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A professional headshot of Terri L. Maurer, a woman with short, styled brown hair, wearing glasses, a light blue collared shirt, and a dark blazer. She is smiling warmly at the camera.

Terri L. Maurer, FASID
ASID President

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Draperies & Window Coverings

Same Time, Same Place

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by: Howard Shingle

Design, like everyday life itself, has been moving through a pivotal period. New concepts have emerged on how interior space is used as clients' personal and business lives face sweeping changes.

The American Society of Interior Designers (ASID) has been tracking these changes and documenting how design can facilitate mixed-use environments. Its new president, Terri L. Maurer, FASID, Maurer Design Group, Akron, OH, sees this period as creating opportunities for designers who focus on clients' changing needs.

"ASID's environmental scanning, used for our strategic planning, shows so many changes on the horizon not only for society as a whole, but also for various cultural groups," Maurer says. "We are seeing the very nature of work and living environments on the verge of major changes. The whole issue of work versus living is blurring as economic, technological and sociological changes are affecting us like never before in human history."

D&WC: How will these changes effect interior design in the years ahead?

Terri L. Maurer: In the future, we will see working and living occurring in the same space. Our homes, or "living spaces," will combine dwelling, recreation and health care delivery as well, in many cases, as work. It is clear that mixed-use environments are in our futures.

What happens in a space will become more important than the space itself. We are seeing that the Baby Boomer generation has no desire to live out our golden years in retirement homes and nursing home facilities. We want to age in place in our own familiar environments for as long as we possibly can. And, the Boomer generation is more likely to utilize the talents of interior designers to create suitable spaces to make this a reality. This generation has the financial capability, and is also better prepared, to make the choices necessary to meet their needs as they age. This is a significant marketplace opportunity for services by interior designers.

ASID is embarking on new research this year entitled "Aging and the Impact of Interior Design." Through focus groups and in-depth telephone interviews with designers and the aging Baby Boomers, we intend to learn more about awareness levels among our aging population of their own interior design needs as they grow older, and what kinds of changes they feel need to be made to their homes to allow them to age in place. We also plan to explore the effects on awareness of design needs of those caring for elderly parents at home.

In the workplace, we have found interior design and the work environment are near the top of the list of things that potential employees look for when thinking about changing jobs. Our research has shown that the working environment ranks behind only compensation and is at a near tie with benefits as important factors considered when looking for, or considering leaving a position. Add that to information ASID has uncovered in earlier research that links interior design to workplace performance, worker satisfaction and the bottom line. Interior design can make a major impact on the workplace, whether it be in a traditional work environment or in a home office.

This year, new research has been scheduled to explore "How Employees Want to Work." The premise of this research is that if employees work the way they want to work, they also will work better. With our current economy and the need to recruit and retain quality employees, the results of our research will provide key decision-makers with proof of the value in re-designing office space and other work environments.

D&WC: What are the most important industry and career-oriented issues facing designers?

Maurer: Interior design is a relatively young profession, but it is rapidly evolving in terms of what we do and how we provide services to clients. A profession that was once based on close ties to the sale of interior products has now evolved into a profession that practices according to widely accepted business and consulting principles.

Fees for service is becoming the norm as designers routinely provide project services such as needs analyses, knowledge- and research-based design solutions and project management. While many designers may still be involved with the sale of products to clients, they now are compensated through a handling fee. Their primary compensation now is based on fees for the services and solutions provided.

ASID recommends to all practitioners that they be knowledgeable, offer solutions and develop relationships. These are basic consulting principles shared with many other consulting professionals in many fields.

D&WC: How is present-day economics affecting designers' businesses?

Maurer: Right now, everyone appears to be extremely busy. I hear the same tales of woe from designers all across the country when they have more work than their staffs can handle. Everyone seems to be looking for more designers to hire, but no one can find them. The good news is: the economy. The bad news is: the economy. Business is booming, but design firms are turning away work because they don't have enough staff to handle all of the potential projects.

This isn't just limited to the field of interior design. The strong economy and tight labor market crosses all professional lines. The situation is calling out for creative ways to create more flexible work situations for both employers and employees. Corporate America is encouraging older workers to work longer or to remain on board as consultants beyond the normal retirement age. New incentives are being created to entice employees to stay or to come on board.

D&WC: What segment of the consumer population is using design services today?

Maurer: On the residential side of interior design, it has always been true that those in the upper income brackets had the greatest propensity to use an interior designer. ASID is working diligently to find ways to bring the benefits of design to more levels of the population.

As we all know, good design does not have to be expensive. We have found through research that people in various stages of their lives have different needs and priorities. The early- to middle-life stages (ages 18 to 34 are in their early-life stages, those aged 35 to 54 are in their middle-life stages) tend to be do-it-yourselfers who ultimately may hire an interior designer to help repair costly mistakes.

