



# HYBRID PROFESSIONALS

BY JAN LAKIN

**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.

Photography: Courtesy of Project H Design



**EMILY PILLOTON :: DESIGNER AS CITIZEN**

**Emily Pilloton,**  
**Founder/Executive Director**  
**Studio H, High School Teacher,**  
**Windsor, NC**

The 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 place greater value on working closer to home and on systems and processes—versus the final product—as solutions.

Emily therefore recast Project H to use “the power of the *design process* to catalyze communities and public education *from within*.” Instead of bestowing humanitarian design projects on communities and cultures deemed in need around the world, the organization focuses on working in collaboration with communities predominantly in the U.S.

To best put this mission in practice, in 2009, Emily and her partner moved from San Francisco to Bertie County, North Carolina, the poorest county in the state, with the objective to make a



“When [the kids] are given the chance to do something real, to build something that they designed, to ask why instead of what, and to think for themselves as citizens capable of great things...that is when the light goes on.”

positive impact on a community through design. Their determination to make one’s clients into co-designers led them to focus on education. Studio H is their major current project: a “design/build” one-year high school curriculum for junior-year students that they designed and teach in collaboration with the public school system. It’s shop class combined with design thinking—all centered on learning by human- and context-driven research, creative problem solving, using industry-relevant vocational skills, and culminating in building one major community improvement project over the summer. This year—Studio H’s first class—students are designing and building a farmers market structure in partnership with the town of Windsor.

Emily feels it’s by being “citizens first and designers second” that designers can make a real difference

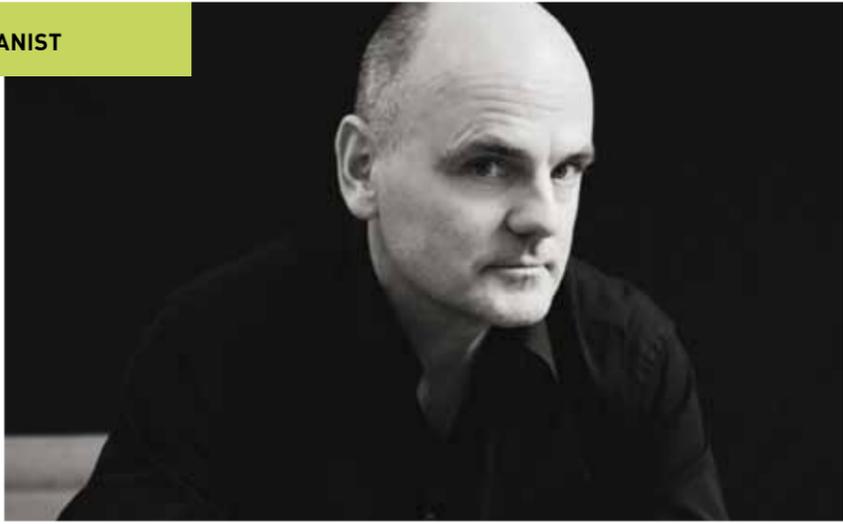
in communities. Interestingly, it’s a citizenship that becomes contagious. In looking at the progress of this year’s students, it’s apparent the impact that Studio H and other programs like it can have on their clients is to help them be problem-solvers—or designers—themselves. And this kind of designer exemplifies citizenship in the fullest sense of the word: members of a community with a sense of ownership and pride. Asked whether the Windsor farmers market will be an improvement over a neighboring town’s market, one student responded without hesitation: “Yep, we can do a lot better.”

**Students from the Studio H program researched, designed, and built chicken coops, which were then donated to local farmers. The unique ChickTopia design by Colin, Rody, Anthony, and Jamesha is shown above.**

Photography: Courtesy of Project H Design

**JAMES CORNER :: LANDSCAPE URBANIST**

**Philosophy:** “People understand landscape as a scenic picture. For me the deeper meaning is about how your body uses landscape. So walking, cycling, gardening, all the ways you use the land are more fundamental than just its appearance.”



**James Corner, RLA, ASLA ,**  
**Field Operations,**  
**New York, NY**

The limited notion of landscape design as green décor surrounding buildings or as delineating recreational spaces is becoming antiquated—with much help from “landscape urbanist” James Corner of Field Operations. James has degrees in both landscape architecture and urban design, but the path to his far-reaching view of the field has been fittingly evolutionary.

