



## Interior Design Expert And Professor Ethan Lu Is On A Mission

*Lu is passionate about educating the next generation of interior designers and encouraging them to become certified.*

Cristina Merrill  
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Ethan Lu is an architecture and interior design veteran, not to mention a professional who is extremely passionate about innovations in the interior design industry.

Today, Lu co-owns Metropolitan United Studio. Founded in 2006, MUS was created with the goal of taking on sustainable architecture projects. Lu and his business partner started off with big projects that involved working with developers. They were doing a lot of urban planning and architecture, but when the recession hit, Lu said all of the big projects disappeared.

So they got creative.

They rebranded. They restrategized. What was available from 2008 and on were smaller

projects, mostly interior design-related, so the company turned its focus to interior design. Today, MUS has both residential and retail design under its belt, as well as office and medical clinic design. MUS is very much open for business and open to doing a variety of projects.

In addition to his business, Lu is an assistant professor in the [Fashion Institute of Technology's Interior Design program](#). He's also heavily involved in efforts to promote - and protect - the interior design industry.

In an interview with [ESTATENVY](#), Lu discussed his career path, how he stays motivated and his advice for young industry professionals.

How did you get started in your industry?

When I was young I was really interested in architecture and pretty much at the age of 17 I knew I wanted to be an architect. I did the more traditional route of schooling. I went to the University of Michigan and I received a Bachelor of Science in architecture back in 1997 and then I went on to Harvard University for my Master of Architecture. From there I went to Columbia University for a Master of Science in Architecture and Urban Design and I graduated in 2001. After I graduated from school, I worked for several corporate design firms such as FXCollaborative (formerly known as FXFowle) and COOKFOX Architects. I took the traditional track from design schools to working for corporate design firms. It's important to have a great portfolio upon graduation. Potential employers won't care about your years of experience, because you have none, but they will focus specifically on your school portfolio. It's important to land a design internship in the summer right before the senior year. Having an internship on a resume will make one stand apart from others.

How do you stay motivated?

I stay motivated by working on projects of all types and by participating in industry events. I'm currently the President of the [Interior Designers for Legislation in New York \(IDLNY\)](#) and I do grassroots and advocacy efforts on behalf of all New York State interior designers. Being actively involved with the profession-at-large and teaching at FIT gives me a purpose beyond "sitting behind a desk" all day long.

Tell us about your work with the IDLNY.

IDLNY is a coalition. Essentially what we do is we support the professional associations and there are two, the American Society of Interior Designers and the International Interior Design Association. In New York State certified interior designer registration is low. We're talking about three figures compared to five figures for any other profession. Because of that, there's a need for advocacy in New York State. At IDLNY, we basically [advocate for the Title Act](#) and the Practice Act. We received the Title Act back in 1990 and that was done by my predecessors years and years ago. And so I'm kind of the next generation that's trying to raise the numbers of certified interior designers in New York City and also New York State so that we can go for what we call the Practice Act. The Practice Act is what allows interior designers to have real power, meaning that you can't really hire an interior designer unless they are a certified

interior designer just like an architect or engineer. You can't call yourself an architect or engineer and if you need to work on an architecture project or an engineering project you have to hire an architect or engineer. For interior designers, that's not the case. You can hire someone who is just a decorator. You can hire someone who watches HGTV and thinks they can decorate. So there's really no practice act that's in place to protect the profession. What that does is it kind of takes away from the profession, it takes away from the students that committed four years of education to become interior designers, it takes away from those who took the NCIDQ licensing exam, and it takes away from those that have actually applied for the certified interior designer credential. I think because I work in a school environment I want to protect my profession. That's why I'm a big advocate of the Practice Act and I'm promoting students to get their certification.

Why is registration so low?

They're not registering and a lot of them are not actually even taking the licensing exam that will allow them to be registered. And then they're not registering because they don't see the value in registration. They simply just don't for some reason, and that is really, really sad. They don't see an income boost, so no one is really motivating them at work to say "Look, your profession matters. You can take the exam, pass it and then become a registered or certified interior designer in New York State." But they just don't, and so it takes a lot of grassroots movement and advocacy from educators and practitioners to really push the younger generation to first take their licensing exam and second become certified interior designers.

Do you have any advice for up and comers in your industry?

Yes, take the NCIDQ exam and become a New York State Certified Interior Designer. Build up as many professional credentials as you can. Also, take the LEED AP and the WELL AP exam. Participate in your local association chapters (IIDA New York and ASID New York). Go to as many networking events as possible. Go to the IIDA and the ASID networking events. I think as interior designers we have to support our profession and if we don't come together as a group our profession will simply get taken away from us.

Is there an industry that you look to for inspiration?

The technology industry. I'm especially excited about Artificial Intelligence and what that means for the Home of the Future or the Workplace of the Future. I've often asked myself how future technology will impact interior design from the creation process to the construction process to the operations and maintenance process.

How do you spread the word about your business?

Many people use the social media platforms but a lot of my business comes from word of mouth. It could be a contractor or a former client that makes the new connections for me. 2400 At the end of the day I'm not a huge celebrity. I'm not on TV or anything like that. Social media is so limited for someone like me. I know a lot of my constituents hire PR companies to do PR for them. I think that works. Mostly what I do is I just do word of mouth and I find that

probably to be the most effective.

How do you make yourself stand out in a saturated market?

For me, it's to stay flexible and not get tied into a specific design style. I believe in sustainability and specifying the best material finishes for my clients. I look for materials that are resilient and will give the occupants the best indoor air quality. This is a concept widely accepted in workplace and healthcare environments but has not caught on as much with the residential environment. I'm also interested in working on projects that lead to Passive House Certification as well as LEED and WELL certifications.

What's exciting about the future of your industry?

As design education enhances critical thinking, every designer will be faced with the triple bottom line - economy, environment and the people - when thinking about a space. The younger generation is much more in tune with resource and energy conservation. I look forward to new and creative ideas to produce sustainable spaces.

What are some trends are you seeing in your industry for 2019?

Evidence-Based Design, traditionally used as a design strategy for workplace environments, will gradually make its way into residential environments. Certifications, such as the WELL Building Standard, have brought Evidence-Based Design into popular culture.

Where can people find you?

People can find me on [LinkedIn](#), and here is my company's website: <https://www.mu-studio.us/>.