


A FORCE to Reckon With



From the classroom to the halls of the state capitol, Lisa Whited is in the vanguard of interior designers working to ensure the long-term viability of the profession.

Lisa Whited had not set foot inside Maine's state house in Augusta since a field trip in fourth grade. Even then she admits that she was more interested in catching a glimpse of her latest crush than in learning about the state capitol building and the important government business that was conducted there. Now however, some 30 years later, she has discovered the "joy of lobbying and testifying."

BY DIANE WINTROUB CALMENSEN

COVER AND PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHY BY JIM ROBINETTE





with in the halls of legislatures considering bills that would impact interior designers and their profession. Even in state houses other than Maine's, Whited's influence is felt through her tireless work on behalf of the National Council for Interior Design Qualification (NCIDQ), American Society of Interior Designers (ASID), Foundation for Interior Design Education Research (FIDER), International Interior Design Association (IIDA) and the Maine Interior Design Association (MIDA). All

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"Back in 1992, I got a phone call from an interior designer friend who told me about a proposed change in Maine's architectural statute," Whited says. "If it passed, the size of projects that interior designers could work on would be limited. My response was, 'It won't affect me.' Boy, was I wrong."

The passage of that bill not only affected Whited's interior design business, but it also launched her in a new direction of advocacy: lobbying and support for collaboration among the architectural, engineering and interior design professions.

The bill that was passed by Maine's legislature in 1992 stated that any project encompassing more than 1,000 square feet or costing in excess of \$50,000 required the approval of a registered architect or engineer. The result: almost everything an interior designer worked on needed the okay of an architect or engineer.

"For me personally, getting my projects approved was not a problem because I had always worked closely with my dad, who is an architect and engineer," says Whited. "But for most of my colleagues, and just in principle, the affect of the bill's passage was huge. A few of us got together to talk, and we knew that we had to do something not only for ourselves, but for the future of the profession in Maine."

What they did was found the Maine Interior Design Association (MIDA), with Whited as its first president. As

MIDA's president, Whited participated in writing legislation to regulate interior designers; met with state senators and representatives to explain the impact an interior designer has on the health, safety and welfare of the public; and she testified at several committee hearings about the Maine Human Rights law and interior design regulation.

One of the most important pieces of legislation that MIDA wrote and lobbied for was a Title Act, which set out the requirements for certification as an interior designer. In 1996, Whited wrote a brochure called, "Definitions for Dummies: A Legislative Lexicon for Interior Designers." According to the definition, "a title act prohibits anyone not certified or registered by the state from representing or identifying him/herself as 'Certified or Registered Interior Designer.' It does not prohibit professional practice or performance of services by interior designers. It does not prohibit anyone from calling him/herself an interior designer."

Under Maine's Title Act, interior design certification has three requirements: 1. An interior design degree from a four-year FIDER-accredited interior design program; 2. Two years of professional interior design experience; and 3. Passing the NCIDQ exam. The title act also provided for a kind of grace period of six years, giving designers enough time to meet the requirements.

Governor John McKernan signed the legislation into law in 1993, after only one legislative session. How did MIDA get the legislature to move so quickly? Great attorneys, professional lobbyists, dedicated interior designers willing to take the time to testify in committee and one-on-one meetings with representatives and senators. Plus a little trick Whited had up her sleeve.

"I was driving to Augusta one day to testify and I knew I had to think of a way to convince the committee that what certified interior designers do impacts the health, safety and welfare of the public," recalls Whited. "Then I thought of using something like flash cards to show legislators the differences among the work performed by an architect, an interior designer and a decorator. The idea developed into a series of 8 1/2" by 11" foam-core boards that show the responsibilities and consequences of each profession through text and illustrations."

The first card demonstrates how an architect is responsible for making a building structurally sound, otherwise the building could fail and collapse and people might die. The next card

explains how a certified interior designer plans an office layout in a way that will not block emergency exits, otherwise people could be trapped in a "failed" building and die. Finally, the third card explains that interior decorators put the finishing touches on interior spaces. But what if they don't do their job? Well then, as Whited puts it, "The worse that could happen is that people leave the building, *alive*, saying 'What a gross color scheme.'"

