Product design, exhibit design, branding and signage—these are some of the crossover specialties that interior designers commonly participate in that enrich our practices and open up new opportunities. But how far can we push the disciplinary boundaries?

As a problem-solving process, design confounds any narrow notion of the practice as resulting exclusively in a physical end product. In fact, this view opens the field to infinite applications.

Perspective looks at five Designers (with a capital D) of this cast and their design journeys. They come from a variety of professions, but they all embrace this broader concept of design and tap into the same skill set that's at the foundation of what we do as interior designers. They use the design process mindset to expand their practices to address issues they are passionate about. In fact, their interface with another discipline is so intense, we’re calling them Hybrid Professionals.
T he impressive flurry of activity around humanitarian design in the past few years has been experiencing a backlash recently; while designers may have good intentions, the argument goes, they often arrogantly impose designs on distant communities that end up as unused, wasted exercises. Emily Pilloton has been there as a humanitarian designer and has learned some lessons.

Trained as an architect and product designer, Emily founded Project H Design in 2008 as a nonprofit that, in its early days, was dedicated to generating innovative designs to solve our most pressing problems. One of the signature projects was an ingenious design for a wheel-like container to make water transport easier. But in the course of designing and producing the “Hippo Roller,” as it’s called, Emily learned to impose designs on distant communities—designers may have good intentions, the backlash recently: while experiencing a backlash recently, while designers may have good intentions, the backlash recently. While designers may have good intentions, the backlash recently. While designers may have good intentions, the backlash recently.

Early in his career while working on several large-scale prominent projects, Corner became discouraged by landscape architecture’s process as an isolated discipline and its resulting lack of synthesis with the surrounding environment. Also frustrated by the field’s stagnant discourse, which seemed devoid of architecture’s intellectual vibrancy of the 80s, James decided to focus on his own research and writing. Literally approaching landscape from an entirely new perspective, James set out on a flying tour of the United States with aerial photographer Alex McLean to document the landscape from above and to investigate the ways in which we impose shape and meaning on the land. In addition to the resulting book, Taking Measures Across the American Landscape, James edited Recovering Landscape: Essays in Contemporary Landscape Architecture in an effort to invigorate landscape architecture as a critical cultural practice. He has also been teaching at the University of Pennsylvania since the late 80s, and since 2000 has been chair and professor of Landscape Architecture at its School of Design.

The new discipline that James is helping to forge is an approach that encourages collaboration among multiple fields such as landscape architecture, urban design, infrastructure, ecology, engineering, and hydrology, and that’s focused on sustainability and the challenges facing our contemporary cities. There’s an emphasis on process versus an end solution, and as such its mindset embraces an open-endedness and allowance for landscapes to evolve with their surrounding context. This would all be academic if James weren’t exploring landscape urbanism in the real realm. One remarkable project that puts this new philosophy to work is Field Operations’ plan to convert Fresh Kills, a huge former landfill on Staten Island—the largest in the country—into a public park that includes natural gas harvesting from the still decomposing landfill to heat 22,000 homes on Staten Island, reclamation of wetlands, grasslands, and woodlands; as well as educational programming and recreation areas for activities ranging from mountain biking and kayaking, to cross-country skiing. The reinvigoration and transformation of degraded sites was also the guiding tenet behind the High Line, the widely acclaimed park atop a derelict elevated railroad track in New York City’s Meatpacking District. A wander along the first phase, opened in 2009, reveals a constant play between its industrial past and its new incarnation: indigenous plants and unamed grasses recall the overall growth of its abandoned years, while rail ties and rusted tracks are ingeniously incorporated into the design. It’s an open space that actively participates with the historical and cultural life of the neighborhood. And the phenomenal success of the park has added to the continued regeneration of the area, including a forthcoming Renzo Piano-designed building for the Whitney Museum at its south end. Not least, it’s become a model for cities around the world looking to transform their post-industrial structures and faltow districts into active regenerative urban spaces.
A 21-year career as a nurse and nursing consultant, followed by a career in business and technology, led to a realization by Debbie Gregory, Assoc. IDA, RN, BSN, President, Nursing Institute for Healthcare Design, that the two fields—healthcare and design—were, in fact, ripe for joining forces. After 21 years as a nurse and 21 years as a consultant, she became a full-time consultant and researcher. In 2009, she returned to academia to help forge a new discipline of design anthropology.

After 21 years as a nurse and nursing consultant, in 2005 Debbie Gregory decided to return to school to study interior design to pursue a love for space planning and design. As she began studying programming, schematic design, and design development, and then researching and designing for healthcare projects, the chasm of understanding between the two fields became particularly apparent. She wondered, “Is anyone asking the nurses about their opinions on the design and function of their work environments?”

To her surprise there was little data from the nursing community. In fact, the only research she found was in the emerging field of evidence-based design. During her studies, she conducted a survey and distributed it to nurses for whom she worked. The data showed nurses wanted to impact design decisions but felt apprehensive about meeting with designers. She realized that she could make a greater impact by educating nurses about design and their potential greater presence in it. After creating a website and building a network of nurses for a few years, along with her nursing colleague Laura Hayes, Debbie officially launched the Nursing Institute for Healthcare Design (NIHD) in 2010. As a nonprofit association, it is dedicated to educating and inspiring nurses leaders about their role in healthcare design and construction. The organization provides tools and research, peer education and mentoring, as well as connection to other members. An educational curriculum about how the design and construction process works enables nurses to better participate in design teams in addition to joining facility planning departments.

