designers are *advocates*

Interior designers across the United States continue to be the leading voices for their profession by spearheading regulatory legislation. By Karina Sanchez
Designers for decades now have fought to join the ranks of architects and engineers – those professionals who are legally recognized and licensed to ensure their qualifications and education. But thanks to many trailblazing interior designers advocating for the profession as a whole, interior design legislation is becoming a reality, state by state and province by province.

Today, 26 U.S. states have enacted either a title act or a practice act – Colorado has a permitting statute in place – and more are in the process of introducing and passing legislation. In Canada, one province has a practice act and six others have title acts.

Put simply, title acts govern the use of a title, such as registered or certified interior designer, but do not require individuals to become licensed to practice Interior Design. Practice acts, although they register the use of a title, also require practicing interior designers to become licensed.

It’s easy to see why such regulation is necessary both for public safety and the enrichment of the interior design profession. Under the framework of the U.S. Constitution’s 10th Amendment, states regulate professions that involve public health, safety and welfare. Interior designers are responsible for such tasks as specifying flame-retardant fabrics, designing living spaces for the elderly or disabled, facilitating safe ingress and egress, and choosing non-toxic sustainable products – all of which are vital to public health, safety and welfare.

Recently, Perspective spoke with three inspirational interior designers who, recognizing this tremendous need, have helped pave the way for legislation in their respective states.

Back in the 1980s, Cary Johnson, FIIDA, LEED AP, was asked for a simple favor by colleague Spes Mekus, FIIDA, now of Tanager Design Group, Mekus, active in the Illinois Interior Design Coalition, requested that Johnson join her and offer a little assistance getting legislation passed in the state.

Now, more than 20 years later, that favor is still being carried out. Illinois passed its interior design title act in 1990, but the coalition – still with Johnson’s support – continues to fight to protect that legislation.

True, it took some positive peer pressure to first get Johnson involved, but he soon realized on his own the necessity of interior design legislation. “It’s important for the public to have a way of discerning whether the [design] professionals they are considering are qualified to do the job,” he says. The realization that poor service places lives at risk was the driving factor in his decision to fight for regulation.

Johnson found one of his most prized supporters to be Timothy Hennessey, the coalition’s original lobbyist. It was Hennessey’s experience in association management, public relations strategies, executive and financial management, and strategic planning that helped map out a strategy for dealing with legislators. Hennessey introduced Johnson to appropriate supporters and helped handle the opposition. “Lobbyists know what legislators are all about, and can identify committee members that are critical to convince and which legislators should be your sponsors on the legislative floor,” he says.

One of Johnson’s priorities was communicating with those who opposed legislation: end-users, the general public and other design professionals, many of whom did not understand what Interior Design involves, nor how regulation improves accountability. He scheduled one-on-one meetings to help educate the opposition and conducted public forums where issues were brought to the table and noted for later legislative meetings. The information gathered was then used to tweak the bill’s wording to address the opposition’s issues.

Johnson was also charged with defining which specific professions would fall under the act. “Craffing legislation wording so that other design professionals weren’t compromised was an important part in dealing with the opposition,” he says. To avoid disenfranchising certain individuals, the proposed legislation incorporated the words “or equal” when referring to a specific qualification, such as the National Council for Interior Design Qualification (NCIDQ). That way, professionals...
Derrell Parker, FIIDA, Partner, Parker Scaggiari, Las Vegas
Years in the profession: 37
Legislation: Nevada title/practice act, 1995
Coalition: Legislative Coalition of Interior Design, Nevada
State board: Nevada State Board of Architecture, Interior Design & Residential Design
Additional involvement: National presentations to other states’ coalitions

Derrell Parker, FIIDA, has a mantra: Stop blaming others for what you don’t have. “Just go out and do it,” he says, referring to interior design legislation and the mindset needed to take those first steps.

As a young interior designer in the early 1980s working at architecture firm Ferris, Alexander, Congdon, Massinari (FACM) in Las Vegas, Parker watched architects with a similar level of experience and education being promoted as partners. As an interior designer, he could not be recognized as a partner, even with a degree in Interior Design from an accredited university. Thus, he was inspired to get up and do something about it.

