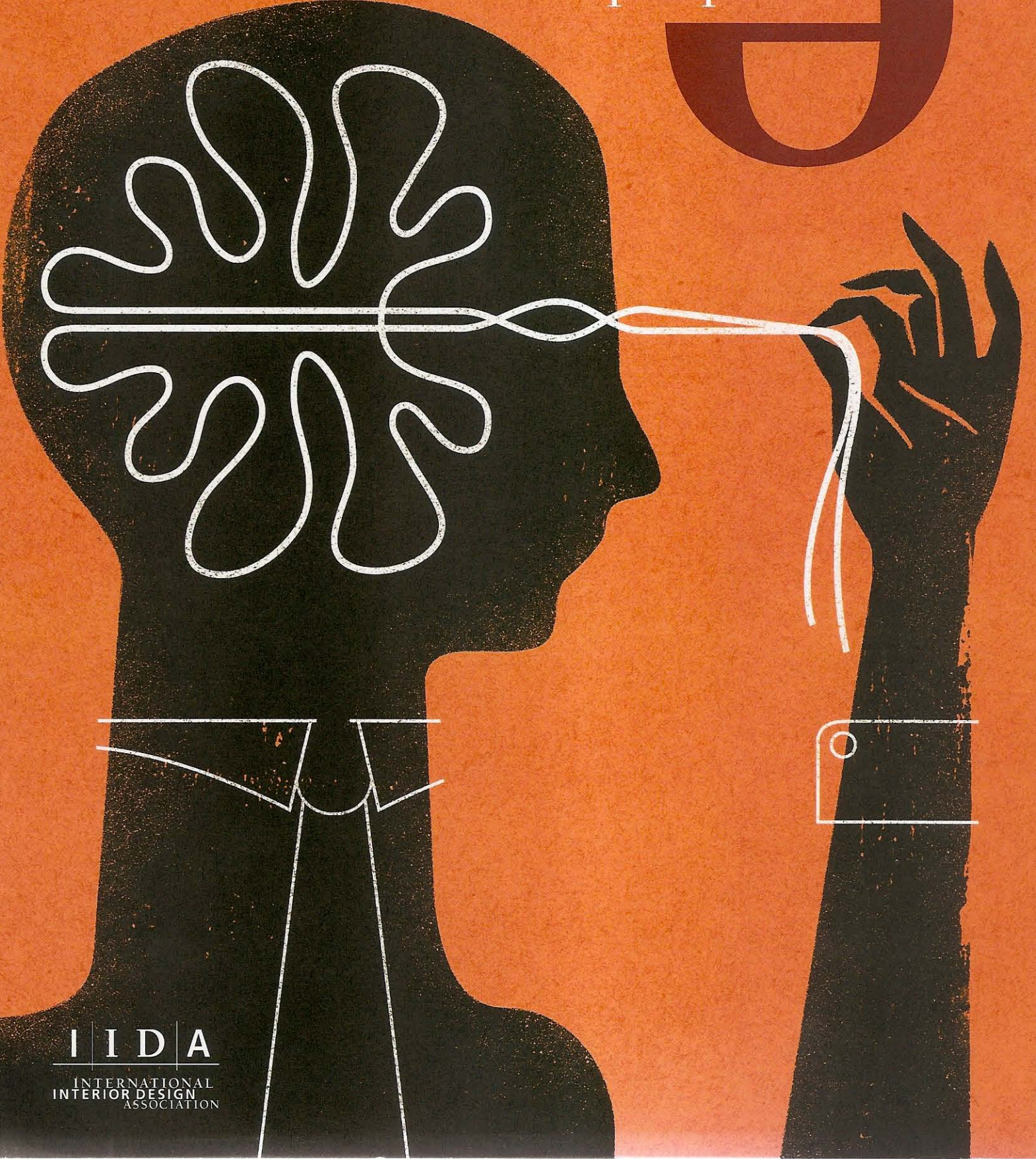
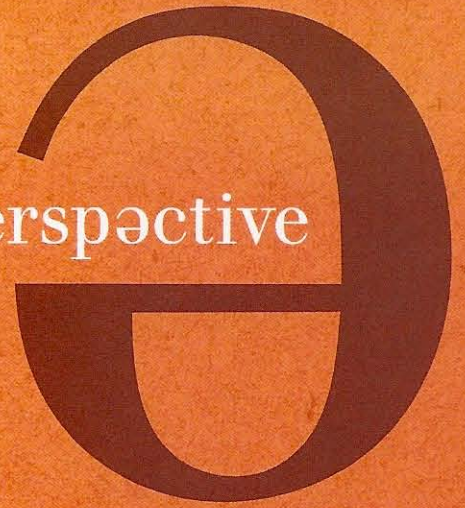