"I also indicate that a well-designed project requires the teamwork of many professionals—and that there are times when an architect may provide some interior design services and an interior designer may provide some decorating services," Whited explains. "This point is important to me because it underscores the importance of collaboration with architects and decorators, and also the value that all design professionals bring to a project."

With usually only 10 minutes to meet with a legislator, Whited used the cards to quickly educate each on the importance of a certified interior designer's work. The cards were so successful that they are now sold to groups around the country

with proceeds going back to MIDA.

As president of MIDA, and after a quick success in the legislature, Whited was appointed to the Maine State Board of Architects, Landscape Architects and Interior Designers, the regulatory board that reviews those professionals seeking certification. Whited was one of only two interior designers appointed to the board.

At this point, however, Whited was not only being noticed in Maine, but on the national level by NCIDQ and ASID. In 1993, the Maine State Board chose Whited to be its representative to the NCIDQ Council of Delegates. From there, Whited went on to serve NCIDQ as director of government and public affairs, director of finance and administration, president-elect, president and, finally in 2001, past-president. For ASID, she held positions

One of Whited's first challenges at the BAC was preparing it for FIDER accreditation review, which it received in 2002. She also oversees the interior design program's curriculum, advises students and teaches courses in career strategies, professional practice, interior design issues, advanced studios and color theory.





in the New England chapter and on the national legislative task force and the national strategic planning committee.

While serving on the Maine State Board and continuing through her service as president of NCIDQ, Whited attended most of the annual and regional meetings of the National Council for Architectural Registration Boards, or NCARB. Whited's reason for attending the meetings was her desire to foster greater collaboration between architects and designers.

"My mantra has always been, 'Let's not reinvent the wheel,'" says Whited. "So I wanted to find out what NCARB was already doing well and bring it back to NCIDQ, and at the same time offer to NCARB what NCIDQ already knew how to accomplish successfully. What I got instead was a head-on collision.

"Although there are some architects who understand the value an interior designer can bring to a project, there are still many, many who believe that we are trying to be architects with lesser standards. There may be some overlap, but our education is different, our exams are different and, in truth, interior designers offer services that are separate and distinct from those of architects.

"Architects spend millions of dollars fighting against licensing legislation for interior designers, and interior designers spend so much money trying to pass legislation. Imagine what we could accomplish if all of that money was put toward educating the public about the value of design, architectural or interior

design. I know that would be a far better use of our money, our efforts and our time. That's my dream."

In an effort to make her dream come true, Whited has returned to the halls of academia after a relatively short hiatus since being a student herself.

Whited's attraction to design began early. Because her father is an architect and engineer, Whited's exposure to the field was immediate. But after graduating from high school, she decided to major in forest engineering at the University of Maine in Orono.

"I flunked out in one semester," she says with a laugh that only 20 years of hindsight can supply. "But on the bright side, while I was there the university sponsored a contest to see who could design the best dorm room. I just did my usual thing to make the room comfortable for myself and I got an honorable mention. Thinking back to that competition, I decided to look into interior design as a career."

Whited then attended Bauder College in Atlanta, GA, and earned an associate of arts degree in interior design. She came back to Portland where she worked as a space planner and interior designer for a Herman Miller office dealer, and did some freelance work for her father's firm. Then, at the tender young age of 23, she decided to strike out on her own, providing design services for office, commercial and institutional buildings.

One project that Whited is especially proud of was the renovation of the Senate chambers and legislative offices in the Maine State House in Augusta because it represented a collaboration with an architect and construction manager—and also because it is in the building that she testified in when lobbying for interior design legislation several years earlier.

In the late 1980s, while still practicing professionally, Whited decided she wanted to go back to school. Unable to find what she was looking for in Maine, she traveled to the Boston Architectural Center (BAC) where she took a few classes in architecture. She actually considered get-

ting a degree in architecture, but chose to stick with her first love, interior design. By the time she had completed the courses she was interested in at the BAC, interior design licensing was becoming an issue that required more of her time and skills.

But the BAC was not letting Whited get away so easily. In 2000, the school asked Whited to deliver the commencement address at graduation—the first interior designer to speak at commencement in its 111-year history. Shortly thereafter, Whited became the first interior designer to serve on the school's board of directors.

"I challenged myself to help the school improve processes and the education offered to its interior design students. I guess that wasn't enough," Whited now says with a laugh.

