

What is Commercial Interior Design?

The commercial interior design industry is as diverse and as rich as the solutions these trained professionals create. Whether they're known as commercial interior designers, project interior designers or design specialists, the commercial interior design industry is defined as one that identifies and applies creative and technical design solutions to interior spaces within commercial (non-residential) buildings. [IIDA Northern California](#) represents these professionals in the region.

The industry's collective goal is to understand and improve upon how people use spaces within commercial buildings, while being safe, healthy and efficient during the process. Their work must conform to all local and state codes, which these professionals must know and follow thoroughly to ensure compliance. Some states require commercial interior designers to be licensed or registered and to document their formal education and experience. Currently in California, there is no licensure requirement for interior designers, although voluntary certification is available through [California Council for Interior Design Certification](#), a private nonprofit entity.

Commercial interior designers' solutions also help make commercial buildings efficient, ergonomically sound, secure, accessible and beautiful – all while enhancing the quality of life and culture of the occupants.

It is also important to note what commercial interior designers are *not*. They are not interior decorators, who work on private residential spaces and focus primarily on aesthetic considerations such as furnishings and finishes within residences. In California, interior decorators are not required to be licensed or to have formal training.

“We believe that commercial interior design has the power to enlighten, inspire and improve the world around us. However, this does not happen by osmosis, but by the continual effort of design professionals to do the work of transformation.”

Lisa Bottom
Past President, IIDA Northern California
Principal, AECOM

WHY?

We believe built commercial spaces should help people flourish, professionally and personally.

HOW?

We use our training and expertise to work with clients and a team of professionals to execute commercial designs that anticipate the needs of people who will experience the building.

WHAT?

We design commercial interiors that are safe, code-compliant, functional, healthy, sustainable and beautiful.

Did you know?

[Source for all figures cited: IIDA]

- People spend more time in commercial spaces than at home. This diverse population includes different ages, physical and intellectual capabilities, cultural backgrounds and attitudes and preferences.
- 80% of commercial interior designers are owners of or are employed by small businesses. The rest are employed by architecture and design firms or large commercial real estate companies.
- A typical commercial interior designer has 14 years of education and experience.
- Approximately 70% of commercial interior designers are women.
- The commercial interior design industry brings in an estimated \$49 billion annually in the U.S.
- Commercial interior designers carry the knowledge and responsibility for code-compliant and sustainable design choices in commercial spaces.
- CIDs' work supports corporate brands and corporate culture that can, in turn, help attract a workforce and improve employee performance, satisfaction and retention.

Commercial interior designers work to optimize the functionality, safety, sustainability and aesthetics of commercial spaces. Their efforts touch the health, safety and well-being of millions of people every day.

What is a commercial building?

Commercial buildings are, essentially, every built space that is not a private residence. These include: office buildings, stores, schools (non-DSA, to be technical), hotels, restaurants, hospitals, medical offices, government buildings (airports, jails, courthouses) and even some high-occupancy residential buildings. They are often spaces used by a broad mix of people. Their construction and design are governed by state and local building codes to ensure their safety and functionality.

What Commercial Interior Designers Bring to the Table

Businesses, governments, universities, hospitals and real estate developers of all shapes and sizes benefit from the expertise commercial interior designers bring to projects.

Safety, Health and Wellness

- “Well-certified” is an emerging standard for commercial buildings. Commercial interior designers consider the physical and emotional well-being of occupants and bring design solutions that improve their health and experience in the space.

“People come to restaurants for cultural experiences and be part of a community. Even with the safety and economic challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, we need to focus on maximizing diner experiences - how it feels to sit at every table and adjust spaces so the customers feel safe, yet the experiences are still meaningful and delightful. That is what will ensure they return – and ensure the long-term health of the business.”

Yoko Ishihara, President, IIDA Northern California
Principal, Wilson Ishihara

- Health and wellness decisions are supported by material choices, physical design and aesthetics. Designing for wellness includes such considerations as lighting, ventilation, water filtration, climate control and other aspects of the building itself.
 - The 2020 COVID-19 global pandemic underscored the significant role that all shared spaces play in containing contagion. Just as they did following other major disasters such as earthquakes, fires and floods, it will be commercial interior designers who will envision and implement the new practices needed to promote good public health practices in the future.
- Good interior design has the power to positively influence people. It helps both buildings and its occupants function more efficiently, sustainably and safely.
- Commercial interior designers utilize their training and expertise to improve how people experience spaces in terms of physical comfort (ergonomics, temperature, lighting, acoustics, traffic flow) and aesthetics (color, textures, ambience).
- Commercial interior designers are experts in understanding the required quality and durability of materials selected to meet the projected needs, resources and usage of the space.

Cost

- Particularly in California, costs associated with commercial construction and building operation are increasing rapidly and exponentially. Commercial interior designers help create cost-effective solutions based on client needs regarding efficiency and functionality of spaces.
- The cost of *not* employing commercial interior designers for projects can be significant. These costs include rework, lack of efficiency and functionality of the space and liability due to injury and loss of life.