perspective



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INTERNATIONAL
INTERIOR DESIGN
ASSOCIATION

closing the

By Sara J. Robertson

If you think the myth that professionals can't work

When describing

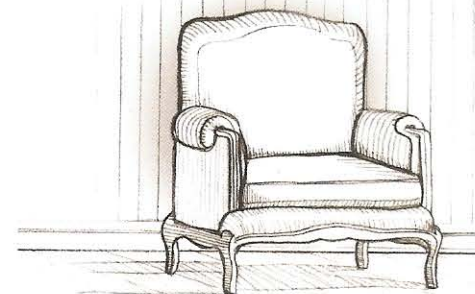
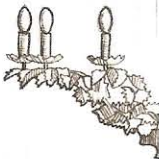
a set of towers he was designing in downtown Los Angeles, world-famous architect and designer Frank Gehry said, "It needs a mix of populations. It's got to be a mix of different age groups, economic groups and ethnic groups to really function." In those words he caught the essence of how all design functions — through holistic collaboration.

Yet the concept of generational gaps is still pretty ubiquitous in today's culture. Just look at the names created to categorize the different age groups — the Greatest Generation, Baby Boomers, Gen X and the Millennials. Given these divisions of age and mindset, it's no surprise that in the workplace, many people cite generational differences as a barrier to collaboration. But in the real world of Interior Design, the successful partnering of different generations is an invaluable business model — because in today's non-stop business climate, it's collaborate or fail.

LET'S GET TOGETHER

Tom Szumlic, Academic Director of Interior Design and Foundation Design at The Art Institute of Tampa in Florida, who's been in the industry for 40 years, believes that design above all is a social

ILLUSTRATION BY CHRIS STRAEHLA



act. "It's rare to think any one designer is a master craftsman and takes something from start to finish on [his or her] own as a lone wolf practitioner," he says.

And that means it's an inherent part of a smart business to include people across generations. "It's ridiculous for Interior Designers and society in general to assume that different generations don't work successfully together," says Turner Duncan, Chairman of Design at DESIGN Duncan Miller Ullmann in Dallas, who's been working in Interior Design for nearly 25 years.

"There's a senior citizen attitude with some firms and principals that 'Nobody can do this as good as me,'" he says. "I'd rather approach design to teach other people how to do it so your life can be more fulfilled, your career expands and life becomes even easier."

At DESIGN Duncan Miller Ullmann, all projects have an established team that includes members with anywhere

gap



successfully across generations is true, **think again.**

between one and 20 years of experience, so the age group and the experience level is threaded throughout the entire team structure.

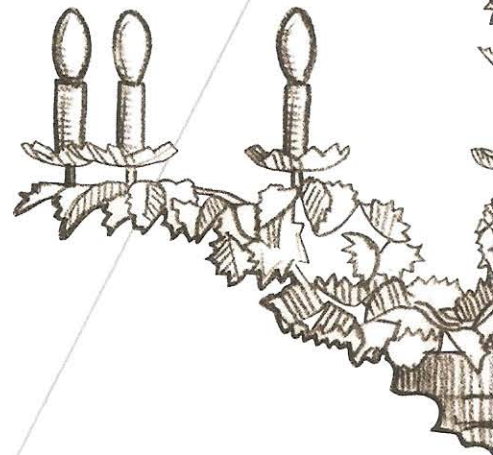
Megan Ybarra, LEED AP, a young designer at DESIGN Duncan Miller Ullman, values the collaboration across generations at her firm. "I think that we have a pretty rounded set of people," she says. "We don't have job-specific people. Everyone can do a little bit of everything."

