

Atlanta Interior De



Like many professions hard-hit by the current economy, interior design is trying to hold its ground in hopes of soon realizing the impending wave of economic opportunity that market insiders believe will soon be a reality. But until the slow-approaching economic shift occurs, design professionals find themselves in a whirlwind of uncertainty as they attempt to make the case for remaining in an industry that seems to be so out-of-reach. Much like their counterparts in cities throughout the country, Atlanta interior designers are finding ways to remain in an industry that is not high in demand although interest in the profession is growing, which is causing unprecedented professional strife in a field that has historically been competitive (even in a good economy).

INTERIOR DESIGN LABOR SNAPSHOT

According to the *US Bureau of Labor & Statistics* (BLS), Interior designers held about 53,290 jobs throughout the United States in 2008; by May of 2009, that number fell to a total of 46,010, which is a 14% drop in less than a year (it is important to note that these numbers do not include interior designers who are self-employed). Georgia interior designers made up nearly 4% of those national totals with 1960 interior designers in 2008 and 1680 interior designers in 2009 throughout the state keeping in line with the national statistic of a 14% decrease in interior designers in just one year. In 2009, Georgia ranked 2nd, only to Florida, in states with the highest concentration of workers in the interior design occupation. It would be interesting to see where those statistics currently lie after two full years of a challenging economy. Most of the designers reflected in these numbers were employed in architect-

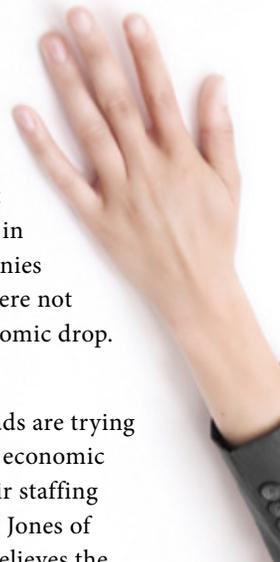
tural and design specific firms that had no choice but to cut jobs in order to keep their doors open for the limited business that remained. It seems that the designers who were working in internal capacities within companies serving in-house design needs were not as severely impacted by the economic drop.

ECONOMIC RECOVERY

Many Atlanta design firm heads are trying to pinpoint the key indicators to economic recovery in order to plan for their staffing needs in the coming year. Alison Jones of *Levino Jones Medical Interiors* believes the key factors to recovery are: (1) banks lending money for business growth and building projects, (2) developers re-starting projects placed on hold over the course of the last two years and (3) favorable legislation that considers the needs of small businesses as it relates to tax and benefits reform. Jones believes if small businesses can glean a targeted amount (with some level of certainty) of projected savings and earnings from all three factors, Atlanta design firms will start hiring again and thus contributing to the local economic recovery.

WHERE HAVE ALL THE DESIGNERS GONE?

Most interior designers who found themselves unemployed are hopeful of the possibilities of the profession and are committed to finding ways to remain in the industry even if in a limited capacity. Although self-employment is common in the interior design field, the past two years ushered in a wave of interior designers going into business for themselves and starting their own design firms as either a sole proprietor or limited



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partnership. The high upswing to self-employment is no surprise considering that the many of firms currently hiring are doing so on a contractual basis which leaves designers with no true sense of job security.

Some designers have left or are considering leaving the field altogether. A number of designers can no longer make the case for holding on to hopes of obtaining gainful employment in the field primarily due to their personal financial situations. Many designers have transitioned into other careers that still

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allow them to have a visually creative outlet, while others have just left visual creativity on the sideline and committed to careers with historically low competition for jobs.

THE FUTURE OF INTERIOR DESIGN IN ATLANTA

As of February 2011, there are 395 registered interior designers in Georgia according to the *Georgia Board of Architecture & Interior Design*. This number is a bit startling considering that over 1600 individuals work as interior designers in the state, with the highest concentration of that number practicing in the Greater Atlanta Area. Interior designers should embrace the idea of professional qualification as the first step in solidifying their commitment to the profession. Far too many designers are comfortable of performing their work under the umbrella of an organization's legality, and don't consider the possibility that one day the legal responsibility may be placed on them.

As the number of interior designers grows locally and nationally despite an uncertain job market, designers must also remember to strategically plan on ways to re-invent and rebrand themselves as they attempt to differentiate themselves from the pack. While many unemployed and/or out-of-work de-

signers are doing the obvious of getting themselves more technical training on computer software and applications that are now expected for employment in the field, Steven Brunner of Atlanta-based *Concinnity Creative* (and current VP of Professional Development for *IIDA Georgia*), urges designers to not forget the importance of appropriate self-branding that graphically sells ourselves and our services. Brunner says that many designers think nothing of spending large sums of money on new high-end hardware and related software, but balk at spending \$500 to incorporate their businesses or to engage a qualified professional to develop a high-quality branding strategy for their firms. This lack of interest in developing the brand is leaving a lot of outstanding interior designers on the outside looking in at the "new future" of interior design.

DESIGN WITHIN REACH

While the interior design field is certainly at an interesting impasse, the possibilities that lie ahead are undeniable. **PASSION, RESILIENCE, PERSISTENCE, CREATIVITY, INNOVATION and EDUCATION** are all essential in driving the profession into the future. Design is definitely within reach, and Atlanta interior designers have a bright future to look forward to if they can stay the course.

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