Explorations in Teaching Interior Design: Involving User Perspectives

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Abstract
Understanding the needs and expectations of the intended users of a designed environment is recognized as one of the essential factors that influence the decision-making process in an interior design project. This situation is also reflected in interior design education, where students conventionally design for hypothetical clients and users. This study explores the contribution of a new user-focused and scenario-based design studio modal to students' approach to successive stages of design processes, learning outcomes, and engagement to the project course during an online education period. Within the scope of the study, second-year interior design students were assigned to real artists and product designers as clients for a workshop for creative production- showroom project. The students had to communicate with their clients, do research and integrate the information they have collected into their design proposals. The paper concludes with an evaluation of the proposed model from students' view. It is believed that the approach proposed and applied within the scope of the study has the potential to present a different perspective in interior design studio courses.
Keywords: Interior Design; Interior Design Education; User Perspectives; Studio Teaching.

1. Introduction: Involving Client- User Perspectives to The Design Studio

Improvement of user experiences with creative solutions in the intervened environments is one of the primary aims of interior design. Understanding how the intended users would interact with a designed environment and analyzing their needs are recognized as essential factors that influence the decision-making processes in design projects (Oygur and McCoy,2011; Redstrom, 2006). On the other hand, it is a challenging process because the clients and the users often differ in their preferences from the designers (Brown& Gifford, 2001), and they may not even perceive the same design features as do the designers (Hershberger& Cass, 1992). Accordingly, the skill to involve client-user perspectives is believed to be necessary for communication in professional practice. The potentials of this inclusive approach for human-centered innovations have also been demonstrated in various design disciplines, regardless of the scales and types of projects they are working on (Van der Linden et al., 2018). This situation also underlines the importance of creating awareness in students about understanding and integrating user views in their projects beginning from the undergraduate years.

Design studio courses are often approached as the core courses of both architecture and interior design education. The studios often become places in which the simulation of the real situation occurs in design education (Demirbaş & Demirkan,2003). The second-year interior design studio also has a transitory role between basic design courses to acquaint students with the specific expectations and requirements of interior design for the first time. Typically, the framework of the course urges students to propose solutions to design problems in hypothetical and propositional projects as it similarly practiced during the following studio years. This structure is often developed in a similar way to professional work practices. The studio begins with a research and understanding phase, then it moves through an iterative design process and culminates with documentation (Christian, 2019). The critical position of the user-client requirements in professional practice indeed has reflections on design studio methods like some other aspects such as the analysis of the functional requirements, site, building typology, orientation, structural properties and services. Some instructors follow a user-designer relationship model for design reviews, where the instructor acts to represent a user or a group of users and discusses the design from a user's perspective (Oh et al., 2013). However, in these cases, the instructor still keeps the role of the expert, so even in this tutoring method, it is not possible to eliminate the effects of a professional view on the feedback given to the students. Accordingly, this approach still lacks the components to introduce students to the perspective of a real client.

Within the scope of this study, a user-based scenario model was tested in a second-year interior design studio where students were assigned to real artists and product designers as clients for a workshop-showroom project. As it is also asserted by Oygur and Mccoy (2011), although environments are often designed for the client, the term "user" is not synonymous with "client," and the users include all the people who will interact with the design outcome. Within the scenario developed for this project, the clients constituted the main user groups. The students were asked to collect information about the needs, requirements, and expectations of the user-clients they were assigned to and integrate the collected data into their projects. The design studio was held online through a digital platform due to the precautions taken for the pandemic, and all of the hypothetical clients were living abroad. Accordingly, the students had equal

opportunities to contact their clients through emails, social media, and online meetings. Students' feedback about their experience while developing their projects and studio outcomes were analyzed at the end of the study to evaluate the potentials of the proposed approach.

2. Explanation of the Studio Structure and Brief

The project brief titled "a designer's space in Tophane: creative production + display" shared with the students was integrating two different functions; creative production and display of the products to be accommodated within a two-floor height space located in Tophane, Istanbul. Within the scope of the design studio, students were expected to develop an interior design project for a functionally hybrid space to be used by a particular product designer or artist that they were assigned. Thirty-four students in the design studio were divided into two groups with two lecturers. Seventeen artists and product designers were selected by the lecturers through preliminary research and they were assigned to the students in two different groups in a mixed way so that two different students from both groups studied the same designer. Accordingly, it became possible to observe the students' varying design approaches to bring to the same subject and share information by following each other.

