

LEAV- ING THEIR MARK

BY NATALIE BAUER

THESE INFLUENTIAL
DESIGN FIRMS ARE
TURNING HEADS
AND CHANGING
THE FUTURE
OF DESIGN.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROGER WRIGHT/GETTY IMAGES

Despite the sluggish economy and tight budgets, a multitude of interior design firms are making more out of less and leaving a large footprint on the future of design.

"Clients as well as designers are realizing that the budget is obviously important. Being able to approach design in an economic way and still make it fresh, feasible and accessible is the challenge for today's leading designers," says Tray Crow, AIA, ASID, IDEC, Chair of the Interior Design Department for the Savannah College of Art and Design, Savannah, Ga. Here are a few of the cutting-edge firms influencing design trends for today and tomorrow.

SIZE DOESN'T MATTER

They're small but mighty. Some of the most cutting-edge projects that will dramatically impact the future of design are accomplished by small to mid-sized firms who can gamble with their creations. Without the massive overhead and cumbersome bureaucracy of larger firms, smaller firms are having considerable impact.

"The real issue is who is willing to take big risks," says Henry Hildebrandt, IIDA, AIA, IDEC, Associate Director of Undergraduate Programs at the University of Cincinnati's School of Architecture and Interior Design. "Large firms and established firms can't [take risks] by and large because of their commitments and nature of their business. Individuals and firms who have a small client

base and fewer obligations can afford more, or have more flexibility to explore new avenues of business and experiment with design issues?"

However, that is not to say that the giant firms will not influence the future of design. Their size alone will have a significant effect. Commonly referred to as one of the leading firms, San Francisco-based Gensler, with its 505 designers and \$88 million in 2002 design fees, and other large firms like it inevitably will cause significant change in the design industry. "We're really big, and we're everywhere so the chances that someone knows who we are is really high," says Gervais Tompkin, Vice President of the San Francisco office.

"[Their influence] comes down to what they do for the profession and the research they do," says Marci Scronic, IIDA, Head of the Interiors Group for RNL Design in Phoenix. "They are constantly looking for the research on what's happening in the future and where that's going. It definitely impacts the way design is being done in the future and not just at Gensler but throughout the country. People look at issues they come up with, and they pick up on that. Everybody wants to be compared to the big guys."

GREEN MEANS GO

With their range and vast resources, larger firms will speak with a commanding force on such hot-button issues as sustainability. "We're at a point on deciding what it really means to be

— Eric Mailaender, Principal of Resistance Design, New York



"I SUSPECT WE'RE GOING TO BE EXPERIENCING MORE AND MORE REVERSAL TOWARD THINGS THAT ARE SIMPLER, MORE BEAUTIFUL, PURE AND HONEST IN WHAT THEY ARE."

green," says Valerie Hassett, IIDA, AIA, head of the interior design department at SBE Architects, Alexandria, Va. "It can be justified and approached from so many different ways that there's not a consistent approach." Eventually, experts predict, sustainable methods will become intrinsic to the practice, and bigger companies such as Gensler, HOK and RTKL and Associates, who now assign green specialists throughout their studios, will have had much to do with how designers "think green."

Taking the sustainability movement to another level, design firm HOK has caught the attention of many with its emphasis on the sociopolitical facets of sustainability. "[HOK] seems to be on the forward push," Crow says. "They look at sustainability in a holistic fashion. Sustainability doesn't only mean green design. It means economics. If you're going to a place that is economically challenged, they're focused on the impact on the entire community as opposed to just focusing on their clients' needs."

On a regional level, some of the most powerful examples of sustainability will continue to arise throughout the Pacific Northwest, where the issue of green design holds substantial weight in the minds of both designers and clients. "[Western designers] are so much more advanced," says Scronic, who is a past President of IIDA's Southwest Chapter.

Pacific Northwest firms such as SERA Architects, Portland, Ore., exemplify the massive strides being made in the realm of purposeful

sustainable green design. In refurbishing offices in the historic Jean Vollum Natural Capital Center in Portland, Ore., the firm analogized the workplace to an ecosystem, and integration between products, space and purpose required extensive research for product selection, says Elaine Aye, IIDA, a LEED-Accredited Professional with Green Building Services, Portland, Ore. The building was the first in the nation to receive the LEED gold rating, and designers have estimated that more than 98 percent of construction waste has been recycled or reclaimed – a local record. Aye says the building serves as a critical example of what's to come for comprehensive green design.

KEEP IT REAL

Looking more broadly, firms creating the most buzz seem to be those tempering their innovative techniques with practical applications. Having emerged from the rubble of the dot-com bust, many firms have shifted their perspective from radically innovative to rationally inventive. "I suspect we're going to be experiencing more and more reversal toward things that are simpler, more beautiful, pure and honest in what they are," says Eric Mailaender, Principal of Resistance Design, New York. "There is a strong sense of frugality and economy and a sort of smartness. There's a sobriety that seems to be slowly setting in. The more influential projects are and will be very straightforward, rational and problem-solving."

— Gervais Tompkin, Vice President, Gensler, San Francisco



"WE'RE REALLY BIG, AND WE'RE EVERYWHERE SO THE CHANCES THAT SOMEONE KNOWS WHO WE ARE IS REALLY HIGH."

— Jeffrey Rausch, Principal of Exclaim Design



“WE DEFINE OURSELVES AS ESSENTIALISTS. WE ONLY PUT IN WHAT IS NECESSARY ... BECAUSE PEOPLE ARE LOOKING FOR A REASON.”