The part of the population in the older life stage (ages 55 and older) are the most likely to hire an interior designer and to be most satisfied with the work of the designer. They are very concerned with the look of their environments and the need for their homes to meet their physical needs. They choose to age in place and are willing to retrofit their homes to accommodate their physical and health care needs as they grow older.

D&WC: What do most clients consider first, second and third when choosing interior furnishings: price, function or aesthetics?

Maurer: The answer to this question is more about the interaction between designers and their clients and meeting the needs of their clients than it is about the specifics of the furnishings or products. We tend to think too much about the look of a space than about the way it works and meets the specific needs of a client. Design is about how an integrated design solution fulfills the desired function and feeling that the client is seeking.

The most important factor for clients, again based on research, is how their designer works with them. There are several critical relationship factors involved in every successful interior project. Once those factors are responded to, the selection and approval process for the furnishings and products required to complete the project becomes a minor issue.

The first and most important factor is understanding. This means taking the time to ask pertinent questions and to understand what the client wants to accomplish, and knowing how to create a functional and flexible solution that is consistent with the client's wishes.

The second factor is coordination. This involves organizing all the aspects of a design project for the client. This includes everything from taking care of ordering furnishings and finishes to complete the project to coordinating the hiring of contractors and subcontractors to get the project done. Essentially, it means taking care of things the client does not want to worry about or simply does not understand.

Clients want the designers they hire to have experience in handling projects like theirs. This factor can run the gamut from demonstrating an ability to understand and interpret the client's wishes, to having completed a body of work that matches the client's needs, to conducting oneself in a professional and ethical manner in the execution of the design project.

Clients want to know that the designer is looking out for their money. That can equate to maximizing the dollars available or simply to avoiding costly mistakes. Providing value for the money invested is more important to clients than the concept of receiving a bargain.

D&WC: Are clients more or less knowledgeable about interior design than in the past?

Maurer: Without a doubt, clients are far more knowledgeable today about our profession than they were just five years ago. The media is most responsible for this growth in understanding. Think about the wide variety of design-related shows now seen daily on television, and the information presented in consumer magazines and newspaper articles on design and decorating and even available from home on the Internet. There is a huge amount of design knowledge available to clients today that simply wasn't there a few short years ago.

Designers also serve as educators to their clients. A large part of what we do is talking with our clients to determine their needs and develop an understanding of exactly what solutions will work for them. All along the way, we are educating the clients on the options and opportunities available to meet their needs.

D&WC: Are consumers spending more on the design of their homes? On which rooms?

Maurer: As time becomes the currency of the future, more and more people are utilizing the services of interior designers. People who once would have simply redecorated their own spaces as a way to conserve their funds, now find they have less time to take on projects of any size. They are turning to design professionals to get the job done while they work or otherwise take care of their families and their needs.

ASID's life stages research showed that early- and middle-life stages were more likely to update their homes for more space or a new look. Early-life-stage clients also tend to focus on bedrooms and bathrooms while middle-life-stage clients tend to focus on bedrooms and basements. If you think about who comprise those groups, you'll see that the middle-life-stage group has a great number of persons with larger families and older children. Thus, the desire to find more room within their homes for additional bedrooms and recreation areas for the children.

The older-life-stage group tends to have more money available to hire an interior designer and to be more satisfied with the results of their projects. They prefer to remodel or enlarge their kitchen areas and the look of their environments is very important to them.

D&WC: What are your plans for your term as ASID president?

Maurer: This is a question that I have been asked repeatedly lately. This seems to be based on the assumption by most people that the president of an organization like ASID should be setting the direction of the group during his or her term. Thankfully, ASID is not managed that way. It would tend to be somewhat chaotic and costly to potentially keep changing direction every year under new leadership.

ASID has been strategically planned and managed for the past 10 years or so. Our board, on behalf of our membership, acts as a strategic planning committee and sets the course for the Society for three years at a time. We examine trends in areas like the economy, technology, politics, society and the environment. Once trends are identified and analyzed for their potential impact on

our profession and the Society, a direction is set to take us out three years. Each year we re-evaluate and adjust our plan to allow for new challenges and opportunities, and to keep us from being blindsided by an unexpected trend or event.

For the past several planning cycles we have identified priority goals of education, knowledge management and sharing, market expansion and right-to-practice issues. These areas are then given the necessary funding and human resource allocations to develop and support programs to ensure success.

If I have one personal goal during my term, it is to continue promoting the wonderful teamwork by the volunteers and paid staff who work side by side to complete the assignments contained in our plan. I am certainly proud to preside over this process as president of ASID, but only as its guide.

The American Society of Interior Designers is a worldwide organization of professional designers that helps establish professional standards and provides comprehensive educational programs to its members. Its headquarters is in Washington, DC; (202) 546-3480.

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