

rising *stars*

**FIVE YOUNG DESIGNERS MAKE THEIR
MARKS WITH QUIET BUT DOGGED AMBITION.**

BY JUDI KETTELER

Armed with degrees, meticulously crafted

portfolios and a hunger to design for the real world, a new class of young hopefuls enters the interior design job market each year. The measure of their promise isn't always tied to the size of those portfolios or their educations. Much of it depends on their talent, humility and willingness to learn deftly and think big.

These five interior designers are looking to fit that bill. Based on feedback from their peers and superiors, they have already surpassed it in many respects.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ERYK FITKAU/GETTY IMAGES





NICKY KAPLAN

POSITION: Project Designer, Hellmuth, Obata + Kassabaum (HOK), Culver City, Calif.

AGE: 32

EDUCATION: Bachelor of Arts, Interior Design, Ryerson Polytechnic University

Nicky Kaplan faced quite an agenda in her design of the Game Show Network's new California corporate offices. "The Game Show Network traditionally has been known for targeting an older audience and airing reruns of shows like 'The Price is Right' and 'Family Feud,' Kaplan says. "They wanted their new personality to reflect a hip, smart, engaging, funny and fun aesthetic." That meant not only walking the line between fun and sophistication, but also helping the company to redefine its core attributes through its design.

Having also worked on the interior architecture of Ascent Media's post-production facility in Los Angeles – a project she just completed this summer – Kaplan quickly is developing a name for herself in the young and hip world of entertainment/media design. Staying ahead of the curve in such a fast-paced and fickle industry is a challenge, but Kaplan has developed a secret weapon: creative purity. "I try to

begin my design development in a vacuum so that I establish a clear concept from the start without being influenced by fads," she says.

Kaplan's philosophy is that designers can – and should – look to trends for inspiration, but that they also should invest in what is lasting. For Kaplan, a South African native, that means frequent travel and studying construction and design projects in other countries. "See the world," she says. "Explore and experience and draw from that always."

That drive to look outside of the office is what sets her apart, says Clay Pendergrast, IIDA, HOK's Director of Interior Design. "Although Nicky is very interested in the aesthetic side of design, as exemplified by her interest in the latest art openings, restaurants and following the fashion world, she isn't afraid to get her hands dirty by pitching in to produce a set of construction documents," Pendergrast says. "Her speed and facility with the computer are excellent."

KAPLAN'S WORD TO THE WISE: "Find a firm that gives you the opportunity to express yourself creatively and gives you opportunities for exposure. Don't let yourself get pigeonholed."

MATT SMIALEK

POSITION: Project Designer at SmithGroup, San Francisco

AGE: 35

EDUCATION: Bachelor of Architecture and Bachelor of Science in Architecture, Penn State University



For Matt Smialek, solving multi-faceted design challenges is a lot like assembling a complex puzzle. “I love the problem/solution side to architecture,” he says. Smialek has gravitated toward high-end corporate design because it puts his problem-solving skills to the ultimate test: How to create highly functional spaces that communicate a positive feeling to the people who work there. “Our goal always is to elevate a space and to elevate those who work in that space,” he says.

His latest project is a good example. As the lead designer for the Canadian Consulate in San Francisco, Smialek had to organize an inherited floor plan and design around the specific needs of each department within the Consulate,

while also maintaining a high level of aesthetics.

“Matt is an exceptional design talent,” says Juhee Cho, IIDA, Smialek’s direct supervisor and head of SmithGroup’s interiors/workplace studio. “In the Consulate project, he was able to integrate complex security measures while creating an elegant civic interior.”

Instead of following one school of design thought, Smialek relies on flexibility. And unlike many young designers trying to make a name for themselves, Smialek prefers humility. That doesn’t mean he doesn’t want his designs to have an impact on culture. It’s just that he’d rather do it quietly through details than announce it loudly through forced trends. “Good architecture sells itself,” he says.

SMIALEK’S WORD TO THE WISE: “It can be disheartening to work on small pieces of something much larger – and to constantly have to jump through hoops. But never lose sight of the big picture, and instead of being in a rush to prove yourself, sit back and listen carefully to those around you.”



DAN MENCHIONS, IIDA

POSITION: Partner, II BY IV Design Associates Inc., Toronto

AGE: 40

EDUCATION: Degree in Applied Arts-Interior Design, Humber College of Applied Arts and Technology

When Toronto suffered a recession in the early 1990s, **Dan Menchions**, IIDA, found himself without a job. Instead of seeing the recent turn of events as negative, Menchions, then just 25, found the silver lining. He met Keith Rushbrook, IIDA, another up-and-coming designer, and the two of them started II BY IV Design Associates Inc.

He and Rushbrook had to tackle everything from designing to bidding on projects to hiring talent to collecting on outstanding bills. “What we didn’t know how to do, we hired consultants for,” he says. “And we figured out quickly that you learn from your mistakes.”

But you also learn from your successes, and the 20-person firm has had plenty of them. One of the most high-profile

projects Menchions has worked on is the CN Tower interior redesign. II BY IV came up with new design concepts for more than 120,000 square feet, including the food service area, the retail section and the circulation areas. It was an exercise not only in restaurant and retail design, but in exhibit design as well. The main goal was to keep visitors entertained while waiting for their shuttle to the top. The firm was integral in transforming the interior of the top Toronto attraction from tourist-tacky to classy.

