Four experienced residential designers discuss the evolution of the profession, from the recession to the popularization of interior design to the oversaturation of the marketplace — and ponder what lies ahead.

Redesigning the Future

Interviews by Rene Ryan
Perspective: The economy has impacted everyone at every wealth level. How have your clients' requests and interests changed? What are you doing differently to meet the needs of those clients?

Jane Gates-Raile: We used to do everything from brand new construction and model homes to kitchen and bath and full residential interiors. But today, the builders aren’t building, and the clients aren’t buying as much furniture because they think it’s frivolous. But they will invest in kitchen and bath remodeling because that’s perceived to be an investment rather than an expense. And they’re a little more cautious about how they’re spending, so we work with them on price management, shopping and budget considerations. Before the recession, people might have been a little bit easier with their money. Now, they’re very savvy shoppers.

Laura Barnett Sawchyn: I find that everyone is much more mindful about what they are spending. Many are only interested in doing what absolutely has to be done and phasing certain purchases. Clients who have large projects are still going forward, since it is that or an empty house. Many have started looking into retail or Internet options for items, looking to save money on certain things, so they can splurge on others. Others have actually expected sources and us to give bigger discounts, expecting high-end furnishings at lower prices.

William M. Stankiewicz: Obviously, people have become a little more budget-oriented. While in the past they may not have asked what something costs, they now do before we order. Clients are also looking at doing projects in stages after we come up with a completed plan.

Fenwick Bonnell: Through the worst period of this downturn, from January to late May, I observed clients to be far more reticent to undertake further work. Whether it was a period of paralysis in the marketplace or perhaps a financially-induced case of seasonaldysfunction, the telephone barely rang. I found that I was doing a lot more follow-ups either by telephone (preferred) or email (too easy to ignore) to motivate clients.

Also, there were some surprising suggestions from clients that we should be cutting our prices in step with the economic downturn. But our philosophy was that this would set a dangerous precedent that would be difficult to recover from when the market returned.

Instead … we reviewed every client file to confirm that we had tied up all loose ends for the completion of each project. If there were still items to be accomplished, we added them to our work list.

We made certain to communicate clearly to our clients that if a budget needed to be reduced, we would gladly offer substitutions that would reduce costs without compromising the outcome of the design.

Perspective: As the public becomes more aware of green and sustainable issues in the business and product worlds, what is the impact on residential projects?

Stankiewicz: Certainly the public is more aware of green design, and with that education, they want to do what they can to utilize the available products or repurpose items they already have. Every client I have requests [green options] or talks about them. Whether they choose to do it or not is another thing because sometimes they’re just not aware of the costs of those items – and they do cost more in most cases. For instance, low-VOC or VOC-free paint costs more than regular paint and can significantly impact a budget.

Bonnell: They’ve definitely been more aware of the effect of rising prices for energy, and this can be relatively significant in the long term. But that is also relative to one’s wealth to some extent. Some countries, like England, for example, have more stringent guidelines pertaining to environmental laws, which have informed us and changed how we approach all of our clients and the recommendations we make.

We have embraced LED technology in a fairly significant way – more so than compact fluorescents, which I continue to loathe – because they have improved the technology significantly over the past year and … they are relatively discrete and long-lasting. Our firm is seriously interested in lighting technology for its aesthetic value; the green factor is only icing on the cake.

Low-VOC paints and finishes have become available to apply and are more durable. And low-flow faucets, showers and low-volume toilets have also improved in design and performance so they’re easy to recommend.

Perspective: How has your business changed now that more resources are available to the public at retail both in brick-and-mortar stores and online? Are they better educated about the design process or more disillusioned?

Barnett Sawchyn: There is a certain amount of pre- or post-shopping that occurs. In general, I find it nice that I can send a client to a Web site for further information or just to peruse the line. I find that most of my clients are not willing to purchase online because there is nobody that can take care of things that may go wrong.

As far as retail, many items in stores are discounted to the same price I can buy for, which is disheartening. My contract includes two options of working … so if clients decide to buy for themselves, my hourly rates increase.
Fenwick Bonnell: Clients have become more familiar with the process, but they don’t know how to put it together. They are educated, but don’t know how to manage it. Also, they rarely have the resources, experience or creativity. That’s what I try to explain to them.

Stankiewicz: Clients are much more informed and educated than ever before, but my clients are not disillusioned about it at all. They know what to expect. The media is doing a great job in getting information out, not only to the design community, but also to the retail customer. For example, PitchSlate.com has a partnership with IIDA. It is a free publicity tool that connects journalists with experts like those in interior design. Because the media can connect to these experts readily for free, they can use the trends at a moment’s notice and

I do believe [the public] is more informed and open to new ideas. But most clients understand that the designer has specific training and the ability to produce results way beyond their expectations. That is why they hire us.

Bonnell: Ultimately, one’s reputation will be dictated by the jobs you have completed successfully, so we do our utmost to provide superior service to our clientele.

Perspective: Historically, designers win business by reputation and word-of-mouth, but the world is changing even in this arena. Where do your strongest leads for new projects come from?

Gates-Raile: I advertise in the Tom Martino Trouble Exclusive Referral Network, Google, the Better Business Bureau and Troubleshooter.com. Then I do media advertisements. My leads come from all of those resources plus referrals. Recently, a client found us in the Parade of Homes and that ended up being a $1 million project in just sales.

Barnett Sawchyn: Our clientele is barely affected by the proliferation of online shopping and home decor specialty stores. Our firm specializes in high-end custom design, that is how we grew our business during the previous recession and that was the catalyst to building our own collection of furnishings and lighting.

