From the showroom to the boardroom, five pioneering females continue to carve out their place in Interior Design history.
People have long posed the question: Is talent born or bred? No doubt, there are natural born leaders, and then there are those who make it to the top with an unwavering work ethic. But regardless of how skill, determination and cut-and-edge creativity are cultivated, it’s clear that some people pave the way for the rest of us to follow.

When it comes to Interior Design, these qualities translate into influencing how designs are developed, products are created, companies are operated, and even how new stars are born. Perspective identified five pioneering women whose talent has not only helped shape the industry, but, in many cases, the world we live in.

In 1980, Robin Klehr Avia joined Gensler, one of the largest architecture and design firms in the world, as a junior designer. She has grown with the firm ever since. Today, she is the Managing Principal of the Northeast Region of Gensler, and a member of the firm’s Executive Committee, Board of Directors and Management Committee. In addition to her responsibilities in the Northeast Region, which includes the New York, Boston, New Jersey and Costa Rica offices, she has firm oversight for the Workplace and Professional Service Practice Area. She also works closely with Gensler’s leadership on strategy and planning related to running the business, at both a regional and global level.

“Design is always evolving and as a professional in the industry you need to embrace a fluid approach toward your career: remain open to learning, try novel things, seize opportunities and be willing to explore new paths,” Klehr Avia says. “The world is changing too, so as designers, we have to respond to that change and the outside forces that affect how we design. With the availability of advanced technology, a focus on performance-based design and clients pushing us to create better work, I feel strongly that our industry today is doing the best work we have ever done.”

She adds that in today’s market, Interior Designers are no longer charged with educating clients about the value of design. Instead, she’s found that clients are increasingly educating designers. For example, “one of the things they’ve educated us on is that we need to show them in some sort of concrete way how design can enhance business results,” Klehr Avia says.

Robin Klehr Avia says. ROBIN KLEHR AVIA, FIDA NORTHEAST REGION MANAGING PRINCIPAL, GENSLER, NEW YORK

“Robin really understands her clients’ business. She works at asking the right questions,” says Diane Hoskins, FAIA, LEED AP, Executive Director at Gensler in Washington, D.C. “She really understands what drives them, how they make money and uses them as key drivers to the way we design and deliver that space.”

Klehr Avia’s projects have won many design awards, including the BusinessWeek/Architectural Record finalist award for the ING Direct Cafe in New York in 2002, IIDA’s Decade of Design Award in 2004 for her design of New York-based Swiss Re Financial Services, and two national awards from the Society of American Registered Architects, one in 2007 for the American Red Cross building in New York, and another in 2008 for The New York Times headquarters.

Designers at Gensler say she has raised the quality of work at the firm, not only aesthetically but also in the way designers present interiors to exceed client needs and expectations.

“She proves it,” says Carlos Martinez, IIDA, AIA, LEED AP, Principal at Gensler in Chicago. “Many times, she asks the sort of questions that force you to really explain why something is a certain way. She’s not necessarily doing that because she doesn’t believe in it; she’s doing it because it becomes a way for us to be more convincing when we are dealing with our clients, users, the media or any audience that we might have.”

Interpreting clients’ needs into designs is just one of Klehr Avia’s many strengths. Julia Simet, IIDA Principal at Genler’s New York office, says Klehr Avia is also talented in explaining her vision to clients. When clients don’t understand the direction or the design, Simet says, she can successfully convert it into the language that they are comfortable with.

Klehr Avia’s talent in translating her vision for clients and colleagues has also made her a trusted advisor.

“She’s very proactive and she knows five years down the line what things are going,” Simet says. “She has her finger on the pulse of what’s happening in the office, but she also completely understands what’s happening globally in the firm.”

The reach of Klehr Avia’s impact on Interior Design goes beyond Gensler. For the next generation of female interior designers, she is an inspiration and role model.

“Interior Design is more balanced in terms of gender, but still it’s a fairly male dominated one,” says Martinez, who is also an Adjunct Professor of Design at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. “As a teacher I’ve had interesting conversations with female students as to their future. When they are aware of Robin, someone like that becomes an amazing inspiration that they can achieve whatever they want, and that there’s a place for them at the highest level.”