The BAC's program director for interior design left the school in 2001. Ted Landsmark, Ph.D., president of the BAC, drove up to Portland to have lunch with Whited and talk about some ideas for helping the school get through the arduous process of FIDER accreditation. How could Whited help? Simple—by becoming the interim program director. For Whited, though, the answer was not quite so easy.

"I looked Ted straight in the eye and said, 'I'm four months pregnant.' He replied, 'So when can you start?'"

Start she did in September 2001, and a little more than a year later, Whited took on the position of program director full-time. Now she commutes two hours from Portland to Boston four days each week, usually staying over in Boston one night. Eventually Whited and her husband, Pete Chanis, plan to move the family—five-year-old Claire, and Alexander, 18 months—a bit closer to Boston, but they haven't figured out where just yet.

In addition to preparing the BAC for FIDER's accreditation, which the school received in 2002, Whited has been instrumental in overseeing the interior design program's curriculum development and teaching and advising students in the bachelor's and master's programs. Students at the BAC take classes in the evening and work full-time during the day at Boston-area interior design firms. Thus, they receive academic credit for classes and practice credit (and pay) for work. Twice each year students must submit a "Design Connection Essay" in which they explain how their practice informs their education and visa-versa.

In the classes that Whited teaches—Career Strategies, Interior Design Issues, Professional Practice, Advanced Studios and Color Theory—she routinely has her students create a strategic plan for themselves. Whited was introduced to strategic planning when she was on ASID's national strategic planning committee. Now she is a strong advocate of strategic planning for school, work and life.

"I believe that if you write it down, sort of set yourself a map

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of where you want to go, you can keep yourself on track better," she says. "When I was 17-years-old, I wrote down what I thought would be my perfect day five years in the future. Get up in the morning, exercise, drive to work in a red car, come home and have a delicious dinner made by my husband. Well, it may have taken a few more than five years, but I've achieved that vision early on in my career."

In addition to strategic planning, Whited focuses her students on the connection between the design of a facility and the success of an organization. While in professional practice, Whited would always ask clients for an organizational chart and strategic plan in order to better understand its goals. Without that understanding, Whited doesn't think it's possible to design a facility that will help an organization achieve its goals. In fact, this belief drove her to earn an M.S. in organization and management from Antioch New England Graduate School in 2002, even as she was taking on her new role at the BAC.

On a more personal level, Whited's return to academia has afforded her that opportunity to affect change in the heretofore difficult-to-change minds of architects. She is always looking for ways to have architecture and interior design students collaborate on their work.

"If I can't convince practicing architects that collaboration with interior designers is valuable, then I'm going to educate young architecture students of that value in real ways," says Whited. "I want my architecture students and my interior design students to understand the good and value that they each bring to a project." ¶

Personal Favorites

Lisa Whited on what she likes best and remembers the most.

FAVORITE BOOK

The Power of Positive Thinking
by Norman Vincent Peale

FAVORITE MOVIE

"Spinal Tap"

FAVORITE AUTHOR

Claire Chanis, my five-year-old daughter, writes and illustrates amazing stories

FAVORITE MUSICIAN

Composer Phillip Glass

FAVORITE RESTAURANT

Kathy's Diner, Portland, Maine

FAVORITE VACATION SPOT

Tie between Pattens Pond, Surry, Maine and Aaran Islands, Ireland

FAVORITE BUILDING AND INTERIOR SPACE

Baxter Building, now owned by the Maine College of Art, and formerly the Portland Public Library

FIRST DESIGN ASSIGNMENT

Redesigning an office for WBLM, a rock-and-roll radio station that was located in a trailer in Lewiston, ME

MOST CHALLENGING ASSIGNMENT

This one: director of interior design at the BAC

HOBBIES

Redesigning whatever house I happen to be living in at the moment (I literally draw plans of additions, renovations, etc.)

FAVORITE MEAL

My mother, who died last year, used to make a great chicken and rice dish (it was the only meal she could cook!). My mother-in-law makes a wicked good chicken and cheese casserole dish as well—that with rice is the ultimate in comfort food for me!

FAVORITE ICE CREAM

Ben & Jerry's Cherry Garcia

FAVORITE COLOR

It changes as I get older.... Used to be peach when I was young, now it is vibrant orange-red