

# Push the Envelope

A profile of IIDA's "Ten to Watch" introduces 10 young professionals who have what it takes to propel the design world in new directions.

BY NATALIE BAUER



PHOTOGRAPHY BY GARY S. & VIVIAN CHAPMAN/GETTY IMAGES

One has been practicing for only two years. Another says he hopes to be included in the next "50 Over 50" competition. Two of them are mothers of two, and many of them set out to be architects yet somehow fatefully found themselves on the inside looking out.

These honorees of IIDA's "Ten to Watch – Future Leaders" share more differences than similarities, but they've all realized a

love for the profession and a need to communicate their unique, innovative vision. Ultimately, these designers profess that they are a work in progress. Whether it's in a classroom or on a whirlwind tour of Europe, these future leaders know that learning never ends.

#### THE PERPETUAL STUDENT

##### JASON ROSENBLATT

It took Jason Rosenblatt a while to find his calling in interiors, but now that

he's here, the profession is all-consuming.

Although he originally intended to become an architect, it took his early mentor, Carlos Martinez, now Gensler's Design Director, to recognize Rosenblatt's multifaceted talents and his strong background in product design and other areas that complement the Perkins & Will Senior Designer's style.

Since then, Perkins & Will Market Sector Principal

Lamarr Reid has helped coach Rosenblatt's professional development. It's been eight years since Rosenblatt made the transition from flipping his structural perspective inside out, and he feels like he just started. "The learning process never ends," he says.

Rosenblatt feels that he's grown into a formidable designer with skills that are attentive to the client, comprehensive in their scope both aesthetically and technically, and flexible, but

he's still got a long road ahead. The Chicago-based designer wants to expand his repertoire into product design, taking cues from design legends Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier. "It's why those guys are masters," he says. "I want to develop an overall deliverable package."

But it's something he says that cannot be done easily by most designers. "Somehow we've lost that collaborative notion in our industry," Rosenblatt says.

"It's a shame because that's the way it really ought to be. It would be nice to blur the lines between the studios as opposed to keeping [them] so separate."

Trying to blur the lines in his own work, Rosenblatt is planning his next study topic. During college, he spent time studying in France, and he would like to reopen those channels of inspiration. "I'm at a point where I really want that again. I want to see new and old architecture

and really recharge those batteries," he says. "You can't spend all your time in the office. There's just so much out there."

#### THE RULE BREAKER

##### JAMES T. POLLET, ASSOC. IIDA

James Pollet considers himself a child of the "dot-com fiasco."

A Senior Associate with San Francisco-based Richard Pollack & Associates, Pollet says the fast-paced, rapidly growing era of Internet

technology and its subsequent rapid end has been the biggest influence on his design philosophy.

"[During the late 1990s,] things happened very quickly, and so I think [design choices] were much more shallow – throwing a lot of colors and shapes around, installing a lot of amenities," he says. "But now that budgets have come down and schedules have opened up a bit more, that's given us more time to think about our design."

We can apply [what we learned] now to spaces in a much more thoughtful way.”

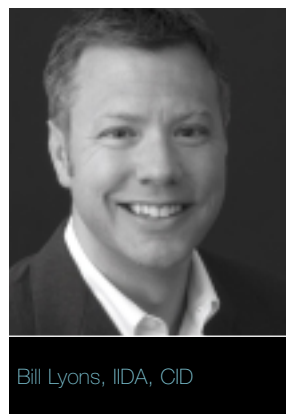
Pollet also sees the industry pulling together in preparation for the next era in IT-related design. “I feel like things seem to be converging,” he says.

“Everything is cross-pollinating, and that’s only going to continue. We saw that a couple of years ago. That’s going to be the way things keep moving, especially with IT. You really see how people don’t necessarily need to go to the office anymore and how that’s going to change things. I think we’re only seeing the beginning of that.”

#### THE PERFECTIONIST

##### **BILL LYONS, IIDA, CID**

Bill Lyons is a realistic idealist: The self-proclaimed



Bill Lyons, IIDA, CID

perfectionist knows he’ll always be chasing a dream. “I always strive for perfection,” he says. “It’s a personal thing. I have sort of this desire inside me to make every project be as good as it can be.”

Although a single project never can reach perfection, the Associate Principal at Perkins & Will’s Minneapolis office believes that the process can mean a lot to good design.

“The process is going to be better when you have good, solid collaboration [with the client],” says Lyons, who has been with Perkins & Will for eight years. “The solution is enhanced when the clients are part of the process because they know their business. Taking those elements from them and collaborating is really a win-win situation. When clients are an active part of the team, they support what they help create.”

#### THE GRAND COLLABORATOR

##### **PETER WANG, AIA**

Forget the T-squares, the CAD drawings and the blueprints.

For Peter Wang, good design starts with the ears. “It’s about communicating, how you see things and putting it in their language so they can understand it,” says Wang, a Senior Associate in Gensler’s New York office. “It’s not only about honing design skills but also communication skills – and having a dialogue with your client, which is an integral part of the process.”