A large percentage of our design process is still based on a market that is not generally available to the public without the assistance of a designer. We are very clear at the initiation of a project how the design process works within our firm. That includes a clear scope of work and a timeline as to how the process unfolds and when to expect certain things to occur.

Perspective: The shape and makeup of residences has changed over the past 15 years. Larger, open spaces are part of the McMansion trend, while clean, open, contemporary spaces present opportunities at the opposite end of the home spectrum. Where do your clients fall in the continuum of home types, and how do you work with them to create inviting, warm homes?

Barnett Sawchyn: My clients are in urban areas and even the suburban clients do not fall into the McMansion category. Even the very large residences are more sophisticated. Large, open, multi-purpose rooms are in just about all new construction. The scale of the furniture and how it relates to the scale of the room is critical. Using great, textural fabrics and materials – plus interesting shapes and warm colors help cozy it up, but first and foremost is layout and furniture placement. The most beautiful item in the world won’t work if it’s the wrong scale in the wrong place.
Bonnell: Our clientele is very broad in range and type from historical renovations to adaptive reuse and new construction. Our jobs range in square footage size because we like to be challenged by the variety of circumstances one faces from both types of jobs. Though I do have to admit to turning down a local job that we felt was too large for the client’s needs and risked being more of a “theme park” than a home.

Perspective: What do you see as emerging trends right now in residential design?

Gates-Raile: Denver has been slow in picking up the contemporary feel, but the emergence of these beautiful sleek styles are fabulous. A lot cleaner and less cluttered looks are becoming popular. And people are looking for longevity. Years ago, when we would sell carpet, people would say, “I’m going to buy the cheapest option and replace it in five years.” But I try to help my clients understand that it’s wise to buy the best you can afford now and not replace it in five years. Design decisions are still the same. The semi-retired and retired are following that, but younger people aren’t.

Bonnell: I think we’re going to see a lot of the following: Energy efficient appliances, LED technology, multi-use electronics, cleaner more modern décor, adaptive reuse of furnishings, hard surface flooring throughout, engineered pre-finished hardwood floors, and the use of a one-color scheme throughout.

Perspective: If you had a crystal ball, where would you predict the residential design world to be in 10 years?

Gates-Raile: It will be very different than it is now. Being in business for 40 years, I’ve seen it make tremendous leaps and changes. The young designers are going to have to learn a whole new way of marketing and working with clients with fewer face-to-face interactions. And I don’t think this is for the better. I think interactions on a personal level are much more important than anything that can happen over the computer. Design is internal. It’s personal – not a computer throwing out pre-fab designs. Sure you can find products, but it’s the joy of creating something special that makes this business unique. That’s something you have to communicate to your clients. You have to explain why you’re necessary.

Barnett Sawchyn: Personalization is key – the “have it your way” method of selection. Custom is king. Of course, there is a trend toward clean, contemporary lines, but ultimately people want what they want. Very few ask what is the trend; they choose what they like, colors and/or styles.

Stankiewicz: In a word: Simple. Let’s face it, the economy has really caused people to redefine what true wealth is for them and you will see it reflected in design preferences.

Bonnell: It would appear that our clientele is becoming younger and more affluent, often with children and a career. This means that they are shedding the style and tastes of their parents; the antiques are being edited out to only the best, most unique pieces. The living room is not just a place to entertain guests anymore and the kitchen isn’t a place to conceal a mess while your friends are impressed in the dining room. The kitchen is becoming the hub of living and entertaining. I see this trend continuing, refining itself in the years to come.

In addition, land and energy costs could also affect the size of homes for the greater population and we could see smaller, more efficient homes of higher quality that are planned for ease of living. Urban centers will continue to become more densely populated so high-rise living will become more desirable, and not just the poor cousin to suburban living. Hopefully, developers will continue to present new ways for owners to live in these smaller spaces and abandon the 600-square-foot “two bedroom plus den” myth.

Perspective: What is your advice to interior designers starting out in the residential field?

Barnett Sawchyn: Newbie designers should find a very good firm with a superior who is willing to teach them the ropes – letting them contribute to
design decisions by making suggestions. Of course, you have to filter their ideas before presenting them to the client, but how can they learn without the permission to try? Do not work for a bully or someone that doesn’t show you respect. Find a firm whose fundamental values match yours. Work really hard, be responsible, be willing and have a good attitude.

Gates-Ralle: It’s going to be a struggle. I’m down to two on my staff. It’s not going to go as quickly as it might have gone 10 to 15 years ago. Designers will need patience and persistence in order to stay involved in the business. Here in Denver, the design field is oversaturated. [Young people today] see television shows and it makes design seem so simple, but my advice is to get a good look at what is going on in the real world because that’s the only way to learn.

Also, face-to-face interactions are going to be extremely necessary. We can communicate via email for the more mundane, but when it really comes to the design phase, I want that personal connection and contact.

I also think the future of design is in the design fee. You can make a much better living with reasonable design fees that meet clients’ budgets than you can promoting product. I advocate for charging a flat fee by the project, not by the hour, but it varies from client to client. It’s a disgrace when you give yourself away.

Stankiewicz: I would recommend [young designers] attend an accredited design school, complete their education there and become LEED certified. That is going to be important. And be aware of state licensing efforts and know what that requires. Lastly, I would say they should get an apprenticeship at a well-respected design firm.

Bonnell: Ask lots of questions. Write everything down. Be straightforward and honest, support your trades and learn from their experience. Do what is right, not what is easy, and always have your work professionally photographed.