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 a 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 also restores its ecological systems. Three times the size of Central Park, the “Lifescape” design for the park will include 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



**Integrating the site’s history with the new landscape, the High Line park features the structural and functional elements of the former elevated rail line—such as rails and ties—along with new structures and foliage.**

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 untamed grasses recall the overgrowth 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 fallow districts into active regenerative urban spaces.

Photographers: Peden+Munk (portrait), Nico Guillin (High Line)



Conversant with both Interior Design and clinical issues, Debbie meets with Scott Johnson, PE (VP at SSR) to discuss a current design project where she serves as senior clinical consultant.



DEBBIE GREGORY :: NURSE + INTERIOR DESIGNER

“Nurses have been incredibly enthusiastic about being a part of the design process. They have a ‘process improvement’ mindset. The designers move on, but nurses have to make it work, and **they would use duct tape if they had to.**”

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

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?” and began investigating.

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. Impressed with this concept, she felt strongly that nurses could be contributing significantly to research and design decisions. At a healthcare design conference in 2005 she slipped a note to a speaker asking him to announce an impromptu meeting for

the nurses in the audience. From the ten nurses who showed up and who responded to a quick survey created on the spot, Debbie’s database of nurses interested in healthcare design was born.

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) and to bridge the culture and communication gaps (no, the designers did not want to talk about HGTV!). But more importantly, Debbie realized that she could help designers pose the right questions—such as about a facility’s local demographic, its specific nursing population, and its goals for growth—all critical to achieving successful facilities.

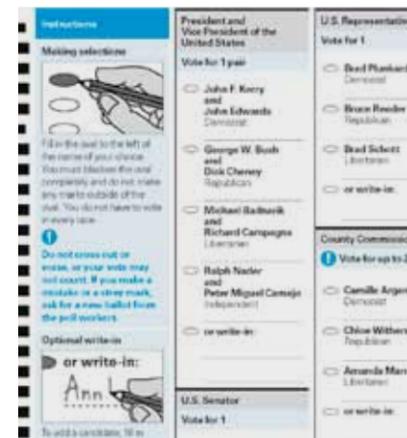
While she received offers to join architecture and healthcare planning firms as a full-time consultant and researcher, Debbie continued to feel

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 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 on design teams in addition to join 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.

Photographer: Allison Grainger

DORI TUNSTALL :: DESIGN ANTHROPOLOGIST



“**Design anthropology** is the field to help you feel confident in your design decisions by showing you the global ramifications of past, current, and potential communications, artifacts, and experiences as they affect the human context.”

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

With a BA, MA, and PhD in anthropology, Elizabeth (Dori) Tunstall has long been interested in how society and culture influence us as human beings. Fresh out of school her career took a trajectory not entirely uncommon for those in the social sciences whose training was valued among interactive and product design firms aiming for a more rigorous approach to user experience and research. Dori joined the Internet technology firm Sapient and then the digital communications division of Leo Burnett, becoming immersed in exploring human behavior and the design of interactive experiences.

Then in 2005, when she took on the post of managing director for AIGA’s Design for Democracy program, she discerned a compelling new inflection of the role of design in relation to human governance. The program “applies design tools and thinking to increase civic participation by making interactions between the U.S. government and its citizens

more understandable, efficient, and trustworthy.” Its major initiatives have been to improve ballots, voting booths, and election design.

To do so, the program established a 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 completed 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.

Steeped in experiences that pulled together the two distinct disciplines of design and anthropology, Dori returned to academia to help forge a new discipline that employs the practices of both. While designers are taught to

observe, in anthropology, the research process is “participant-observation,” with the goal of developing a deeper understanding or empathy towards relationships among people, objects, and the environment. “For their part,” Dori says, “anthropologists are interested in learning how to better communicate their insights to a wider society, a task in which design excels.” The hybrid practice, therefore, can provide a deeper understanding of human nature as well as of designed communications, environments, products and experiences.

Until 2009 Dori was associate professor of Design Anthropology for the School of Art + Design, at the University of Illinois, Chicago. But she has taken her hybrid vision one step further. In her new post as associate professor and associate dean at Swinburne University of Technology in Australia, she has established a Design Anthropology program (one of two in the world), making the new discipline official.

**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.**

Photographer: Photoevents.com.au

Right: A PNC bank branch can now be certified by a new volume LEED process for which many retailers are grateful. Far right: PNC expresses its green spirit with one of the U.S.'s largest green walls.



GARY SAULSON :: REAL ESTATE DIRECTOR + LEED PIONEER



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

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.

“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.”

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 end 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.

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