A detailed document about the assigned clients, including the websites, brands' names, contact information, was shared with the students while the rest of the research was conducted by them. The students were encouraged to reveal items designed and produced by the designer, the design philosophy behind the final products, and the unique methods used in their manufacture. Additionally, the projects were expected to provide comfortable and functional spaces for creative work and an engaging atmosphere while serving as a window to the designer's world. The required functional program that was given in the project brief included areas or spaces to accommodate:
• design processes
• the production processes of the actual products or mock-ups
• displaying/exhibition of the products
• selling of the products
• other auxiliary and additional needs (office, kitchenette, wet areas, storage)

The project area was located in Tophane, one of the oldest commercial settlements of Istanbul. Today, Tophane and its surroundings, Karaköy, feature the oldest part of the port city which maintains the characteristics of commercial and transitional spaces as areas of encounter, exchange, and short-term presence. (Kafescioglu, 2016). Although the main focus was on the client's needs, during the online studio, students were also aimed to gain an awareness about the surrounding environment's interaction with their design proposals. They were asked to perform detailed site analyses, transportation routes and put forward critical views about the relations of the project site with the neighboring structures including a mega port project, Galataport, which will be opened in the near future.

3. Evaluations of Studio Outcomes

A qualitative research approach was used to understand and interpret the outcomes of the user-focused studio model through student feedback. A questionnaire that included open-ended questions and additional sections asking for written narratives about the students' experiences during the studio was conducted. Students were directed questions that aimed to explore the content of their dialogue with their hypothetical clients, the mediums they have utilized to reach out to the clients, the ways they have integrated the information they have gathered into their projects, and their overall evaluation of the user-focused studio experience. 25 of the 34 students (73%) stated that they contacted the product designers and artists through various mediums, including social media, e-mail, video conference applications. Arranging online meetings with the clients was not obligatory for the studio; however, many students preferred and achieved to do that. Analysis of the responses regarding the content of students' communication with the designers indicated that the process had primarily contributed to three stages of project development. These prominent themes emerged as analyzing the user profile, determining the program based on the designer's production methods and spatial needs, and developing the conceptual approach.

4. Overview of the Studio Experience and Outcomes of the Proposed Model

Having a general understanding of the user characteristics by researching real clients was one of the main contributions to the design process. In a conventional studio program, students determine the primary and secondary user groups as an outcome of a hypothetical process that is intertwined with the development of a conceptual approach and a scenario. Different from this usual studio structure, this time students had the opportunity to get familiar with their clients and made their analysis of the user groups which overlapped with the needs and interests of their clients. These user groups mainly constituted of the customers and the staff who work with the designer. Additionally, they had a chance to understand the personal characteristics and expectations of the clients as emphasized in their responses to the question "If you contacted the designer, how did your dialogue evolve?".

> "We corresponded on social media, and I have received feedback from the designer about who would be the user and customer groups in such a studio and showroom that I design for her within the scope of our studio course. I have proposed adding a workshop area, and when they heard this idea, they liked it very much and told me that they are also tutoring similar workshop sessions with customers in their real professional life."

> "In addition to our meeting with the designer, I have reached information about him by following his work on social media. I also had a chance to get to know about his interests and how these interests reflect on his work. For example, he told me that he likes to do meditation and yoga during short breaks, so I have added an area for these activities in his working area in my project."

> "My research on my client enabled my interaction with the project through human factors. There were not many sources about his design processes but I had a chance to learn about his method of expressing his thoughts on life through the design of his lighting products. I have also utilized from his speeches and articles about his design works"

Another essential stage of design processes in the design studio is developing a conceptual approach that is an abstract idea that evolves as the design grows and addresses the essence of the design problem with creative solutions. In the case of this project, just before coming to the stage of concept development, students have studied the working principles of the designer, the materials that she/he used, the production methods, and even the lifestyle of the clients. They have then articulated the data they found out through the storyboards, which were presented and discussed during the initial weeks of the studio (Figure 1 and Figure 2). This exercise enabled students to improve their knowledge about the designer's perspective while designing, producing, and exhibiting the works. Students responses to the question "How did you reflect the information you acquired on your project? (Design philosophy, design process, project's program?)" also underlined the significant reflections of their research on the clients and production stages on their design decisions during the conceptual development phase.

> "First of all, I searched about the artist and his works and also his working environment. I tried to analyze the forms and shapes that he uses in his work and to understand the ideas that he bases his artworks on. I aimed to create a fitting environment to display the sculptures. My research on the artist helped me develop my design idea"

> "The aspect of the designer that I researched that impressed me the most was the specific method of creating ceramic items by dripping technique. This method which creates very different forms with ceramic material, became an inspirational starting point while creating a concept for my project."

> "I have watched some videos of the production phases of the products designed by my client. While developing my concept these videos helped me a lot."

