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My Time at the Ohio University Interior Architecture Program 1998-2020



The past nine months have brought significant pressure and distraction from our normal lives. The forces that impacted us all came most powerfully from the pandemic, the economy, and the political environment.

These forces are affecting us individually, the university as an institution, the town of Athens, the state of Ohio, the country, and most of the world beyond our nation.

I have not wanted to contribute any additional distraction as we do our best in our academic pursuits within the Interior Architecture program environment.

Now, however, it is the right time to let you all know of my plans.

As Spring Semester registration for classes approaches you may have noticed that within the Interior Architecture (IA) courses offered for spring there are none that show 'Ziff' as instructor.

This is not an omission, not an error.

On December 31, 2020, I am retiring from full time university employment. I am shifting gears and looking forward to doing other things.

I have been here, at Ohio University, for almost twenty-three years.

I came to Ohio University in the summer of 1998 and began teaching full time in the Interior Design program that fall quarter (yes, we were on the quarter system then; fall, winter, spring quarters, each of ten weeks, and we were called 'Interior Design').

I accepted this faculty position because of the experience I had during my interviews in a gloomy gray March.

The initial impression that Athens made upon me, when we drove into town that Sunday afternoon was one of a miserable and run down little town, especially in the gray cold March weather.

The next morning Sharran Parkinson picked me up at the Ohio University Inn and we headed to campus for a day of interviews and presentations to students and faculty.

As the day progressed and I talked with faculty, students, and administrators, I was impressed and actually quite touched by how warm, welcoming, and genuine everyone seemed. The university, as presented through the people I met exuded a real sense of graciousness.

I accepted the position here because of this character
(and the fact that they made me a good offer!)

1998

I had come from the University of North Carolina-Greensboro, Department of Housing and Interior Design (now Department of Interior Architecture) where I had taught full time for ten years.



Athens was a much smaller town back in 1998, with far fewer shops, restaurants, and amenities in general. Where the Wal Mart is located now was the last remnant of an airport runway.

East State Street did not have most of the businesses that now line the street. There was no Lowe's, where Aldi is there was an old traditional lumber yard called Wolohans.

The Athena Grand theater was a Big Bear grocery store and the Kroger was half the size and far poorer in what it carried than it is today.

Ohio University & Tupper Hall



In 1998 the Interior Design program was located in the basement of Tupper Hall, which was the Home Economics building.

Interior Design occupied the former laundry and kitchen spaces in the home-economics program and when I arrived students had dedicated workstations that had been donated by Steelcase: 1980's office panels and work surfaces. The vertical panels were covered in a heather grey fabric that was looking quite worn by 1998.

When I arrived the program faculty was Dr. Judy Matthews, Dr. Sharran Parkinson, Dr. Jongran Lee, and adjunct faculty member and artist Harold Edwards.

Two full time faculty had just retired the previous year and were part of the faculty that greeted me when I interviewed for a faculty position in March of 1998, Dr. Katherine Steiner, and Don Pierucci.

Interior Design students did their drawings using T squares and triangles; hand drafting for all of their project work. Upstairs in Tupper Hall, on the second floor, there was a classroom that was a Computer Lab.

There were twenty pc computers in that room and our students took a 'computer design' class there twice a week, for 90 minutes a class learning early versions of AutoCAD.

As a new faculty member I was supposed to bring fresh ideas and new methods to the program.

My big revolutionary idea my first year here was that our students be required to purchase, install, and use parallel bars in place of T squares. A parallel bar is a far, far better tool for doing hand drafting than a T square.

1999

In the summer of 1999 we hired David Matthews as a full time faculty member.

David and I had taught together for five years at UNC-Greensboro. David had grown up in Athens and had gotten a double major at Ohio University, in Interior Design and in Fine Arts.

David brought a wealth of computer technology and software knowledge to the program along with a contemporary design sensibility.

2000

In the spring of 2000 the program went through a successful Foundation for Interior Design Education and Research (FIDER) review. (now Council for Interior Design Accreditation (CIDA)) with accreditation for six years.

In the summer of 2000 we moved from Tupper Hall to the newly, and fully, renovated Grover Center.

The entire interior of Grover Center had been 'gutted' and several new exterior portions of the building were added.

Grover Center, originally built in 1959 as the Ohio University gymnasium (prior to the construction of the Convocation Center) was where the Bobcat basketball team played their games up until 1968.

