

# perspæctive



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# LEAV- ING THEIR MARK

BY NATALIE BAUER

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



**D**espite 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



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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



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