> "Understanding the design language of the client that I have developed my project had a very enhancing influence on my project while developing my conceptual approach"
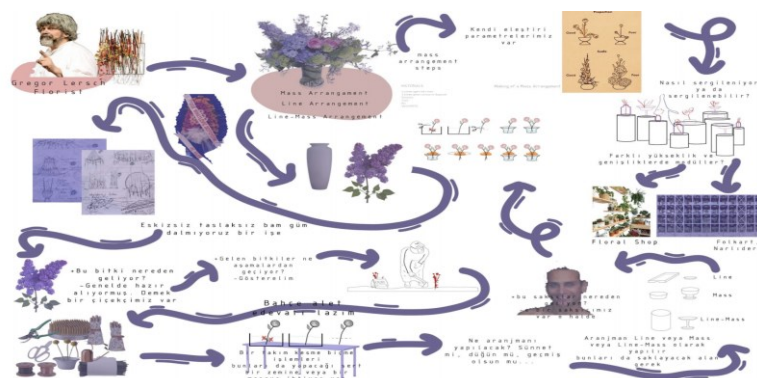

Figure 1. Ardahan Görkem Tepe (INT 201 student) storyboard (Client: Gregor Lersch, Florist)

Figure 2. Dilara Tolu (INT 201 student) storyboard (Client: Joachim & Morineau, Ceramic Artists)

Analysis of the projects and student responses indicated that, 17 students (50%) developed their concepts regarding the production methods and the forms of the designer's products (Figures 3,4 and 5), and 10 students (30%) developed their concepts based on the program requirements and the way the products were displayed.
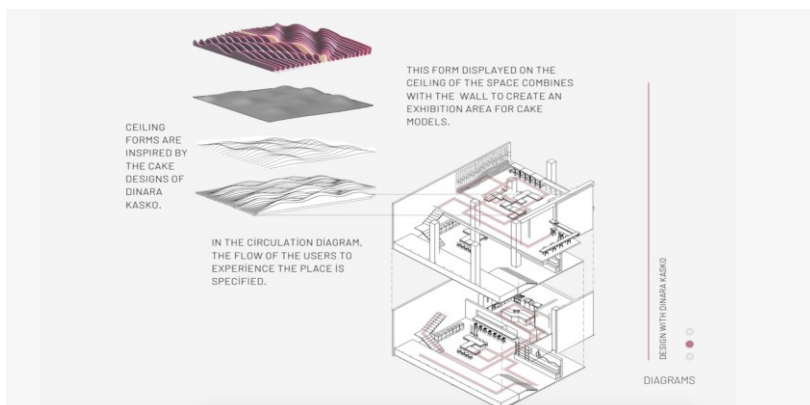

Figure 3. Pelin Acar (INT 201 student) design development process (Client: Dinara Kasko, Pastry Artist)

Figure 4. Pelin Acar (INT 201 student) exhibition & tasting space (Client: Dinara Kasko, Pastry Artist)
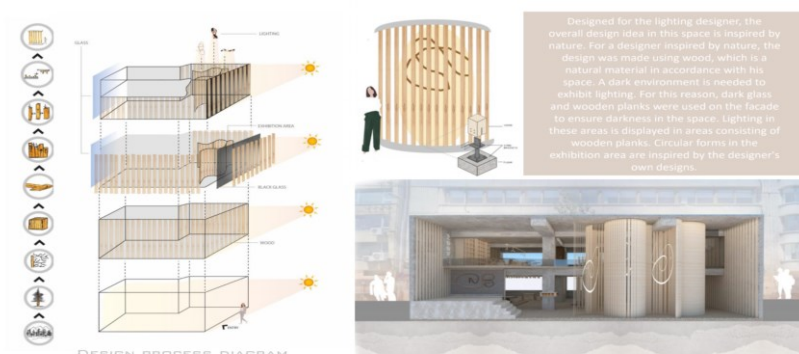

Figure 5. Bahriye Elanur Kahya (INT 201 student) design development process (Client: Niamh Barry, Lighting Designer)

Students' responses also revealed that another critical contribution of clients' feedback was the gathering data to develop a unique spatial program in each project. The students were asked to design the interior to accommodate both production and display functions. However, the range of the professional works of assigned clients was changing in a diverse spectrum, including various types of design fields such as product design, furniture design, fashion design, pastry art and floral design. The production phases and display requirements for these design products were changing

accordingly. Some of the responses of students to the questions "Which questions did you ask your client? Did you get feedback during the process? How did they contribute to your project?" and "How did you integrate the information you acquired in your project?" highlight the influence of their dialogue with the designers on the formation of the spatial programs.

