THE WORLD SEEMS SMALLER, CONSUMERS ARE MORE CULTURED, EVERYONE IS CONNECTED — AND DESIGNERS ARE LISTENING.

BY JENNIFER GROVER PROKOPY

CHANGING AESTHETICS

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARTIN BARRAUD/GETTY IMAGES

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Some trends are fleeting, in one month and out the next. Others stand the test of time, leaving a lasting imprint on our environment. Every day, designers imagine. In reaction, design will step back from technology, trying to create more low-tech environments... 

"There is an overwhelming desire today, says Dan Menchions, IIDA, ARIDO, Principal Partner in II By IV Design Associates Inc., Toronto. "To balance this overload, he's impressed by the media coverage his friends would be really impressed by the media equipment that he had," Cutler says. "This trend seems to have been replaced by one where people still want all the technology, but they want it hidden."

FAMILIAR TERRITORY

Some designers see an alluring different — and positive — influence of technology on their work. Diego Burdi, HIDA, ARIDO, Creative Partner at Toronto-based burdifilek, says technology has broken down barriers between the firm and its clients. (The firm also won a 50th Annual Interior Design Competition award for the Tip Top Lofts Sales Centre in Toronto.)

Innovations in communication enable us to design in such a way that a client can really visualize what we're bringing to the table," Burdi says. "There's a strong bridge that makes potential clients a lot more comfortable, because they can see what can be."

The result, he says, is that clients are more knowledgeable and quicker to assert themselves in the design process: "In general people are looking for more aesthetic value."

"They are arméd with more resources and are increasingly open to exploring more creative possibilities to fit their particular needs."

In the residential realm, consumers have made a giant leap in design education: professionals agree that a glut of home and garden television programs is excelling a monumental influence in the United Kingdom and North America. "Today's society is a lot more design-aware," Burdi says, "and designers will be challenged in the future to create a more unique palette than you see today."

THINK GLOBAL, ACT LOCAL

With global communication channels widening, designers and consumers are more aware of design standards, says Bryce G. Rutter, Ph.D., DMI, IDSA, founder and CEO of Metaphase Design Group in St. Louis, Mo. "Consumers are increasingly smarter about what real, good design is," Rutter says, and in turn, they judge their environment by a global standard that designers must acknowledge.

Burdi hopes exposure to new cultures will spice up worldwide design and views of beauty. In his view, "there's been a bit of a wash globally," a sameness of design from country to country. "I remember going to Europe or the Far East 10 years ago and being awe-inspired," he says.

However, on a trip to Europe a few months ago, Burdi noticed a shift toward bland uniformity in some public spaces, particularly in airports. "You get off the plane ... and you're dropped into a mini-mall and you have to wonder where you are," he says. This forecasts a backlash...
against the homogeneity and a return to the roots of local design in many countries.

Cities like Toronto, Menchions says, are reacting in a different way to globalization — by embracing “design on every street corner,” he says. “Toronto is such an international city, with a very eclectic design style” that he feels will spread to other parts of the globe.

The formation of the “Eurozone,” the inexpensive air travel in Europe and the upcoming enlargement of the European Union, says Cummings, make it easier for designers to travel within Europe and work for clients in different countries, exposing many more consumers to design influences from across Europe. “It’s having a big effect, bringing in the possibilities of many new colors and textures, fabrics and furnishings from all over the world,” he says. “The increased exposure to new design approaches is a growing influence.”

**Comfort Zone**

In the United States, people are working harder than ever — and have been rewarded with an economic slump that allows them little opportunity for relaxation or vacation. At home, cell phones, the Internet and cable TV keep consumers wired in to a 24-hour news feed. It’s no wonder that designers are seeing that clients’ behavior is in a trend toward “nesting,” a return to calming tones and casual environments, spaces where frazzled minds and bodies can escape and unwind. “I have noticed this trend manifesting itself in simpler, more comfortable and less ostentatious design requests, homes that act as havens rather than vehicles to impress,” Cutter says.

Liza Robinson Vidal, Vice President of U.S. operations for Bali-based Warisan, says consumers are looking for styles that are not comfortable are out,” Vidal says. “Consumers are looking at style as something that will last beyond next year’s fad. There is a return to substantial, natural materials and simple designs that are satisfying to consumers’ ideas of value and beauty.”

But nesting is a uniquely American trend, according to Burdi. When it comes to other countries, he says, “I don’t think what’s happened in the last few years is affected design. I think everybody is just trying to put their best foot forward.” While the 9/11 attacks put a momentary damper on the world, he says most countries snapped back quickly. “We all froze for a few months. But then, clients said, ‘Life goes on, we have to move forward!’”

While home style in the United States is leaning toward the personal retreat, that doesn’t mean the nation is taking a timeout — design still moves forward. Burdi is amazed, for example, at the tenacity of U.S. retailers, who are using cost-effective tools like color and texture to keep design fresh on a budget: “The energy level is quite phenomenal. Although there are struggles right now, retailers are being a lot more innovative with a lot less to work with and still keeping consumers’ interest.”

**The Generation Gap**

Design for all generations will come of age in the coming years, according to Jim Mueller, Chair of the Industrial Designers Society of America’s Universal Design Special Interest Section. In the United States, aging baby boomers are placing a greater value on letting functional independence of elders seeking to ‘age in place’ for as long as possible,” Mueller says. “This will boost interest in universal design in architecture, interiors, appliances, furniture and fixtures.”

This same trend is affecting design in Europe, where Cummings says his clients are placing a greater value on design ideas that will last for many years. “Natural, muted, easy-to-live-with colors are very popular” for creating spaces that provide lasting comfort, he says. “Life is getting more and more demanding — and people are looking for a place they can relax. Our client base is aging a bit, and they want something that’s easier to live with and will stay looking good for 10 years.”

**While Home Style in the United States is Leaning Toward the Personal Retreat, That Doesn’t Mean the Nation Is Taking a Timeout — Design Still Moves Forward.**

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