Communication forms the key foundation for Wang, who puts collaboration atop all else in his design philosophy. “The infusion of ideas by team members and the client, which I consider extremely important, enriches the project and makes it much more meaningful,” he says.

Wang keeps the emphasis on the client rather than his own aesthetic needs. His design for ING Direct in New York won the 2004 IIDA Decade of Design Competition honor.

But the decidedly modest Wang says he hasn’t quite found what he’s looking for professionally. “You look for those moments where it’s a project you’ve

done and you come back to it after some time, and it still speaks to you and you say, ‘Wow, did I really do that?’ That’s the type of moment I am searching for,” he says. “Some people have achieved the formula for doing that. I don’t think I have yet.”

#### THE TEACHER

##### **MELISSA MIZELL, LEED AP**

Like many instructors, Melissa Mizell says she learns as much from her students as they do from her.

“Students inspire me by helping me to remember that there are many ways to solve a problem,” says Mizell, an Associate at Gensler’s San Francisco office.

Mizell has taught part time at the California College of the Arts for nearly three years. She says the future is bright for her students and the profession. “The work is becoming a lot more conceptual, and the quality is getting better,” she says.

Mizell also says her students will help lead sustainability into ubiquity.

“The knowledge of sustainable design is increasing,



Melissa Mizell, LEED AP

and so is the desire to learn more,” she says. “But I am looking forward to the day when sustainable design is not considered something you add or [don’t] add to your projects, that it is just ‘good design.’”

Though she won’t offer a time-table for when that day will occur, Mizell does believe the profession is at a tipping point regarding sustainable design. “We’re really on the cusp of it becoming more mainstream,” she says. “A few years ago it was a niche kind of thing, but with the whole LEED system, people racing to become accredited and state and city projects requiring LEED certification, more people are looking at it.

“There still are things that discourage me, but incrementally, it’s growing,” she says. “When I hear people say things like, ‘It’s not going to last,’

or, ‘We can’t do it,’ or, ‘It’s just a West Coast thing,’ it discourages me, but it doesn’t stop me because I am beginning to see positive changes from our vendors. They’re responsive to market pressure. If [designers and high-powered clients] start to say we’re not going to use any product that we think is not good for human health or the environment, the manufacturers will start to listen.”

#### THE RISK TAKER

##### **KIMBERLY SACRAMONE, IIDA**

Give Kimberly Sacramone an inch, and she’ll take over the whole space.

Sacramone, Design Director for Interior Design at HLW International’s New York office, likes to learn her clients’ vision and go one step further through intuitive listening. “Clients inform me [through] what they say but also [through] their body language and emotional responses to our questions. That’s what gives me fuel on how far to go,” she says.

After nearly 12 years in the industry, Sacramone

says her desire and ability to go further are stronger than ever. “With experience, I feel a lot more comfortable taking risks,” she says. “I’ve learned now that being a little nervous about something is a good thing. As long as you do your research, that’s how you start evolving – by taking risks and not always falling back on a safe solution, as long as it is appropriate for my clients.”

Sacramone’s risky business often leaves her without a formula for design, but she does follow one general rule of thumb: “There needs to be a transition through a space, how a space unfolds to a person,” she says. “When I’m designing a space, you come up with a big idea, and the entire space has to be holistic and refer back to that.”

The design for Millennium High School, a New York City public school that operates with a partially privately funded budget, reflects Sacramone’s devotion to having a central theme. The school’s principal was a constructionist who believed that

children should create their own educational track.

To reflect that philosophy, Sacramone fused school design with alternative office trends – an uncommon marriage. “All these wonderful things we’ve done in office spaces in the last 10 years aren’t standard for our children in schools,” she says.

The 100,000 square foot design relied on soft lighting, ergonomic furniture and warm colors, as opposed to the fluorescent bulbs, flat-backed chairs and stale hues of most schools. Its open floor plan provides students with niches outside the classroom to study or socialize. “It was a really rewarding experience for me because I felt the true value design can have on community,” Sacramone says. “The kids, when they came to the opening of the school, were just blown away.”

#### THE MASTER TRANSLATOR

##### **MARK BRYANT**

Excess is a foreign term for Mark Bryant.

The Southwest Regional Design Director for

Gensler, Bryant doesn't waste his lead on unnecessary concepts: "I never drag a pencil across paper without asking myself, 'What does this line mean?' 'Why is it heavier than another?'"

His methodical approach has led to a strong consistency across his 21-year career, which has focused mostly on corporate design. Bryant says putting together his application for the "Future Leaders" award revealed his style with more clarity than ever before. "No matter what the style, I'm a modernist, so historically my work is based on very simple, clear planning," he says. "The concepts are always evident"

"Designers must be able to discuss design in more business terms – that's your client," he says, "so I have really learned to be able to look at and respond to my work from others' perspectives."