South Entrance of Grover Center



The year before the move, 1999-2000, Dr. Judy Matthews had been appointed Interim Dean of the College of Health and Human Services, (when Dr. Laura Chapman, the previous dean of the college retired) the academic college in which the Interior Design program was housed.

Judy had been the School of Human and Consumer Sciences Director for many years (the 'school' unit in which the Interior Design program was housed).

Judy was one of the reasons I accepted the position here and she was the person who hired me. Judy's role as Interim Dean was fortunate, and very important to the Interior Design program's future. The overall space allocation, program finalization, and final space planning of the Grover Center interior was being done while Judy was Interim Dean.

Because of Judy Matthews' vision and her leadership we got a very generous amount of space on the third floor of Grover Center, with large studio spaces, faculty offices, and two dedicated classrooms.

Our move to Grover Center came after a great parade of huge blue Steelcase semi-trucks, lined up along Richland Avenue to deliver much of the furniture that still makes up the Grover Center interior.

The Interior Architecture faculty were given permission to select the design studio furniture, from a limited list, that best met program needs. We selected the Bretford desks and side tables that are still in studio today, along with Herman Miller 'Caper' chairs and Herman Miller storage boxes upholstered with the famous 'Dot' fabric designed by Ray Eames.

Fall 2000

By the fall of 2000 my colleagues Sharran Parkinson, David Matthews, and I had substantially revised the program's curriculum, adding studio seminar classes, lighting design components, an expanded computer class, a senior thesis studio, and a senior thesis preparation course.

The name of the program was changed from 'Interior Design' to Interior Architecture

Interior design presented itself in name as a program that was rooted in an out-dated home economics model while the professional reality of the program was that it was a serious, accredited, and high quality design education program.

The change in name was made to express the contemporary content and character of what interior design education was really addressing; the architecture of inside spaces.

Many programs around the country have since 2000 changed to 'interior architecture' for similar reasons.

September 2001

I was working in my office, Grover Center W353, at 8:36am, on the beautiful sunny morning of September 11, 2001, when the online news networks showed the first airplane crashing into the North World Trade Center tower building.

By days end the world had changed dramatically and even here in southeast Ohio there was a frightening sense of vulnerability and imminent danger.

2002

My role in the program shifted a bit in 2002 when I agreed to serve as Area Chair when Dr. Sharran Parkinson stepped down from that role.

2004

In the spring of 2004 I was awarded promotion to Associate Professor and tenure (permanent faculty position).

It takes a good bit of work to achieve that!

For the next twelve years I served as program chair and took part in many curriculum revisions and additions driven by faculty desire to maintain a dynamic and contemporary character and content in the program.

2005

In 2005 Dr. Sharran Parkinson accepted the director's position at the Virginia Commonwealth University Interior Design program.

To fill the faculty position she vacated we hired Vincent Wojtas (now Caranchini) as a full time faculty member. He came to us from Chicago where he had been teaching at the Harrington Institute of Design.

Vince, an MFA artist, brought an artist's knowledge, skill, and sensibility to our color theory classes and a scholar's approach to our history of interiors classes.

2006

In 2006 we went through another successful FIDER accreditation review with accreditation for six years.

2008

The economic crash of 2008-2009 brought the university face to face with major economic challenges.

By 2011 it was decided by the upper administration that the College of Health and Human Services, founded in 1982, would be broken up with the programs in the college relocated across the university.

The stated reason for this action was that a regional Academic Health Center was going to be created that required a dedicated academic health unit, a medical school, and some governmental agencies.

The former college of Health and Human Services was to become the College of Health Sciences and Professions, which it is today.

Rumors flew around campus but the Academic Health Center never came to pass. It was rumored that there never was sufficient support for such a creation within the state government and the medical community.

In the spring of 2011 we held a 'search' for a full time faculty position.

We interviewed a number of good applicants and were delighted to hire Daniel J. Harper, who came to us from Chicago where he had been teaching design in both face to face settings and in online programs.

Dan brought professional design experience and skills and a gracious and enthusiastic design sensibility to the program. He immediately fit in with his colleagues and with the Athens community overall.

2012

Interior Architecture became a program area in the School of Art, in Seigfred Hall.

By 2012 the IA faculty were part of the School of Art, in the College of Fine Arts. Our new home was lively, zany even, and quite different from our previous academic home.

