



MAGAZINE

LICENSE AND REGISTRATION, PLEASE: WHY LEGISLATION OF THE DESIGN TRADE MATTERS

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Perhaps the only thing more confusing than the state-by-state laws governing the work of interior design professionals is the plethora of definitions of what “interior design” entails. That question—What the heck is interior design, anyway?—is what led designers in the 1970s and ’80s to organize and advocate for regulation in the first place.

TERMS TO KNOW

NCARB: The National Council of Architectural Registration Boards, a nonprofit corporation that administers the Architectural Experience Program and Architect Registration Examination.

NCIDQ: National Council for Interior Design Qualification, a certification exam used to license interior designers in all U.S. states and territories with regulations, except for California.

It’s important to make one thing clear: No national regulations govern the interior design profession, and all interior design-related state laws exempt single-family homes—meaning there is no licensing requirement to

Mandatory registration: Commonly referred to as licensure, this gives designers working in commercial spaces the ability to submit documents to building departments, to own more than a third of an architecture and design firm, and to have control over bids of state and federal projects. They also get to call themselves registered or licensed designers.

Voluntary registration: Professionals can choose to register with their state, giving them the same rights as a mandatory registration.

Private certification: A registration process independent of the government and run by a private organization. If a designer uses “NCIDQ” after their name, that’s a private certification. The NCIDQ examination uses the Interior Design Educators Council (IDEC) certification.

Exemptions: Qualified interior designers may submit projects for a permit within a specified scope of work, even though their state’s law stipulates that only an architect or engineer are licensed to submit for whole buildings.

Continuing education requirements: Some registered practitioners must complete CEUs, or continuing education units, to maintain their registration. In some states, these courses must be focused on health, safety and welfare so the consumer can be confident that the interior designer is knowledgeable on issues that affect the public. Requirements range from 27 minutes to 24 hours per year.

by laws in 27 states, Puerto Rico and Washington, D.C. “Similar to architects, engineers, nurses and other professions [whose work] affect the public, you have to pass an exam to show you are qualified and have the space-level knowledge to do your job,” says Kelly.

practice residential interior design anywhere in the U.S. Nor is the label interior designer regulated. When they were first introduced, many state regulations included an attempt to control use of the phrase, but that legislative debate fizzled quickly. “Interior designer was such a wide variety of what people do and how they’re educated, that the effort to regulate it was met with a lot of resistance,” explains **Emily Kelly**, the director of advocacy, public policy and legislative affairs at the International Interior Design Association (IIDA). Today, the right to call oneself a registered, certified or licensed interior

designer is protected

Regulations focus on non-residential spaces because those projects—which include prisons, courthouses, hospitals, hotels, restaurants and retail stores—are all places where the government has an interest in public safety, health and welfare. “Interior designers can have a direct impact on potential hazards, as well as disaster mitigation and planning,” says **Bryan Soukup**, the vice president of government and public affairs for the American Society of Interior Designers (ASID).

Of the laws that do exist, some mandate designers working in commercial spaces to register with their state in order to practice. These laws often often give designers the stamp and seal privileges typically reserved for architects and engineers, allowing designers working on commercial spaces to get their own permits. Other laws establish voluntary registration; in those states, designers who register are allowed to use a specific title, like registered interior designer. Registration fees vary from less than 50 to a couple hundred dollars.

Efforts to limit and expand a designer’s purview is an ongoing and evolving debate across the country. Because designers move—and frequently practice—across state lines, the IIDA advocates for all states to adopt a uniform interior design law that includes an outline of the scope of work for the profession. Additionally, they assert that all registered designers (by definition, those with a formal education who have passed their certification exam) should have the ability to stamp and seal their own construction documents.

a registered federal lobbyist, 75 percent of his job consists of working on state issues affecting the interior design industry—topics like practice rights, service taxes, the authority to stamp and seal construction documents for permit, firm ownership issues, and the ability to place lien laws on clients who skip out on bills. The remaining 25 percent focuses on federal pursuits, from building codes and accessibility to standards and sustainability policy. When he's not traveling between state capitols, Soukup is on Capitol Hill representing the national interests of the interior design industry. His primary focus is fighting deregulation, which periodically becomes a political rallying cry—and is surprisingly bipartisan. Regulations on workers in any trade are viewed as extraneous government spending and interference on the conservative side, while the cost of the formal education, tests and registration represent a barrier to entry on the liberal side, says Soukup. “[Either way], policy makers say, ‘Why do we need to regulate somebody who’s going into somebody else’s home and picking out pillows or wallpaper?’ But it is not the intent to regulate residential work; the proposed regulations are for interior design in public, commercial spaces where large groups of the public meet and safety codes are implicated.”

