REINVENTING INTERIOR DESIGN

By Penny Bonda, FASID, LEED® AP

How would you define the current state of residential design? I asked this question of those who should know - not just designers, but also others who make it their business to observe designers - and heard back a resounding upbeat consensus. Times are good! Some of the old demons remain and not all were in agreement about precisely where the practice is today, except that it's in fine shape.

I interviewed two educators, an architect turned residential developer, a designer/consultant, a high-end interior designer, a designer who specializes in sustainability, the president of a design management company and representatives from ASID and IIDA. We explored the idea of "reinvention", a rebranding and repackaging if you will, of the residential interior design profession to suit the changing times and anticipate the future. The stars seem to be lined up for success for residential interior designers. Or are they?

For instance, the external forces influencing the profession include the aging of the population, increased media attention (a.k.a. reality television), green design and the unprecedented transfer of wealth - estimated in the billions of dollars - that is already taking place. Societal shifts signify change that will profoundly affect the profession, but how so? And is the profession ready?

Bespoke

Global

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CURRENT AND FUTURE REFLECTIONS

According to Marlene Farrell, Director of Interior Architecture and Design at San Francisco's Academy of Art University, "Opportunity has never been as incredible for residential designers and the profession has never been better poised for the future." Farrell's chief evidence is the number of firms that are hiring her graduates at high entry-level salaries and the number of graduates successfully going out on their own. Of course, the Bay Area has 41 billionaires or ten percent of the *Forbes* 400 listed billionaires. "Our biggest problem," she states, "is a shortage of qualified people for firms to hire."

Mary Knackstedt, author, designer and consultant, also believes this is a wonderful time for the interior design profession because there's a huge demand for what designers have to offer. "There's a tremendous opportunity for designers who do truly creative work to be successful today," says Mary Knackstedt. "But they need to have a high level of creativity and be able to do exceptional work—with the background of a good education and experience. They also need to have a good team to work with. Designers can't do it alone. This is very definitely a time for cooperative effort."

"The profession is in a state of transition and growth in a very positive way," states Lloyd Princeton, the president of Design Management Company, a consulting firm. "Historically, residential design was akin to decorating. Now in the last five to ten years through efforts of ASID and similar organizations, we have an industry that's recognized for its value and creativity."

Others expressed similar thoughts, citing a growing public awareness of what designers can do. Robert Wright of Bast/Wright Interiors in San Diego sees the evolution of interior designers into interior planners. Charged with assembling teams including architects, engineers, lighting consultants, zoning officials and others, at a project's beginning stages, the designer is taking on more complex issues, especially on larger jobs.

Because projects are more complicated, Princeton cautions residential interior designers to be very clear about whom they're targeting and not to try to be everything to everyone. "Lower budgets don't fit most designer's pricing models," he believes. "Good design is for everybody, hiring a design professional is not. You can find really good design at Crate & Barrel, but it's not the same as hiring a professional who will get to know you and your family and create custom solutions. We need to be realistic about this."

Technology is changing the profession, as it is most others, and the way designers find business. Farrell recalls conversations with some designers who credit their websites as the source of most of their clients. Paul Vincent Wiseman, the prestigious San Francisco interior designer, said his most significant client called him because of his webpage on the ASID website. This was years ago when few people even had websites. Other designers also credit the ASID Design Finder, a web-based interior designer referral service.

IT'S AN HGTV WORLD

Most agree that reality TV's representation of residential interior design is good for the profession by increasing awareness with a public that may never have considered working with a designer. The programs also demonstrate that a project involves a talented professional, which is good advertising for designers. However, there is a downside; for example, that design is all about making spaces pretty, ignoring any life safety issues, and raising expectations that you can flip a room in 48 hours. Louise Farrar Wegener, IIDA, principal at Z-3 Design Studio in Portland, OR, is disturbed by the hosts of the shows that present themselves as professional designers, but are not necessarily educated or credentialed interior design professionals. As IIDA's Residential Forum advisor, she promotes the organization's position that educated design professionals should be making design decisions about public health and safety, but realizes that consumers aren't often aware of the difference.