The School of Human and Consumer Sciences (the modernized Home Economics school) was made up of programs and faculty that were substantially 'social science' in their methods, content, and character.

The IA faculty were generally seen as the 'creative and odd' folks in that unit. In the School of Art the IA faculty were seen as the 'business oriented and mainstream' folks.

It was funny. The art faculty were, for sure, far more expressive of the world of creative undertakings; they were artists, we were designers.

2012

In the fall of 2012 the program went through another successful CIDA review, with accreditation for six year.

2013

In the fall of 2013 I wrote and presented a proposal to change the name of the School of Art to the 'School of Art and Design.' This proposal became the subject of much debate for the next six months.

In the spring of 2014 the proposal came to a faculty vote. The vote was positive (by a very slim margin) and the official school name became 'School of Art+Design.'

I found this change to be empowering; we now belonged, we were no longer outsiders trying to fit in, we were in!

Three years ago, in 2017, our colleague Vince Caranchini accepted a faculty position at Northern Arizona University-Flagstaff, after being here for twelve years and serving as area chair for his last three years.

Vince's departure was the reason we were allowed to search for a new faculty member this past spring when we hired Dr. Nichole Campbell who comes to us from the University of Florida.

Nichole has extensive background, credentials, and research knowledge in the design of healthy environments, evidence based design, and human behavioral issues in design.

From 2014 to today there have been many challenges within the university and within the School of Art+Design. Curriculum changes, enrollment concerns, funding cuts, and other issues have made maintaining our program difficult at times.

Even within the context of many challenges, the IA program remains a program in the School of Art+Design that is widely regarded as a strong undergraduate program.

We have an appropriate number of majors (for the size of the program) a lean faculty that is effective and productive as university employees, and a record of high quality outcomes for our graduates.

As we work to respond to the world of the pandemic with online teaching and increasing economic pressures on the university the IA program continues to benefit from having large studio spaces with dedicated workstations for each IA student that we will occupy again!

Thank you to Judy Matthews even after all these years!

After working as an architect and interior designer for eight years I applied for a faculty position at UNC-Greensboro and after three rounds of interviews I was hired.

I went into an academic career in 1988 because I felt a strong calling to the world of teaching design.

I had experienced what I found to be the excellent and really interesting world of design and design education while I was getting my Master of Architecture degree at Virginia Tech.

The faculty that I had while at Virginia Tech were interesting, energetic, and ferociously dedicated to high design, but many were disappointing as teachers.

Some were downright mean in their way of teaching and interacting with students. Some were very aloof and would not take time, or make the effort, to talk with individual students.

While at Virginia Tech I decided that design and design education was without question an essential and fascinating piece of the world of humans.

I also decided that it must be possible to be a teacher of that content in a better way, without being mean, without stamping on a student's physical model during a critique (really!).

I have been teaching for thirty-three years and I have enjoyed every one of those years as a teacher.

For better and for worse, there are, in addition to teaching, many other things required of a university professor.

To achieve promotion and tenure a faculty member must compile a record of scholarly activities, such as publishing articles, attending and presenting papers at conferences, exhibiting creative work, and other forms of discipline appropriate scholarly work.

Beyond that faculty are also required to do 'service' work for the university and for one's discipline.

Being on school, college, and university committees, writing reports, taking part in accreditation reviews, revising curriculum, and many more university environment tasks that are done each year, each semester are all part of a faculty member's job description and requirements.

I am retiring at the end of this Fall Semester and will take the entire Spring Semester off.

Starting at the end of December the Interior Architecture program will be chaired by Professor Dan Harper.

Dan is an outstanding educator and designer and because of his role here I know that our program will continue to provide students with an excellent design education.

When the world is once again safe, in pandemic terms, and when Ohio University's Interior Architecture program returns to face-to-face classes (hopefully next fall) I will make myself available, and will be pleased to teach, one, perhaps two, classes as an 'adjunct' faculty member (which means paid by the course rather than a yearly salary.)

My wife Kate, our dog Beemo, and I will continue to live in Athens and I plan on maintaining a relationship with the Interior Architecture program, with the faculty, and with the students, as a design colleague and possible resource.



Enjoy every day as much as possible.

Be aware of how you live your life.

Be aware of the decisions you make and how they impact the quality and character of your life.

Notice and seek out good design!

Most of us are well positioned to do good and enjoyable things every day, every year.

Onward!