Since being named one of the “Ten To Watch” by IIDA in 2004, Viveca Bissonnette has added more than 30 projects and many awards to her portfolio for her work in the corporate, education, government and residential sectors.

Of the many projects Bissonnette has designed, the one she feels most strongly about is the High Tech High campus, a single charter school launched in 2000 by a coalition of San Diego business leaders and educators.

“It touched me on a personal level because my son Zachary is currently a junior at High Tech High and has been a student on campus since starting grade six in the Middle School. For him to be able to experience and thrive in a space that I’ve worked on is very meaningful and brings home the reason I became an Interior Designer,” she says.

The school doesn’t have traditional hallways and lockers. Instead, the design team’s vision was to create a neighborhood and a community for the students to collaborate on projects.

“It is de-centralized with no main administrative area and teachers have their offices adjacent to the classrooms,” says Bissonnette of the school’s teaching clusters designed to encourage team teaching. In 2005, the campus received an Honor Award from the DesignShare Design Awards program, which recognizes designs focused on creating innovative learning environments.

Viveca Bissonnette, President-Elect, IIDA, ASSOC, AIA, CID, LEED AP ASSOCIATE AT CARRIER JOHNSON + CULTURE, SAN DIEGO

Soon, Bissonnette will be sharing her innovative skills of creating communities elsewhere when she becomes the President of the IIDA International Board of Directors, inducted at the IIDA Annual Meeting at NeoCon 2010 on June 13.

“IIDA is in a unique position to take the lead in bringing together practitioners, educators and legislators to strengthen and unify the design community,” she says. “As President, it will be my priority to foster this environment of collaboration.”

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**Jane Rohde** has more than 22 years of experience designing spaces for seniors. Among her most noteworthy efforts, she developed Continuing Care Retirement Communities, which provides long-term care for seniors in Maryland and Michigan, while serving as the Vice President of Design for Erickson Retirement Communities, a company based in Catonsville, Md., that developed and managed retirement communities.

Growing up in a farming community in Eden, N.Y., Rohde says it gave her a different set of values: “You always knew the older people in the community,” she says. “That definitely impacted me.”

In 1996, she founded JSR Associates, Inc., in Ellicott City, Md., which provides consulting services for senior living, healthcare and sustainability across the nation, to integrate the gap between operations for senior living model designs and the designed environment, an issue she witnessed earlier in her career. She says she chose her current profession “because elders and children are the most vulnerable populations; they are the ones who are least designed for in a purposeful manner.”

Since then, Rohde has won several awards for her designs, including the 2009 AIA Design for Aging Award, which honors innovative design and execution of senior living facilities, for an intergenerational community she co-designed in Rantoul, Ill. She also received the 2008 Innovative Product Award from Long-Term Living and Healthcare Design magazines for her patented Access Table, which frees elders from using a bib while dining and allows them to share the table with those in wheelchairs and chairs simultaneously.

“She’s a leading expert in senior living design,” says Amy Lopez, IIDA, AAHID, Principal at Houston-based WHR Architects, Inc. “She has influenced it greatly through her activism and her education of the public.”

A champion of seniors, Rohde has impacted Interior Design with her work as a member of the 2010 and 2014 Health Guidelines Revision Committee for the Guidelines for Design and Construction of Health Care Facilities, which is used as a reference standard by federal agencies, architects, engineers and designers in 42 states when reviewing, approving or developing their own codes. She was instrumental in improving the long-term care nursing portion of the Guidelines.

But it’s not just designers, architects and engineers that Rohde has influenced. She has also improved the daily lives of many seniors, such as Jane Heald, a resident of a senior living community in Pleasant Hill, Tenn. Heald reached out to Rohde for advice when reconstruction was taking place at the Wharton Care Center nursing home. Rohde offered suggestions on care models and later became responsible for the center’s senior living consulting, programming, Interior Design and space planning.

“We have a gated courtyard, so now people will be able to go outdoors when they want to and be safe,” she says. “And instead of one big nursing home, we now have four unique households.”