**THE POINTILLIST**  
**ANGELA SORRELL**  
**PETERSON, IIDA**

For Angela Sorrell Peterson, the work never ends.

"Once you start drawing, you realize how much more

you need to draw," she says. "When you take the time to really get in and work out the tiniest details, that's where a project is made or broken."

Peterson, an Associate Principal with Austin, Texas-based Susman Tisdale Gayle, agrees that keeping the big picture in mind matters, but it is at that smallest point where the big picture gets its shape. "The seemingly smallest details impact the overall success of a space," she says. "A lot of times, clients aren't aware that we're getting to that level of detail, but that's one of the strong benefits of hiring a professional – to stress that level of detail."

As part of the project team designing the interiors for National Instruments Corp. in Austin, Peterson painstakingly documented the project details to help her formulate the overall space. The second-floor balcony, for example, has a commanding view of the first-floor entry. The balcony's railing consists of vertical structural tees – angled to match the maple wall panels surrounding

the room – with horizontal tube steel capped off with a brushed stainless steel handrail.

"We had a challenge on that project because we wanted to celebrate their nationally award-winning site by bringing the outdoors in using a natural color palette," Peterson says. "But at the same time, their employees are fairly young, so [National Instruments Corp.] wants to have a hip, cool environment for the young people to try to get them excited about being an employee there."

As a result, Peterson's project team created a space that gradually transitions from the more natural entry space into the "more hip" spaces and open offices. "We had to take the natural colors downstairs and use those as leads and tweak them just enough so it's successful – so it's a different feeling on the upper floors," she says.

**THE TEAM CAPTAIN**  
**AMY HURSH LOPEZ, IIDA**  
More than any project or prototype, Amy Hursh Lopez considers the interior design



Amy Hursh Lopez, IIDA

studio at Watkins Hamilton Ross Architects Inc. her greatest work to date.

The 33-year-old designer started at the Houston-based firm as a junior designer in 1995 and worked her way up to studio leader by extolling the values of team-based design and professional development. "My role is leading a design team. I'm not a senior designer – I am the Interior Design Studio leader and an interior design project manager. I manage the team, inspiring, motivating, pushing, encouraging and leading the team," she says. "The quality of the work the studio produces speaks to me and about me."

Lopez says the evolution into a leadership position resulted from the patience and guidance of her mentors, who helped shift her thinking from her personal career to that of the firm's trajectory.



“You start off really small. You look at things very self-centered,” she says. “As I’ve grown, I tend to see things in a much bigger picture, looking at the total impact, not just how it affects me. I think that’s called growing up.”

The bigger picture comprises a complex web of designers and project assignments that Lopez considers to be one of her career’s biggest challenges. “You have to find the right balance of people and skill sets that match the client and project type. You can’t have all superstars,” she says. “My job is to make sure I have the right team at all

times, meshing that team with our architectural teams and then making sure we have mission-based clients to allow us to do what we want to do.”

And what the health-care-oriented designer wants to do is no simple task. “I’m constantly pushing to have our design and our designers work to a higher standard,” she says. “It’s fairly critical in the healthcare world because probably only in the past five to 10 years could you even say the interior environment has been recognized as a differentiator in the health-care market. We’re always trying to counterbalance the institutional feel that has always existed in health-care. We must create a higher standard – that there can be good design that is supported by detail and thoroughness, so that people can actually walk into a hospital and say, ‘Wow, this looks good.’”

#### THE NEWCOMER

**VIVECA BISSONNETTE,**  
**ASSOCIATE IIDA,**  
**ALLIED ASID**


Although it took Viveca Bissonnette a long time to find her place in the professional world, she’s wasted no time making her mark.

A Designer for Carrier Johnson in San Diego, Bissonnette only began practicing interior design two years ago after working for 13 years in the airline industry as an instructor.

Growing up with a father who was an architect and a mother who was an urban planner, Bissonnette was surrounded by design but never seriously considered pursuing it as a career. But after so many years in the airline industry, Bissonnette says something was awry. “I was searching for something that would fulfill all the needs that were missing,” she says,

“It was the creative outlet. I did not have one in my previous career.”

After a late-night conversation in her living room with her husband, Bissonnette began researching interior design programs, and within four months, she had quit her job and enrolled at the Design Institute of San Diego. “Professionally, it was the best thing I’d ever done,” she says.

Now, two years after she graduated, Bissonnette says she’s making up for lost time, capitalizing on all the passion she kept bottled up for so many years prior. “This is the first time in my life when I’ve actually gotten up and couldn’t wait to go to work. I never felt like this before,” she says. “And that just lends itself to doing better work. If you put your whole heart and soul into your work, it’s hard not to get good results. I feel that I’ve found the place that I belong.” 

## Judge and Jury

IIDA’s Ten to Watch were chosen by a jury of their peers based on project work, their service to the community or IIDA, and their commitment to professionalism.