> "I've contacted the designer via e-mail to prepare a storyboard to show his working processes. I got information from him about the stages of preparing his products. I have benefited a lot from this information while developing my project, especially during the program phase."
>
> "I have made a list of the required workshop spaces and needs by following the artist's social media accounts and reviewing her past works. As a result of my research, I've designed the atelier and display units."
>
> "The client that I was developing my project for was designing ceramic products using a special dripping method. By analyzing the production methods of the products, I've added a ceramic workshop consisting of sub-areas of production and an exhibition area to display the ceramic products."

Another critical aspect of the design problem given to the students was the development of complying spaces in terms of scale, ergonomics, and appropriate equipment to accommodate the particular needs of production and display activities. Students explored the production phases of the design products and searched for specific display needs of each type of product. For example, one of the students created a dark exhibition tunnel to display lighting products (Figure 6). Another student created a custom system with rollers to show floral designs and set a strong relationship between the display and production areas (Figure 7). Students' comments also highlighted the contribution of the dialogue with the clients to making design decisions related to ergonomic considerations.

> "I have analyzed the working principles of the designer in his workshop and tried to construct the atelier and display area in my project accordingly. I also searched for appropriate materials for the surfaces to facilitate production phases."
>
> "I have prepared questions to ask my client before we meet on Zoom. We had a half-an-hour meeting. We have talked about the stages of production from modeling, preparing molds, and cooking cakes in her atelier, and I tried to shape my workshop area accordingly. This experience improved my project in many different ways."
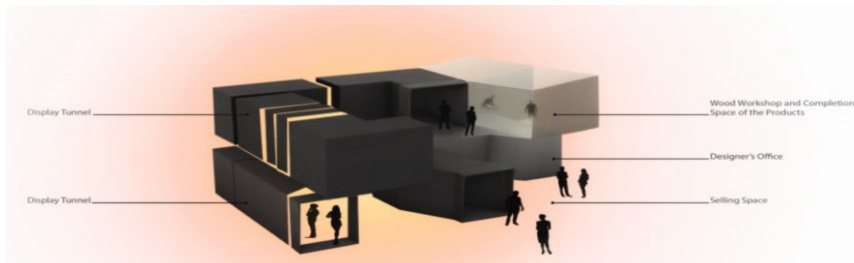

Figure 6. Özge Hamurcu (INT 201 student) exhibition tunnel for lighting products (Client: Tom Rossau, Lighting Designer)

Figure 7. Ardahan Görkem Tepe (INT 201 student) view from the display area (Client: Gregor Lersch, Florist)

The feedback from students about their overall evaluations of the semester indicated that the user-focused studio experience was successful from their perspective. Twenty-nine students (87%) evaluated the outcomes of the project studio as positive and encouraging. Their comments were supporting this evaluation at most parts.

> "The whole process of getting feedback from the designer was so helpful and guiding in terms of developing my conceptual ideas"
>
> "Our contact with the real clients enabled us to better analyze the issues that gained importance from their perspective throughout the process."

> "Searching for my client's design processes, hearing her stories and even the spaces that she has been working in helped me to develop my ideas and build my project on a more solid foundation."

Overall, the method has been shown to be effective for providing a cooperative environment that integrates the real client-users' perspective on undergraduate- level students' projects.

5. Conclusive Remarks: Overview of the Studio Experience and Proposed Model

Conventionally, the interior design studio includes interactions with peers, professors, and design professionals. The client-user perspectives experience incorporated into the second-year interior design studio allowed students to explore the substantial client-user experience, rather than the lecturers taking on the role of clients. In comparison to the preliminary research stages conducted in a conventional studio, the students had to handle case-specific research on their clients. By the nature of this process, they had more opportunities to learn by research and get engaged in the project with the knowledge of the program's needs and requirements and feedback they gained from their clients.

A limitation of the proposed model, according to students' feedback, was the length of the time period used for the research and communicating with the clients. Some asserted that they had to spend long periods of time for the research part and consequently they could have less time for the design part. Another shortcoming was, not all of the designers and artists who accepted to play the client role shared the same amount of information about their works and requirements. Besides, dealing with the development of a concept for the clients who have a diverse range of products and production methods was reported to be challenging by a few of the students. On the whole, responses to the questionnaires showed that students appreciated the integration of user perspectives to extend their conceptual approaches, proposals for the program and decisions on the spatial organization.

A review of relevant literature indicates that a range of teaching models are available to be utilized in the interior design studio. The way how design studio models are structured and organized is an essential element for the student contribution to the production of creative ideas. The study revealed that a deep insight into the users' perspective supports the interior design process to keep the design focused on delivering compatible spatial experiences with the needs, motivations, and expectations.

Conflict of Interests

The Authors declare no conflict of interest.

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