**An avid** mountain climber, Nila Leiserowitz has scaled many peaks, literally and metaphorically, during her 30-plus years in the design industry. At 24, Leiserowitz (née Hildebrandt) started her own interior design company, Wheeler Hildebrandt, with partner and friend Gary Wheeler. A decade later, she joined Chicago-based commercial architecture and interior design firm Perkins + Will as a vice president leading the healthcare and corporate interiors practice. While at Perkins + Will, she became the first woman to serve on the firm’s board of directors.

In 1995, Leiserowitz was recruited by global architecture and design firm Gensler, to help rebuild its Los Angeles Workplace practice, and quickly became a firm-wide Workplace leader. Her client list includes such companies as Glendale, Calif.-based DreamWorks Animation, New York-based international accounting firm Deloitte & Touche LLP, and Saban Capital Group, Inc., a private investment firm based in Los Angeles specializing in the media, entertainment and communications industries. A leader in workplace design, Leiserowitz has received many accolades from IIDA, ASID and AIA.

Maintaining Gensler’s position as the top commercial interior design and architecture firm in Los Angeles County is demanding enough, but Leiserowitz’s concern about the greater world around her led her to creating g:Serve, a community service and outreach group in Gensler’s Southwest Region. g:Serve has successfully raised money for various causes, collected food and clothing for local schools and the homeless, and built or renovated shelters for others in need around the Southwest United States, Haiti and China. She also is a champion for professional women. She organized “Women in Design,” an event demanding enough, but Leiserowitz’s concern about the greater world around her.

**Jane Rohde**, FiIIDA, AIA, ACHA, AAHID, LEED AP

**Managing Director/Principal of Gensler Los Angeles**

**Nila Leiserowitz, IIDA, ASID, Assoc. AIA**

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“Part of the way I measure my success is by creating an environment for people to do great work,” she says. “I’m a firm believer that you are only as good as the creative people around you.”

Former colleagues say Leiserowitz empowered them to succeed by offering them guidance and allowing them to voice their opinions.

“She created a place where people had equal opportunity and felt they were being supported. She would empower you to believe that you could accomplish things,” says Rey Viquez, who worked with Leiserowitz at Perkins + Will and at Gensler throughout the ‘90s. Viquez now owns his own design firm in Los Angeles.

Christina Clark, who worked as Leiserowitz’s assistant from 2003 to 2007, credits Leiserowitz for helping her become successful both professionally and personally.

“She taught me how to blend my personal and business lives together so that I could be successful as a professional, as a woman, a wife and friend,” says Clark, who is now Vice President of Warren Woven Real Estate Services in Los Angeles. “She really showed me how to bring people together.”

JANE ROHDE, FIIDA, AIA, ACHA, AAHID, LEED AP

**Principal and Founder of JSR Associates, Inc., Ellicott City, MD.**
Barbara Barry, who began her career as a fine artist, launched her namesake residential interior design studio in 1985, designing for such clients as Michael Ovitz, co-founder of Creative Artists Agency and former president of The Walt Disney Company, and Darren Star, creator of television series Beverly Hills, 90210 and Sex and the City. Since the company expanded to include commercial work in 1995, Barry—who is known for her simple yet elegant style that evokes old Hollywood glamour—has designed interiors for spaces such as The Savoy Hotel in London, Brooks Brothers’ flagship Manhattan store and the Avon Centre Salon and Spa in Trump Tower in New York.

“Design awakens you and brings you back to your five senses, and in doing so, brings a richness to your life that is tangible,” Barry says.

In 2000, Interior Design magazine inducted Barry into the Interior Design Hall of Fame, which recognizes designers for their contribution to the evolution of Interior Design. Architectural Digest also named her one of the “World’s 100 Best Designers” in 2005.

Through licensing arrangements with manufacturers such as Henredon, Baker Furniture, HBF (formerly Hickory Business Furniture) and Tufenkian Carpets, her style has also influenced product designs from furniture, rugs and linen to lighting at Boyd Lighting and even home fragrances and chocolate.