Parker realized early on that politics are local, and to affect change, you have to be involved on a grassroots level. So he started at the bottom, asking coalition members seated in the meeting room if they were registered voters. “I was often the only one standing,” he says. Priority No. 1: Register people in the coalition to vote. From there, Parker knew he needed to motivate the coalition; that meant helping members understand why they were there. It was through constant meetings with coalition members, architects, legislators and end-users that he was able to inspire people through his passion.

“Nevada now has a joint board with interior designers and architects, and there have been no major fallouts,” he says. “We’ve proven we are here for the long haul. If you show you’re serious, it’ll pay off in the end.”

Nine years after conceptualizing a plan for interior design legislation in Nevada, its practice act was enacted. The majority of those nine years were dedicated to education, submitting articles to local newspapers and magazines, attending council meetings, holding town hall meetings, speaking at high schools and colleges. Because, as Parker found, the correlation between Interior Design and public safety is not always immediately understood by lay people. “And because of legislation, we’re finding more savvy young people coming into design than ever before.”

Parker says colleges and universities are doing a better job educating interior design students about the many aspects of design, from safety codes to ethics. “Today’s young designers are well aware that they need an accredited degree. They come to work, and they create their own timelines to get the NCIDQ [exam],” he says.

Parker still travels regularly from state to state to give presentations to coalitions on what to expect when passing legislation, how the Nevada coalition did it and what it’s doing now.
Even as an undergrad at Louisiana State University during the 1970s, Deborah Steinmetz, FIIDA, recognized the importance of conveying to the public that Interior Design stretches far beyond furniture placement and choosing colors. “In college, I understood that it was more than decorating. I knew what I could do as an interior designer and how [Interior Design] influenced the well-being of others,” she says. Early in her career, she decided to get involved with the newly developed Licensed Interior Designers of Louisiana Coalition.

During the 1980s, the coalition introduced its bill, testifying the need for it in front of state and local legislators. Like Steinmetz a few years prior, the state’s interior design students were a major part of the grass-roots efforts, helping educate the public about Interior Design.

Steinmetz’s chosen plan of attack? Education through face-to-face contact. “It’s amazing how myths about the profession start disappearing once you talk to people one-on-one,” she says. Steinmetz and the coalition continued to educate architects, code officials, fire marshals, legislators, end-users, the public and even those within the interior design profession. This was done by conducting town hall meetings, visiting the state capital, and meeting with as many legislators and lobbyists for architects, engineers and home builders as possible.

Steinmetz quickly discovered that you can’t win every battle. She recalls a one-on-one meeting with an interior designer who did not support the legislation because he was opposed to government regulation of any form. The two sat together and weighed the pros and cons. Still, the designer refused to lend support. “Some days you cut your losses and move on,” Steinmetz says. Over the years, she’s been met with other opposing views. “That’s where you learn to make compromises,” she says. “But don’t destroy the core of what you want accomplished. Be ready to compromise, but know where to hold the line.”

Moving forward, Steinmetz is confident that the upcoming generation of designers is just as passionate and dedicated to increasing the professionalism of Interior Design through legislation. With a seat on Louisiana’s state board, she sees firsthand how students are becoming more involved, sitting in on legislative meetings.

Steinmetz’s focus is now on this newest generation of designers. With her involvement in NCIDQ’s Interior Design Experience Program—created to help entry-level designers and students prepare for the NCIDQ exam and gain workplace experience through mentorships—she helps young designers experience both the professional and legislative sides of the business. Other interior designers should be motivated to do the same, she says. “Talk to classes, give presentations and make yourself available for professional college courses,” she says. “There are a lot of ways to get involved with young designers.”

Deborah Steinmetz, FIIDA, Principal, Steinmetz & Associates, New Orleans

**Years in the profession:** 32
**Legislation:** Louisiana title act, 1984; practice act, 1999
**Coalition:** Licensed Interior Designers of Louisiana
**State board:** Louisiana State Board of Examiners of Interior Design
**Additional involvement:** Student mentoring programs