Debbie Gregory, Assoc. IIDA, RN, BSN, President, Nursing Institute for Healthcare Design

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Elizabeth (Dori) Tunstall, PhD, Assoc. Professor of Design Anthropology, Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, Australia

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The conference began the challenge of discovery to determine where the nurse fits in to the design process and what role the nurse should contribute as a part of the design team, according to Debbie. As a design intern attending end user meetings, one role was immediately obvious: that of interpreter between the two professions, both literally to translate professional terms to a nurse, ADA Guidelines would suggest the American Diabetic Association’s recommended diet to nurse leaders about their role in healthcare design and construction. The organization provides tools and research, peer education and mentoring, as well as connection to other members. An educational curriculum about how the design and construction process works enables nurses to better participate in design teams in addition to joining facility planning departments.

Nurses have contacted the NIHD from all over the world, eager to be a part of designing clinical spaces. On the design side, architects, contractors, facility managers, hospital administrators, and clinicians have become involved and want to impact this new collaborative relationship that will facilitate trust, respect, shared goals, improved clinical work environments, and ultimately patient outcomes."

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To do so, the program established an anthropological co-design process involving an array of voters, including potentially disenfranchised citizens—those with disabilities, native speakers of foreign languages, people of various ages—and explored how the voting process was affected for them. The aim was to use information design principles of clarity and simplicity to make voting easier and more accurate for the U.S. voter. In 2007 Design for Democracy comprehensive ballot and polling place design guidelines that enable election officials to design materials appropriate to their own contexts. Dori has also applied anthropologically informed design thinking to emergency and evacuation strategies, the IRS’s design management of taxation, and, most recently, billing and payment health systems for Chicago’s Bureau of Health Services.

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If you can better read your ballot on election day, thank Dori Tunstall and Design For Democracy for its clarity and for making the voting process more accessible to all.
As the sustainability movement has stormed through the interiors and building industry over the last decade, a number of committed companies have been integral to propelling it forward. LEED headquarters for major corporations both made good copy and helped considerably to lay the groundwork for transforming LEED certification into the valued goal and mainstream standard that it’s become. However, putting green intentions into action hasn’t always been easy—especially when sustainability goals outpace the LEED framework. As a result, not a few corporate clients have been interested “green” participants but still left the heavy lifting to the building and design community.

As PNC’s real estate director, Gary Saulson led the greening of the bank’s first LEED building, Firstside Center, which opened in 2000 in Pittsburgh. This project launched a dedicated commitment by PNC to continue to build green, including—rather optimistically—all of its new bank branches. While Firstside entailed a steep learning curve, there had been a LEED New Construction guidelines and certification process in place to work with. Fulfilling PNC’s desire for 60 new green bank branches would be a different story.

Documenting, registering, and certifying each and every branch would be an expensive, time-consuming proposition—if not redundant. Most retailers at the time would choose either to build a signature retail space or two or else opt out of LEED altogether. Nevertheless, Gary set out to forge a new streamlined LEED process with the USGBC that would harness the redundancy of high-volume building itself without compromising the technical integrity of LEED. Working closely with the sustainability consultant, Palladino and Associates, Gensler as architect, and the USGBC LEED retail committee, Gary helped to develop a prototype process—one that presented a fairly significant departure for the USGBC. LEED’s credibility has always depended upon the rigor of the required documentation—you must back up claims of sustainable processes, materials, systems and strategies to achieve certification—and the USGBC was loathe to relax such standards. Any departure from LEED’s building-by-building documentation process was a radical mind-shift.

Resolute nonetheless, Gary’s team dedicated several years of documenting, designing, and building new bank branches the conventional way while working with the USGBC on a new approach, which eventually became a pilot program. For this new process, documentation focuses on a prototype that serves as the basis for all built branches and ensures a consistent sustainable product. In November 2010, the USGBC announced the launch of LEED for Retail and the LEED Volume Program, based on this prototype model. PNC’s properties have evolved to 117 LEED-certified buildings today—more newly constructed LEED buildings than any company, period.

Even more impressive is that this new potential for green retail has opened the floodgates for green building and interiors in general. Nearly 100 national and independent retailers and franchises, each with hundreds and thousands of retail spaces—including Best Buy, Chipotle, L.L.Bean, McDonald’s, Starbucks, and Target—have participated in the retail pilot program since its launch in 2007. Do the math and you’ll see that green building has moved forward exponentially.

“The fact that we have reached over 100 certified projects under the USGBC’s LEED program not only is significant for PNC, but it’s really significant for those who care about the environment in general.”

Gary Saulson
Director of Corporate Real Estate, PNC Financial Services Group, Pittsburgh, PA

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Photographer: Courtesy of PNC (portrait and green wall), Michael Moran (PNC Bank branch)