IT'S JUST A NUMBER

For 55-year-old Bill Clegg, FIIDA, LEED AP, Partner at Schoenhardt, Inc., in Tariffville, Conn., age is just one of many traits that make an individual designer unique. "We've had younger designers, architects and interns work for us, and to me, age is never really a factor," says Clegg, a 36-year Interior Design veteran. Demonstrating that point is Clegg's partner who is 16 years his junior.

"I appreciate all generations and points of view," Clegg says, "because I don't know everything. I don't see everything. For somebody else to have a fresh idea or a thought I haven't thought of — that's what makes design great."

At Pye Interiors in Charlottesville, Va., having different generations working together ultimately contributes to the firm's bottom line. "The generational



"I appreciate all generations and points of view because I don't know everything. I don't see everything."

differences of our designers allow our firm to efficiently respond to a variety of project types with users of all ages, from an assisted living facility for seniors to a university recreation center for students and

faculty," says Linda Pye, IIDA, CID, ASID, Principal Designer at Pye Interiors.

"The biggest misconception about working with a generation different than your own is that it will be a negative experience," says Pye, who has 25 years of experience. "I have found the opposite to be true."

That's not to say designers don't all want to showcase their own unique personalities. "The truth is we're all kind of divas — we're artists," says Michelle Workman, owner of Michelle Workman Design in Los Angeles, who's been working in Interior Design for 12 years. "Nobody wants to hear someone else's opinion about your artwork, but to say that it's a generational thing is sort of an excuse more than anything else."

For her, the key is also teamwork. "Interior Design has to be a collaborative art form, and once you get over your own ego, you can work that way."



MENTEE TO MENTOR

To make successful relationships work across generations, the key is developing strong mentor and mentee partnerships. Sarah Nielsen, IDS Associate, DCI, Owner of FRESH Interior Design in Charlotte, N.C., has only been working in the industry for eight years, and she attributes much of her success to her mentor — a designer in her 60s who has been in the industry for more than three decades. “She’s been instrumental in introducing me to some great techniques in design and helping to further my design education,” Nielsen says. “Without her, without having that sounding board, I can’t imagine how I’d do it.”

Finding a mentor takes some effort and a willingness to let down your guard. “At first when I met her, I was a little intimidated,” Nielsen says about her mentor. “In the industry, there is that fear that designers don’t want to help out other designers,” she adds. “You have to have an open mind and be appreciative of new ideas whether they’re from someone who has had 20 years of experience or someone who is straight out of school.”

After working with more than 200 interns in her 40 years as an interior designer, Marilyn Schooley Hansen, FASID, Owner of The Designers Omaha in Omaha, Neb., knows a thing or two about mentoring. “Designers get bogged down in the doing and the process, and they sometimes think, ‘I can do it better myself,’” Hansen says. “But if somebody doesn’t mentor you, then how do you grow? If we don’t mentor others, then what kind of profession will we have in the end? A bunch of people competing with each other and not moving the profession forward.”

Lisa McDennon, Allied Member ASID, Principal at LRM Interior Design in Laguna Beach, Calif., who’s celebrating her business’ tenth anniversary this year, has experienced the difficulty of not having a mentor in her career. So she recently set out to find one. “I’m at a point where my business is ready to jump to the next level, and I feel like I could really use some help and guidance,” she says.

She created her own business to counter the experience of not having a mentor. “One of the reasons I started my business was to provide an atmosphere for designers to have a safe, nurturing, fun and healthy environment to do what we love to do.”

The most successful firms value each designer’s unique creative ability and nurture the lifelong learning process no matter their age. “Everybody in a collaborative setting has something to offer, whether it be experience, design knowledge or technology innovation,” Clegg says. “Leaders always need to remember that and coax it out of every generation.” 

For somebody else to have a fresh idea or a thought I haven’t thought of — that’s what makes design great.”

Bill Clegg, FIIDA, LEED AP, Partner at Schoenhardt, Inc., in Tariffville, Conn.