But it's not just politicians who have misaligned the cogs in pushing legislation through. Professional organizations for architects, including the American Institute of Architects (AIA), have lobbying arms of their own—and a long-standing history of opposing any regulations that include stamping and sealing rights for interior designers at both the state and national levels. Much like the IIDA and ASID, the AIA frames its argument primarily around public safety: “We create next-generation energy-saving

buildings to make our communities healthier and safer,” reads the AIA’s national standards on professional licensure. “The essential purpose of licensing architects is to protect the health, safety and welfare of the public and shield consumers from unqualified practitioners.” The demise of North Carolina’s HB590 in 2017 is a fitting example of the organization’s influence. The state bill, which would have allowed registered interior designers who had passed the NCIDQ exam to stamp and seal documents, sailed through the House but ultimately stalled in the Senate and failed to pass. On its website, the North Carolina chapter of the AIA cheered the bill’s demise as “something like a victory,” stating, “the train that was about to crush our profession stopped.” They attributed their success in large part to the work of at least 50 local chapter members who met with elected representatives “to educate them on the consequences of the bill.”

The IIDA and ASID agree that registered designers are indeed qualified to carry

out these tasks. Ultimately, both are fighting for regulation in order to expand the business and practice rights of designers, and to reassure consumers and clients that a qualified designer is working on their project. “Explaining to legislators why interior design should be regulated is tough, because they don’t [always] understand what it is, or that it’s just coming in and making things look pretty,” says Kelly. “Many of our members say that they are the only working professionals that are not regulated. They want to strive for that privilege.”

GET ORGANIZED

Two major networks—the International Interior Design Association (IIDA) and the American Society of Interior Designers (ASID)—are at the front lines of the fight for professionalization and regulation of interior design. But they’re also destinations for designers to gather, network and learn.

	IIDA	ASID
PURPOSE	Founded in 1994 through the merger of the Institute of Business Designers, the International Society of Interior Designers, and the Council of Federal Interior Designers to support the commercial interior design industry.	Founded in 1975 to advocate for the professional interior design industry, focusing on how designers’ work positively impacts public welfare.
HEADQUARTERS	Chicago	Washington, D.C.
STRUCTURE	35 chapters across the globe, 98 city centers, and 115 campus centers	46 chapters in the U.S. and more than 200 student chapters
HOW MANY MEMBERS?	15,000+ across 58 countries	25,000+ nationwide
	» To join at the professional	» ASID welcomes

	<p>level, designers and educators must prove that they have passed the NCIDQ or NCARB; educators must also be an active department chair or full-time instructor at a postsecondary program.</p>	<p>designers at all career stages and in all design specialties, including health care, workplace, institutional, retail and hospitality, education, and residential.</p>
WHO CAN JOIN?	<p>» Associate members have met education requirements for NCIDQ but have not yet passed the test.</p> <p>» Membership is also open to industry professionals who are not practicing but make practice possible (including lighting designers, photographers, consultants, dealers, distributors and manufacturers)</p>	<p>» ASID members also work in interior architecture, develop and sell industry-specific products, educate students at universities, colleges, or accredited schools of interior design, and are current students enrolled in postsecondary programs at these schools.</p>
HOW MUCH DOES IT COST?	<p>Annual dues range from \$60–\$535, depending on what membership you have and when you join.</p>	<p>Annual dues range from \$85–\$15,000 for individuals, students and brands.</p>
MAINTAINING MEMBERSHIP	<p>10 hours of continuing education (CEU) every two years.</p>	<p>10 hours of continuing education (CEU) every two years.</p>
WHAT ABOUT STUDENTS?	<p>» Anyone in a postsecondary interior design or architecture program can join.</p> <p>» A student membership gives students access to a mentorship program,</p>	<p>» Anyone actively completing a minimum of a two-year program can join; students can maintain their memberships for up to six years for a onetime fee.</p> <p>» Student chapters of</p>

volunteering opportunities, and centers on campus that connect other student members as well as job seekers.

ASID are led by students, with the assistance of a faculty adviser, on campuses across the country.

PERKS OF MEMBERSHIP

Continuing education, industry recognition and networking.

Continuing education, advocacy, networking, awards programs, trade discounts and insurance products.

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