Sustainability

- Commercial interior designers encourage the principles of environmental sustainability and provide the expertise needed to create sustainable interior spaces.
- Ensuring the health of the environment and mitigating the impact of climate change are growing world-wide concerns. Regulations, clients and the public are demanding that commercial buildings be built using environmentally sensitive materials and practices and that buildings function in a sustainable way.
- Commercial interior designers adhere to “green” building codes and are increasingly applying LEED certification (an industry-wide standard of sustainability ratings for buildings) standards with their designs.

**“if an interior is well designed, there are no questions, just positive responses. You're not slipping on the floor and falling and hurting yourself because the designer specified the correct slip-resistant tile.
That's why we're important.”**

Katie Toth, President, IIDA Southern California
Senior Interior Designer, HBG Design

Eight Benefits of Working With Commercial Interior Designers (CIDs)

- CIDs envision and create what people experience most in commercial spaces – materials used, spatial organization and flow, ergonomics, acoustics, etc.
- CIDs connect the dots between the architect's drawings and what you see/touch in the spaces.
- CIDs save time and money.
- CIDs help protect clients from liability.
- CIDs carry expertise no other professional has, envisioning and anticipating future needs.
- CIDs translate business objectives into special use.
- CIDs help create safe spaces by complementing what clients do or by filling in project gaps.
- CIDs know the codes and know the vendors – they bring solutions.

How Commercial Interior Design is Evolving

CID has changed over the years. Up until the middle of the 20th century, much of the work done by CIDs was handled by architects and interior decorators. As construction and design practices and codes have become more advanced, the CID industry has emerged as a distinctive professional category supported by a professional organization, education, training, certification and regulation.

The requirements for commercial buildings continue to change over time. Functionality, safety, sustainability and healthfulness of commercial buildings are constant considerations as the human experience, technology and society evolve.

The advent of the COVID-19 global pandemic has presented a new challenge to the CID. CIDs and the industry must now address how commercial building design can help mitigate the spread of infectious diseases and balance that with the economics of managing a business. Factors that need to be reassessed include how to move people to and through their workspaces or other destinations; interior surfaces and how they can be kept clean and with minimal human touchpoints; air quality, filtration and freshness; and how to balance health-driven spatial requirements with ambience and how people experience a space like a restaurant or other entertainment venue.

Profile of a “Typical” Commercial Interior Designer

Source: Analysis of 2,200 IIDA members queried for the IIDA Interior Design Compensation Report 2019

Variables include: tenure, education, credentials, job function, supervisory responsibility and geographic region

- Age / Sex: Late 30s / Female
- Ethnic Background: Caucasian/Non-Hispanic
- Employment: Works in a mid-sized, U.S.-based architecture, engineering or interior design firm with 80+ employees
- Education: Bachelor’s degree in interior design
- Expertise: Average of 13 years, including supervisory experience and at least one professional credential (e.g., LEED or NCIDQ certification)
- Compensation: \$78,100 annual base salary; \$69,000 median salary

Commercial Interior Designers Versus Architects: What’s the Difference in Salary?

The gap between those with degrees in architecture and commercial interior design is closing. Understanding the unique skills that interior designers bring to projects is on the rise, leading to an increase in designers’ salaries. For example, the salary gap between those with a bachelor’s degree in architecture versus those with degrees in interior design is changing: from \$35,000 in 2016 to \$23,000 in 2018. Furthermore, design professionals with at least one credential earned a median salary \$15,000 greater than those without (\$75,000 vs. \$60,000).

What’s the potential for Growth Within the Commercial Design Industry?

According to the 2018 *IIDA Index Report*, the commercial design industry experienced moderate and steady YOY growth from 2016-2017, with positive growth across all market segments and project sizes. Furthermore, 65% of respondents to the *IIDA Interior Design Compensation Report* earned cash bonuses in the 12 months prior to September 2018.

Strong job satisfaction, increases in base salary, strong billable rates and the likelihood that designers will recommend the profession to others contributes to the affirmation of industry health. According to the Department of Labor Statistics, the interior design profession will grow an additional 4 percent over the next 10 years – parallel with architecture. This means that demand for designers and professionals in associated roles (sales staff, educators and project managers) is expected to increase.

What is IIDA?

Founded in 1994, the International Interior Design Association (IIDA) is a 501(c)(6) not-for-profit philanthropic organization with a mission to advance commercial interior design as a profession. The [Northern California chapter](#) was founded that same year and now represents more than 900 CIDs; the [Southern California chapter](#) was established in 1995 and today represents more than 800 professionals. As with its national counterpart, its collective goal is to support and promote the profession through education, sharing knowledge and best practices, advocacy and research. The work of commercial interior designers touches the health, safety and well-being of millions of people every day.

Current IIDA California leadership:

- [Yoko Ishihara](#), president-elect, IIDA Northern California
- [Katie Toth](#), president-elect, IIDA Southern California

For more information, please visit www.iida.org or www.iidanc.org.

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