



ALLYSE YIRAN LI, RID

Principal Designer, Founder at RAAW Design & Associates

Founding principal of RAAW Design & Associates, Allyse Y. Li is the vision behind the Vancouver based interior design and residential development firm. As an RID, Li's design professionalism and advocacy for sustainable development practices manifests in all her undertakings. Since 2016, Li has successfully led over 100 interior projects ranging from residential to commercial, multifamily and hospitality categories. Paired with an unparalleled approach to interior design and integrated project management, her expertise in urban land economics with a focus in sustainable development, renders every RAAW custom home and interior awe-inspiring and unique.

As an educator and an ambassador of the NCIDQ Exam, Li regularly speaks to design college and university student groups in Canada and the US. Her research in the academe focuses on Urbanism through disruptive creation in design and planning. Her personal and professional endorsement of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, in particular SDG#4 is a theme in her Graduate studies and research. Li's distinct and multidisciplinary academic background drew her to examine Net Zero Building (NZB) methodologies under a tentative totality, ultimately envisioning new themes and variations in the areas of affordable, universal and resilient built environments across developmental landscapes. Through her practice, research and teaching, she works to bridge the gaps between market, academe and non-profit sectors.

Li also holds an ARCT in Piano Performance from the Royal Conservatory of Music, with music theory and history pedagogy since 2011. She is currently the mother of two and is working on the first collection of authoring a series of children's literature, using stories to teach and inspire social responsibility in sustainable living to a young audience.

Q: Brief intro/What type of work do you do/ where do you work?

A: As a registered interior design practitioner, I'm involved in the full spectrum of the practice. My work is never limited to single office desk or a particular physical setting. On the contrary, it is conducted in a multitude of settings.

As much as I love indulging in RAAW design's beautiful new firm interiors and enjoying my new custom work station (which I designed for myself), I also appreciate the diverse settings where my practice leads me. I've led team meetings from project sites through video conferencing, and drafted alternate construction details on site in efforts to issue site instructions in time; I've finalized revisions for specifications from a construction site trailer amongst the project developer and consultants; and during the height of the pandemic, I've also managed

subcontractors for our contracting side of the firm from my kitchen with my one & two year-olds in the same space.

I must also acknowledge the fact that I am fortunate to be one of those designers who live, breathe and feel empowered by design itself. For me, the boundaries between what's personal and what's work is blurry. Knowing that my practice makes up an integral part of my happiness and wellbeing allows me to naturally integrate work with life, and vice versa.

Q: When did you decide to take the NCIDQ Exam? How did you decide what order to take them in? Why did you become NCIDQ Certified/why was it important to you?

A: The idea of being a professional interior design practitioner was always something I knew I wanted to do. There are certain professional

capacities which NCIDQ signifies. Things such as thorough knowledge in the building code, standard construction details, and project procurement process, the list goes on. Accredited design education requirements, verified project experiences and rigorous examinations are three key pillars that are set out by the NCIDQ Exam for qualification. It's a distinguisher that easily filters out the non-professional designers in this field from those who went the full length. There is a real difference.

There are also benefits to team building and work efficiency which I seek for as an employer and business owner here. Simply put, NCIDQ Certificate holders speak the same 'design language', which makes running a project from initiation to completion so much more efficient and enjoyable. Ideally, everyone practicing design in my office is either a RID or on their way to becoming a RID for this reason. The first step is NCIDQ.

Q: Did you fail any exams/retake any? How did you stay motivated through that process? How long did you study for the exams/What did you use to study?

A: Life happens, and projects can't be just paused. For me it meant taking time to study and write the exams was a challenge. As an owner and the principal designer, taking extended time off from work to study or having paid-leave to write the exam was simply not a feasible option. In addition, as a woman in design and a new mother, it doesn't get easier. I was however, fortunate to have found some time to write my IDPX and Practicum exams separately during my two pregnancies.

For writing my IDPX exam, I made use of a long-weekend getaway in Seattle with my husband about 8 months-in during my first pregnancy. I still remember memorizing ASTM & ANSI testing numbers while driving down to the Prometric centre near Seattle. I passed this exam in one attempt, but I knew it was a close call because I nearly ran out of time. About a year later, I went for my PRAC exam in Vancouver, about 5 months-in during my second pregnancy. I used all the study tools I

could possibly source, and I was thrilled when I learned that I had passed with a better score than I expected.

For both exams, I started less than three months prior to the scheduled exam date. I recommend starting earlier, but it's a personal choice, and it varies for everyone. My study plans were more ambitious and rigorous as I knew I had the advantage of 'experience'. In addition to the labor of memorization, fully understanding the underlying concepts and reasons behind each content area is critical in the testing context.

Q: Has the practice of interior design lived up to your expectations that you had as a student? Any surprises or disappointments?

A: I wouldn't choose another career path even if I had the chance to start over ten times. This is my dream come true and it keeps getting more exciting. I still remember when I was 17 and researching for design schools in Vancouver, planning for the financials, and figuring out how I was going to make it happen.

Any surprises? Definitely. I didn't end up becoming just an interior designer as I had hoped. I started out as a designer, but along the way, I picked up roles such as project manager, design and marketing consultant, and real estate advisor. Provided that I also put myself through business school as a UBC undergrad student, specializing in economics, I found practice transitioning to a Designer-Contractor, then a Designer-(Builder) Developer.

