By Elizabeth Fitch Weiss

Both architectural and interior design firms have struggled for decades with the question: Where does architectural design end and interior design begin and what is the bridge between the two? Defining these two disciplines to clients can be tricky, especially when they are paying for what can sometimes be seen as overlapping services.

Anita Sandberg, associate and director of interior design at Gorman Richardson Architects (GRA), believes there is a bridge between architecture and interior design but that bridge has gotten “smaller and fuzzier over the years.” When thinking of an entire building, she sees interior architecture as the macro and interior design as the micro. Sandberg, who works closely with the architects at GRA, believes having interior designers in-house provides opportunities for the two to support each other and give clients “a full spectrum of services.”

Steve Lewis, AIA, GRA’s design principal, agrees: “The two inform each other – architects are focused on the enclosure and, while a good architectural designer is also sensitive to the interiors, interior designers bring a richness and depth to the project.” Lewis is a big fan of having an interior design studio in-house: “You want interior designers to understand your concepts for a space intimately. When you are bringing them in as a consultant, it’s harder to collaborate spontaneously.”

Sandberg points out that interior designers have a greater understanding of spatial issues that relate to work, understanding work flow, and knowledge of the trends that support work. According to Sandberg, it is an interior designer’s overall understanding of programming, test fitting and even a building’s contents that feeds into the design as a whole.

“Every environment has its own unique requirements,” agrees Lewis. He points out that communication between architect and interior designer from the inception of the project is key in order to design a building that reflects its owner’s and users’ needs. Lewis feels it is often the interior designer, working closely with users during programming, who conveys the project’s initial goals, vision, and needs to the architect. He feels the final design is a direct reflection of the interaction between the two.

At the same time, interior design has evolved over the years. The term “interior architecture” is fairly recent and Sandberg recalls that in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s a similar discussion was taking place regarding the differences between interior design and interior decorating.

“Technology has changed everything, from finishes to furniture selection,” Sandberg says. Especially in furniture selection, the merging of technology and systems furniture has created an entire morphing industry that interior designers have to be fully familiar with. Sandberg also points out the need for designers to follow the perceived best practices of design.

“Green buildings really bring interior architecture and interior design closer together,” remarks Lewis. When the firm is working on a building that is intended to be LEED certified, whether it is new construction, commercial interiors, or retail, both architects and interior designers are brainstorming and innovating materials, systems, lighting, finishes – whatever is needed to give a client a responsive building. There is little separation between the two disciplines at that point, says Sandberg.

Ultimately, it isn’t really necessary to define the differences between interior architecture and interior design but it is important to recognize how the two add value to a project. If interior design is the Yin then interior architecture is the Yang that makes a building work for its occupants. One brings form and one brings function. Just as Yin-Yang represents the interaction of two energies, it is that same interaction of energy that bridges the two.

Elizabeth Fitch Weiss is the managing principal of Gorman Richardson Architects. GRA is a 25-person planning, interior design and architectural firm located in Hopkinton, Massachusetts, focused on corporate, life science, institutional and retail facilities; sustainable design, and building envelope sciences.