John Black, owner of J Black Design, a furniture design company based in Greensboro, N.C., first met Barry in the mid ‘90s when he served as the Design Director at Baker Furniture, then headquartered in Grand Rapids, Mich. He says her designs are simply powerful.

“The most obvious influence she has had in the furniture business is bringing a sense of simplicity to product design; not just modern design, but the strength and versatility of simple forms,” Black says.

Long-time friend Michael Vanderbyl, IIDA, founder of Vanderbyl Design, a multidisciplinary design practice in San Francisco, agrees. “She’s like Coco Chanel with her interiors—they are never outdated.”

“Her first collection for us [in 1995] was incredibly simple by the standards of even modern rugs,” says James Tufenkian, owner of Tufenkian Carpets, a New York-based dealer of artisan rugs handmade in Nepal and Armenia with showrooms nationwide. “Barbara took respect for the materials and craft that we employ to the limit by keeping the design so spare and the colors so subtle that the complexity of the fabric itself became the star.”

The result?

“The success of that collection opened the eyes of the interiors industry and expanded their notions of what could be done in handmade rugs,” Tufenkian says.

For Baker Furniture, a division of the Kohler Company based in Kohler, Wis., Barry designed a collection that features furnishings from cabinets, beds and chairs to lighting and accessories such as throws, vases and mirrors.

“When we launched her collection in 1996, it was such a success that everybody in the industry basically copied her,” says James Caughman, Interior Senior Sales and Marketing Executive at Baker Furniture. “She’s produced several icons.”

Barry has also pushed the envelope in the rug industry with her simple design aesthetics.

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**BARBARA BARRY, IIDA**

**FOUNDER OF BARBARA BARRY, INC., LOS ANGELES**
Anita Barnett’s interest in Interior Design was first piqued when her family built their own house in Elwood, Ind., in the ’70s.

“It was interesting for me to see how [the Interior Designers] led my parents into understanding that a home was an experience,” says Barnett.

Throughout Barnett’s career, she too has tried to bring her clients to a better understanding of the power of design and how it can support their business objectives. Her portfolio includes clients such as food giant General Mills, Inc., Accenture, a global outsourcing and consulting firm based in Dublin, Ireland, and Edelman, a global public relations firm.

In 2001, when General Mills acquired food manufacturer Pillsbury, Barnett and her team helped bring talent from the two companies together with their design of the new General Mills World Headquarters in Golden Valley, Minn. The interior of the new campus emulates a town center, with stores featuring famous brands from both companies, glass-walled offices and a Betty Crocker Test Kitchen at its center.

“Instead of everything being very removed, we created an open and transparent environment so everybody can really see what was going on throughout the facilities,” Barnett says.

In 2004, the facility was a finalist for the BusinessWeek/Architectural Record Awards, which celebrates the collaboration of client and architect in achieving measurable business and organization goals through design.

Barnett has also received many awards for her leadership skills. In 2000, she was honored with IIDA’s Distinguished Leadership Award for her outstanding leadership contribution to IIDA and the Interior Design profession. In 2007, she was honored again by IIDA with the Lifetime Achievement Award for making a positive and lasting impact on the organization and profession.

“The attention to detail and the listening skills she possesses are amazing,” says Melissa Lamb Brown, Owner of Relocation Strategies, Inc., in Indianapolis, who worked with Barnett in the ’90s. “Her designs reflect the passion she has toward solving the client’s individual need.”

Over the years, Barnett has moved from designing interiors for clients to playing a more strategic role as corporate, commercial and civic market sector leader at Perkins + Will in Minneapolis. But her core objective has always been about leading organizations to find solutions that support a common goal.

“Anita is one of those exceptional leaders with excellent consensus-building skills,” says Peggy Noakes, FIIDA, AAHID, LEED AP, EDAC, Associate at the Houston-based WHR Architects, Inc., who served with Barnett on the IIDA International Board.

“As President of the board, she brilliantly applied her own problem-solving skills to the business of leading the board in an extremely collaborative manner that continually resulted in effective outcomes,” she says.

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ANITA BARNETT, FIIDA
PRINCIPAL OF PERKINS + WILL, MINNEAPOLIS