The same resilience and determination that kept Menchions alive during the tough times is what sets him apart in his field. “I was so naïve about the business, but the passion was really there,” Menchions says. “I really grew up in this industry.”

MENCHIONS’ WORD TO THE WISE: “Learn to take constructive criticism. Understand that it’s all about the client, and don’t take it personally when the negatives come.”

“I was so naïve about the business, but the passion was really there. I really grew up in this industry.”

— Dan Menchions, IIDA, Partner, II BY IV Design Associates Inc., Toronto

mentoring *the next generation*

Crucial to any young professional's success is the guidance they receive from their veteran colleagues. "Once you get to a certain level, your job is to start taking care of the next generation," says Andrew McQuilkin, Vice President and Design Director at FRCH Design Worldwide in Cincinnati. That means emphasizing some of the skill sets young designers don't always realize are extremely valuable, like drawing. "For clients, it's an amazing thing to have someone draw in front of them," he says. "It builds client confidence."

It also means channeling certain elements of character, like impatience, into more positive characteristics, such as passion. When Professor Robert Probst, Director of the School of Design at the University of Cincinnati's acclaimed

College of Design, Architecture, Art, and Planning speaks to graduates, he encourages them to nurture that desire to create. "You have to work with both your heart and mind," he says. "It's passion that carries you through."

McQuilkin is glad to see that hunger and raw drive in the work world. "When you give young designers the opportunity, you're amazed at the amount of creativity that they come up with," he says. Of course, some of it may miss the mark, but that's what mentoring is all about: encouraging the raw creativity, while imparting a sense of the business realities, like budgets, time constraints and client expectations. His best advice for young designers: learn, learn, learn, and don't let yourself get pigeonholed. He has a suggestion for veterans, too: "Give them a chance."

YOKO ISHIHARA

POSITION: Associate, Gensler,
San Francisco

AGE: 33

EDUCATION: Bachelor of
Science, Interior Design, University
of Cincinnati



Asking basic questions is the staple of **Yoko Ishihara's** design process. "One of the things I most love about design is that there are still so many things to learn," she says. "So I hope I never lose the ability to just step back and ask questions, without having to pretend I immediately know the answers."

That process of discovery has proven to be a sound approach, especially in Ishihara's work with Nokia Vancouver. She already had worked on a Nokia project in Mountain View, Calif., but there were distinct culture challenges behind the Vancouver job. "The space had to reflect the culture of Vancouver," says Ishihara. "So we started asking, 'What is Vancouver?'" Ultimately, her team meshed natural and metropolitan elements to create a design concept of rustic sophistication. Not only did the client love it, the finished space received rave reviews in the design world. Ishihara also took the lead on developing the Seattle corporate office for Getty Images, and she worked on several prestigious

entertainment industry projects as well, such as Electronic Arts in Redwood City, Calif., Dodge & Cox in San Francisco and Nike Geographic Business Unit in New York, Chicago and Miami.

"Yoko is one of those quiet storms," says Gensler Design Principal Collin Burry, IIDA. "She has a blistering talent that is neatly packaged away behind a calm shell. She never toots her own horn but is highly respected by her peers."

Ishihara always has relied strongly on her gut feeling and inner guiding voice. "The trick is not to think so much about the trends, but to keep sharpening your intuition," she says. That means traveling, studying and always remaining open-minded. Though Ishihara has lived in the United States for many years, she greatly admires the design principles rooted in her native culture. "In Japan, it's about the art of craftsmanship and striving for perfection," she says. That mentality of hard work, solid craftsmanship and attention to detail finds a subtle influence in all her designs.

ISHIHARA'S WORD TO THE WISE: "A designer's true talent is revealed by how much potential they can unearth and turn into a creative design innovation for their client."



JESUS COLAO

POSITION: Architectural Associate, Skidmore, Owings & Merrill LLP, New York

AGE: 33

EDUCATION: Master of Architecture, University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Fine Arts; Bachelor of Arts, Interdisciplinary Design and Planning, Architecture, University of Washington

Jesus Colao believes the best architecture has musical qualities. With a background in both architecture and music, it's easy to see why. "I love the idea of translating music into space," Colao says.

That's the kind of artistic aesthetic that drives all of Colao's work and makes him stand out among his peers. It informs everything he designs, including his work on the 7 World Trade Center Marketing Center. Working on a project with such deep emotional roots is humbling for Colao, who originally hails from Spain and has lived and worked all over the world. "We're taking raw space and using technology to create

something that is exemplary of the future," he says. "We also wanted to introduce an element that really spoke to the celebration of rebuilding." The marketing suite includes exhibit and conference space, with elements such as double curvature walls and complex geometries translated into three-dimensional space.

Colao embraces technology because it allows designers to work more precisely, and he highly values precision and conciseness. But he avoids technology for technology's sake, or trend-setting for the sake of ego. "I'm interested in music, philosophy, history and biology, and in revisiting the classics," he says. ☒

COLAO'S WORD TO THE WISE: "If you want to design, you need to make it personal. Search who you are and find ways to weave your experience with your ideas. Realize it's a long process, find the right tempo and stay in it for the long haul."

"Realize it's a long process, find the right tempo and stay in it for the long haul."

— Jesus Colao, Architectural Associate, Skidmore, Owings & Merrill LLP, New York