidence of transformation over recent years by incorporating themes of multi-generational living and inclusivity, requiring students to go beyond aesthetics and address client needs rooted in cultural and social practices.

The analysis indicates that while the curriculum covers a broad spectrum of project types (residential, retail, hospitality, product, civic/public, and open-ended), the least transformed briefs are those that focus on commercial interiors, particularly retail and hospitality. These tend to default to globalised stylistic norms, with little interrogation of cultural or social dynamics, mirroring the broader critique of South African interior design as visually driven and global-trend oriented. By contrast, briefs tied to residential and civic projects showed greater capacity for contextual responsiveness, especially where local clients, sites, or community needs were incorporated.

The findings also highlighted areas for curricular development. Constructs such as ritual, heritage and materiality, the pluriverse, and community agency were either absent or only implicitly referenced in the briefs. Introducing explicit references to these concepts could enrich the way students frame and execute their projects. For example, ritual as a lens allows students to understand how everyday and ceremonial practices shape spatial needs; materiality and heritage foreground local economies and cultural narratives; the pluriverse positions African design as globally competitive without assimilation; and community agency situates interior designers as active participants in civic life.

Practically, this shift would require embedding decoloniality, social design, and cultural identity across briefs, prioritising local case studies and participatory design methods, and exposing students to practitioners who advocate socially engaged design. Complementary theoretical lessons already support this progression: first-year students are introduced to social design concepts, second-year students engage with critical theories and career pathways, and third-year students address active citizenship and real-world impact. Yet without stronger alignment between theory and design briefs, students remain hesitant to pursue socially engaged projects, often due to limited exposure to role models in practice compared to the visibility of conventional, aesthetically driven interior design.

Based on this case study, it is evident that the institution is making strides toward cultivating socially responsive interior design, but more deliberate and consistent integration of social design across briefs is necessary. By embedding cultural constructs, encouraging critical engagement with context, and fostering mentorship with socially engaged practitioners, interior design education in South Africa can better prepare students to address the complex spatial challenges of their urban environments.

Recommendations and conclusion

The shifting landscape of interior design education in South Africa calls for critical re-evaluation of inherited pedagogies and development of new frameworks rooted in context, culture, and community. The emergence of independent platforms demonstrates the potential of decolonial, non-institutional approaches in reimagining design knowledge and practice. These platforms illustrate how interior design can move beyond static, imported models to embrace pluralistic, participatory, and regenerative methods deeply attuned to local realities.

To align interior design education with these evolving paradigms, the following recommendations are proposed:

- **Diversifying design content:** Design briefs should be intentionally structured to challenge assumptions and broaden understanding of space by integrating cultural perspectives, indigenous

practices, and lived experiences. These should be embedded not merely as visual references but as conceptual drivers within research and design development phases, addressing the limitations identified in current practice that prioritises Eurocentric solutions.

- **Integrating indigenous knowledge systems:** Design theory modules should include indigenous worldviews to challenge dominant Eurocentric narratives. Educators can collaborate with local knowledge holders, cultural practitioners, and community designers, fostering shared and inclusive learning environments that counter the erasure of intangible cultural practices.
- **Encouraging interdisciplinary collaboration:** Adopting interdisciplinary approaches helps students explore relationships between spatial design and broader social issues such as inequality, heritage, and identity. This cultivates civic responsibility, reinforcing interior designers' roles as active societal contributors aligned with the concept of critical citizenship (Prinsloo 2011).
- **Building communities of practice:** Industry professionals should co-create cultures of shared learning through mentorship, critique, and public engagement. These interactions expose students to diverse design languages, encouraging meaningful responses to place and culture that extend beyond aesthetic concerns to embrace interiority's fuller definition.
- **Sharing design processes, not just products:** Education should shift from presenting completed projects for aesthetic appeal to making visible the design process, including cultural influences, iterative thinking, and community engagement. This transparency supports development of empathetic, informed designers.

The role of interior designers must be reconceptualised beyond creating aesthetically pleasing environments to become translators of cultural meaning and facilitators of spatial justice. As Königk (2015, pp. 50, 55) notes, iterative design processes allow designers to extract and synthesise meaning through empathetic engagement with future inhabitants. Success lies in aligning interpretations with the lived associations and experiences of those occupying spaces.

Through these shifts, interior design education can transition from passive transmission of globalised norms to active knowledge production that affirms African ways of knowing and spatial design's critical role in shaping equitable, culturally significant futures.

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