Taking on the capital investment aspect means greater financial control in our firm's current and future projects and allows for the maximization of operation efficiency with less design compromises. Being the producer for our projects also allows for other values such as sustainability, affordability and a higher level of design-build integration to be possible. I will highlight too, that this greater financial leverage in acting as the designer-developer compared to standard design firm's traditional route of going by the billable hours/fee structure, does also translate to greater risks involved, and more sensitivity to market fluctuation and planning regulations. There are benefits in both models.

I enjoy being the designer, designer-builder/designer-developer, all quite equally.

Q: What advice would you give to current students that you wished you had received?

A: I'd like to encourage graduating students to take some time to study for the IDFX exam and write it earlier than later (take advantage of the student-status on exam fees). The content of this Fundamental Exam (first exam) should be what all new interior designers are familiar with. Everything covered in the exam will benefit new designers in ways that are essential to ensuring design success, especially when starting out, not to mention the other benefits which the NCIDQ designation naturally brings.

It's about being responsible to the clients, the general public, and to the employer/design colleagues; plus, it is a great way to wrap up the journey of design education in the classroom.

Q: How has having an NCIDQ Certificate benefited you and your career?

A: It's difficult to know for sure to what extent the NCIDQ designation contributed to my success in building the business infrastructure of my firm, but I know for certain that the degree to which I held my work accountable to the NCIDQ standard was in itself, a distinguished way of conducting my way of practice. Good business is reliable services, and that is the foundation which I intend to build everything else upon.

Interior design is ultimately, a service that requires more than just people-skills, optimism and compassion. It demands a level of understanding in building design, code & regulations, construction methodologies. The profession of interior design is also more than just aesthetics. There are risks involved with the integration of design knowledge, ethics and business instincts which having the NCIDQ Certification can help mitigate.

It is far better to actively invest in learning and qualifying through the NCIDQ Exams & CEUs (continuing education units) than passively relying on E&O insurances out there when it comes to avoiding potential design related mistakes as a practitioner.

Q: Have you/are you interested in pursuing any other credentials/certifications or licensure/registration/certification in a jurisdiction? If so, please provide those details.

A: Yes. Self betterment never stops, and since my NCIDQ designation, I have engaged in updating my building code knowledge through continuing education through third party accredited institutions, and pursuing graduate level design related studies and research in academia. Prior to obtaining the RID (NCIDQ, IDIBC) designation, I also held the LEED (CaGBC, USGBC) professional title, and have taken part in LEED certified projects in the multifamily sector. As with my business school training in the urban land economics with the specialization in RED (real estate development) from UBC (University of British Columbia), I also benefit from the knowledge and credentials in this field. It supports my role as a Designer-Developer well.

One of the professional developments I have taken on during the pandemic also involves completing the series of education training for the three parts of the CPHD/C (Certified Passive House Designer/Consultant) exam through the PHI (Passive House Institute). This is a part of my further commitment in sustainability for designing the built environment and to prepare for my firm's upcoming projects in the near future.

Finally, above all else, I am a little nosy in that I'm often curious about how people use their spaces; and how built spaces can actually help people (especially people in need) live better. Market tradeoffs, creative conservation and cultural hybridity are areas which I am generally interested in within the context of my design practice. Observations, case studies and life experiences are also important aspects of my personal and professional development.

Q: What could the industry do to overcome obstacles from diverse individuals being represented and having equal opportunity?

A: I think the interior design industry is quite open and yet still it is difficult to enter for lots of young professionals due to the lack of practical experience and/or the opportunity to gain them initially. I personally try to make an effort to welcome graduating or close-to graduating

interior design students as an Ambassador through volunteering with CIDQ. I also work with local colleges and design professors to periodically deliver professional practice insights as a guest lecturer through my firm. I am again open to being a sponsor from this year onwards, while also launching my plans to facilitate exam study groups and meet-ups using our firm's space during the weekends. Something I'm quite excited about actually.

I feel that having open conversations is important here. Ensuring young interior designers are being supported by certified, positive and accessible mentors is a great starting point to transitioning towards a more inclusive professional community here.

Q: What are common misconceptions people have? How can we combat these misconceptions and communicate more effectively?

A: NCIDQ Certificate holders and those who are seriously pursuing the qualification should be indicating their professional credentials clearly wherever appropriate. I feel that there is still this lack of representation for NCIDQ on the market for the industry and public, where the title 'interior designer' is used very casually and often times, inaccurately. Some people misuse and abuse the title, resulting in fees that seem to greatly vary. This is where it becomes very confusing for most first-time clients.

I applaud those interior designers who dedicate a page on their company website or social media platform to explain fee-related matters. This kind of open transparency and genuine honesty is encouraged to combat market misconceptions, and those who deliberately try to take advantage of the job title, especially in the private non-regulated market sectors.

Q: Anything else you'd like to share?

A: Final Thoughts: Good design is essentially good planning. Interior design is a profession that is often put under the luxury-design market spotlight, and is praised for being more of a first-world (developed-world) service, but I want to remind us all that it can be so much more. I believe interior design can transform lives,

especially in elevating baseline living standards for those who are most in need.

Design problems are socio-economic problems. The interior designer is a planning professional for the interior built environment who can ensure building occupants live and thrive in dignified, affordable, and universally accessible spaces regardless of social class, race and ethnicity.