Lloyd Princeton sees this as a good thing. "Yes," he states, "*HGTV* presents design in a very unrealistic light in terms of time and cost, but it forces the design professional to engage potential clients in a dialogue to explain what a designer does. They need to have that conversation."

David Meckel, director of research and planning at San Francisco's California College of the Arts, admits that his students watch the design reality shows, but they also read and appreciate the new printed media aimed at consumers. *Dwell*, he believes, hits a nerve especially with young people who like clean, simple spaces and want to know how to buy things at Ikea and make them look good.

OLDER AND RICHER

The rich are getting richer and the Baby Boomers and their parents are growing older, two significant influences on residential interior designers. The transfer of wealth is currently estimated at more than $33 trillion. Dr. Stuart Rose, an architect and national marketing consultant to design professionals who is now developing residential communities, observes, "Our economy is creating more (have-nots) and more super wealthy. The latter will spend money with no budget limits. If I were to return to the practice, between consulting, engineering, architecture, contract interiors or residential interiors ... I'd quickly head for high end residential (design). Clients are typically loyal, will pay well for really good service and do demand nurturing. Liability is low, and time for creativity is high."

Meckel sees this growing wealth facilitating a collision of values that will put designers in the position of defining themselves. "If the general public is getting smarter about our footprint and reducing our impact on the planet, and the wealthiest are building multiple homes in remote locations, should the designer adopt a less harmful approach - a less bad McMansion?" Meckel asks.

The trends for aging are definitely moving in one direction - staying put. Robert Wright finds his clients staying in their homes for the long term. "I have smart, savvy clients who recognize their inevitable limitations, and they are requesting remodeling for accessibility." Marlene Farrell has noticed that Baby Boomers want a more urban lifestyle, a significant pullback from retiring in sun cities and golf courses. "This is an opportunity for interior designers to step up and introduce the appropriate solutions to make spaces suitable for future needs," observes Mary Knackstedt.

Reinvention

Sustainability

HOW GREEN?

Opinions expressed about green design in residential practice are all over the board. Many, like Robert Wright, say there's not much interest from their clients; while others believe that it's huge - an explosion. The educators interviewed were the most enthusiastic, reflecting, of course, their students' views.

"Their value system on the environment and social justice is so far ahead of the profession," states Meckel. "We're no longer teaching the children of tree-huggers, we're teaching the tree-hugger's children's children. The profession won't transform rapidly; that will happen generationally from the bottom up over time, but this younger generation is ready to mainstream ideas that we thought were wacky 20 years ago."

Mary Knackstedt is taking sustainability very seriously and has a zero-energy building on her project list. In the green arena, she believes interior designers need to be 100 steps ahead, but work at only about 20 steps ahead because that's what clients understand. "If you get too far ahead," she says, "clients really aren't ready for it."

Kari Foster, the founding principal of Associates III in Denver CO, has specialized in eco-responsible, residential interiors since the mid-90s. Her firm turns down work from clients who shun green design, and yet her practice is thriving. "I've never had so much fun, I've never worked with such a wonderful team, and I've never had such great clients. I love what's happening."

THE PROFESSION REDEFINED

The practice of residential interior design is poised to be reinvented, and yet many of its practitioners are holding to traditional models. ASID's executive director, Michael Alin, thinks that most interior designers in the U.S. primarily practice residential design, but "most do not want to be pigeonholed in one specialty, and in fact do commercial design work as well." He also feels that commercial designers have more clearly defined roles within the profession and among their clients, while the breadth of residential design is often not as clearly articulated to consumers and even within the profession of interior design itself.

Alin's observation implies reluctance from residential designers to embrace and exploit their considerable value. It also suggests a separation between the two specialties of residential and commercial interior design, with one healthier than the other; which, if true, is detrimental to the entire profession. Despite the positive reflections by those who weighed in on the issue for this article, there is work yet to be done. All facets of the industry - the design centers, the professional organizations, the firms and schools - need to take responsibility. Redefining, rebranding - call it what you will - lies not just with individuals, but also on everyone with a stake in the profession's future.