Firms such as Canadian team Yabu Pushelberg, whose creations include Minneapolis' Le Meridien Hotel and Tiffany's New York flagship store, reflect this trend.

“They're very influential because they're innovative but what they design is very utilitarian,” says Jim Druckman, President of the New York Design Center. “They're very conscious of the practical application of their design. It's not just wild design. Everything they do has a purpose.”

Experts and principal designers predict utility-driven firms will continue to resound especially well with clients. Among them, according to Phoenix-based Nicole Ospina, IIDA, Vice President of U.S. Business Interiors, are firms such as Exclaim Design, whose mission statement is founded on function and flexibility. “We define ourselves as essentialists,” says Jeffrey Rausch, Principal of Exclaim Design. “We only put in what is necessary ... because people are looking for a reason. They're asking, ‘Why are you doing that? Why am I spending \$1,000 on that chair? What's my return on investment?’”

In line with practicality and sustainability, firms using raw materials are popular among clients and colleagues. “We've seen a lot of projects using more raw materials, not using as much carpeting, keeping concrete floors just that, more use of cork, just showing a lot more of the construction because, why hide it?” Scronic says. Yabu Pushelberg's extensive use of glass and wood,

illustrated by Le Meridien, compels designers to think differently about such basic materials. “They're challenging designers and people that use the designers to better utilize the resources at hand,” Druckman says.

Firms that will continue to turn heads are those using these basic materials to create an integrated form that reflects a myriad of images about the client, the building's audience and the surrounding environment. Designers and experts turn to such firms as Phoenix-based Stein-Cox Group, which often relies on products that reflect the surrounding environment. In its remodeling of the Phoenix Children's Hospital, Stein-Cox tried to mirror the shapes and colors of the desert. Designers painstakingly researched to ensure, for example, that the design's green, painted areas matched the color and shape of the native paloverde tree. “Literally, it matches,” says Morris A. Stein, FACHA, FAIA, President of the Stein-Cox Group.

STRETCHING THE LIMITS

Significant strides also will be made as firms transcend boundaries across various design genres. Vigilant practices will continue to expand their reach into other profitable sectors, infusing fresh perspectives and alternative methods of design and construction.

Leading firms, for example, already are bringing new life to the workplace, merging their retail expertise with corporate design. Using point-of-sale concepts in key reception

areas for customers, potential employees and current staff, firms will help clients sell their images. Designer Michelle Wempe says firms such as STUDIOS Architecture, San Francisco, Calif. – already a master of workplace ecology – are studying the organizational side of interiors. Their focus on workplace strategy can lead the way in creating workspaces that will attract better talent, maintain a strong workforce and impress customers.

Designs such as STUDIOS' XM Satellite Radio will bolster productivity and stakeholder confidence, says Principal Todd Degarmo, IIDA, AIA. The Washington, D.C. office, which hosts nearly 180 broadcast booths, needed to attract a creative staff to a city not traditionally known as a center of inventiveness, and the space had to reflect that. Using prefabricated broadcast booths that snapped together, STUDIOS designers laid out the booths, complete with arching windows, down long, expansive hallways and major circulation areas for potential employees and investors to get glimpses of the staff at work.

Influential firms also are crossing over into the government sector, not normally a bastion of cutting-edge design. Louis Schump, a Principal of NBBJ, Seattle, says one of the most powerful designs he's seen in recent years is Perkins & Will's plan for the Los Angeles Federal Courthouse, making the firm one of his top picks. “[The courthouse is] pushing the boundaries of what recent city buildings have

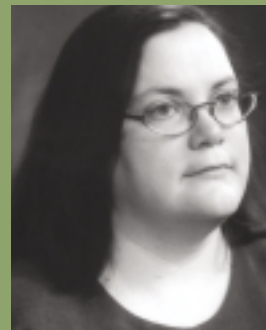
been,” Schump says. “The courtrooms are daylight. The area outside the courtrooms overlooks an atrium that overlooks L.A. The connection to the outside and the city that the court serves seems to embody democracy.”

And hospitality designers will leave a striking mark on the healthcare industry. For example, BeeryRio & Associates, Springfield, Va., which has designed a majority of the assisted-living facilities for Sunrise, seems to be leading the charge in developing a facility trademark, one which will surely impact the rapid rise of these facilities as baby boomers age. Hassett says BeeryRio uses commercial construction techniques that are glossed over with residential materials. These techniques create a distinct image for future assisted-living facilities. “They look like big, oversized Victorian homes, but of course, they're constructed out of steel and concrete, and the interior spaces are proportional to the size of a commercial building,” she says.

UNIVERSAL RULE

Taking design to a new level, these influential designers often differ in their approaches, their muses and their techniques. However, they have one thing in common: inspiring clients. No matter how much they want to push the boundaries, designers must enlist the support of willing consumers. The firms fortunate enough to work with visionary clientele who can be sold on innovative design will meld the shape of future design. ■

— Valerie Hassett, IIDA, AIA, SPE Architects, Alexandria, Va.



“WE'RE AT A POINT ON DECIDING WHAT IT REALLY MEANS TO BE GREEN. IT CAN BE JUSTIFIED AND APPROACHED FROM SO MANY DIFFERENT WAYS THAT THERE'S NOT A CONSISTENT APPROACH.”