

EDUCATION



Eve Mercier was told by design professionals that they would snap up graduates as soon as they come out of the school.
Photo: Jonathan Wong

Inner vision

The city's first dedicated interior design school has been set up to meet growing demand, writes Kate Whitehead

Hong Kong now has its first dedicated interior design school. Opened a month ago, the school is currently offering short courses and in September will launch a one-year diploma.

Insight School of Interior Design is the brainchild of Eve Mercier, a qualified interior designer and art historian. This is her second stay in Hong Kong, having lived here 14 years ago when she set up her own fashion design company and worked for Shanghai Tang.

After a stint in London where she set up her own interior design agency, she returned 18 months ago. While renewing her contacts in the industry, she says she kept hearing the same message from architects and developers.

"They were all telling me that there are massive projects happening in Hong Kong, but there are not enough properly trained interior designers to meet the demand," says Mercier.

It's taken just a year from conception to securing a site in Chai Wan, outfitting the school and lining up a stellar team of tutors and visiting mentors. That's fast work.

"That's Hong Kong," laughs Mercier, and her understanding of how the city works as well as her contacts have helped her create a school inspired by the ones in Europe.

The 4,000 sq ft school occupies the top floor of an industrial building and has plenty of windows, flooding the space with natural light and offering a harbour view. Smart partnerships means the facility is well equipped. The European

lighting specialist Zumtobel has kitted out the lighting studio, giving students the opportunity to get first-hand experience with colour temperature and the impact of lighting on a space.

The course tutors have impressive industry backgrounds. Côme Remy, who teaches the history of style and the history of 20th century furniture, was head of the 20th Century Decorative Art department at Christie's for four years and Ulrich Geissler, who teaches the sustainable design short course and works on the diploma programme, works with Foster and Partners design services in Hong Kong.

And the team of seven visiting mentors is equally impressive. Among them is Douglas Young, founder of G.O.D; British sculptor Ian Abell; designer Joyce Wang; and curator Catherine Arminjon.

Insight is working towards offering an internationally recognised diploma, but that's not possible at present because Hong Kong doesn't recognise interior design as a field of education, instead being offered as a module in design schools alongside product design,



Employers want to see you being savvy and practical and having a strong portfolio

EVE MERCIER, SCHOOL FOUNDER

graphic design and other similar disciplines.

Mercier says industry insiders aren't concerned whether the diploma is internationally recognised, they just want interior designers that know what they're talking about, and she is confident her students will find work in Hong Kong after graduating.

"When you interview for jobs, employers want to see you being savvy and practical and having a strong portfolio. That's what we bring to the school, as well as a lot of industry links," says Mercier.

Although the school can't offer accreditation, it's done the next best thing by setting up an exchange programme with the KLC School of Design in London that will give students the opportunity to attend lectures on British interior design. Offered as a master class, the one-week training will include visits to historic houses, specialist finishing studios and showrooms.

All the courses are taught in English and there's plenty of flexibility in the programming. Short courses are offered on evenings and Saturdays to allow working professionals to top up their knowledge in specific areas. And the one-year diploma is split into two sections – residential interiors and commercial interiors. Take just one subject (over three months or two days a week for a year) and students come out with a certificate. Take both options and graduates will get the diploma.

The one-year diploma begins on September 15 and costs HK\$245,000. Mercier is adamant that diploma graduates will

come away with a strong technical grounding and be able to avoid the practical mistakes so often made by unqualified interior designers.

"People have this image of interior designers being just women who can choose the colour of a cushion. That's not the way I was trained and not the way I want the school to train interior designers. We are going to teach everybody how to be an interior architect before being an interior designer," she says.

In addition to classroom time, diploma students will also complete a 100-hour internship and will have the opportunity to work on some real design projects. Mercier has lined up some property developers and hotel chains that will bring their projects to the school.

"They will get a free design proposal and the students will get to work on a project that is real," says Mercier, adding that she hopes those connections may lead to internships and possibly jobs.

The short courses are open to all and could be suitable for new homeowners who want to design their own flats to professionals looking to hone their skills. There are 10 short courses on offer from how to design to small spaces to lighting design and textiles for interiors. The short courses are mostly one to two days but can be offered as two to four evenings and cost between HK\$1,990 and HK\$3,950.

\$245,000

The cost in HK dollars of the one-year diploma at Insight

"Architects and developers are all telling me, if you train them we are going to snap them up as soon as they come out of the school because we are dying for some people who know what they are talking about," says Mercier.

Within the first three weeks of opening, 140 short courses had been booked and a number of women – this is an area of study dominated by women – came back to take additional classes. And a few of those students are professionals who are dissatisfied in their current job and thinking of a career change.

"We welcome people who have already had a career because a good interior should have many skills, including project management, budgeting and [knowing] how to deal with a client. When you've been working in marketing or banking [these are things] you know already," she says.

Insight will also offer tailor-made training for companies that want to improve the skills of staff in specific areas, and Insight has already seen expressions of interest from developers and luxury retail firms. life@scmp.com

