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.

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 Lamar 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 Pollock & 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.”
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 at the heart of his design philosphy. “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 yet. “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 inspired 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 the industry toward 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.”

“Think there 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 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-growth 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 HVM International’s New York office, likes to learn her client’s 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.”

Saccomone’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 transgression through a space, how a space unfolds to a person,” she says. “When I’m designing a 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 finest details, that’s where a project is made or broken.”

Peterson, an Associate Principal with Austin, Texas-based Susman Tsidale 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 LOPÉZ, IIDA
More than any project or prototype, Amy Hursh Lopez considers the interior design studio at Watkins Hamilton Ross Architects Inc. her greatest work to date. The 55-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 healthcare-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 healthcare market. We’re always trying to counterbalance the institutional feel that has always existed in healthcare. 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.’”

A Designer for Carrier Johnson in San Diego, Bissonnette only began practicing interior design two years ago after working for 15 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.”

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