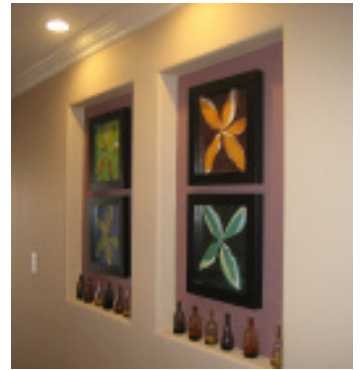
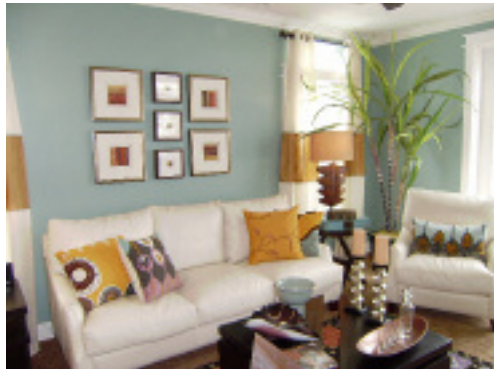




An Inside Job

Interior Designers are Artists of Space

By Laura Armstrong

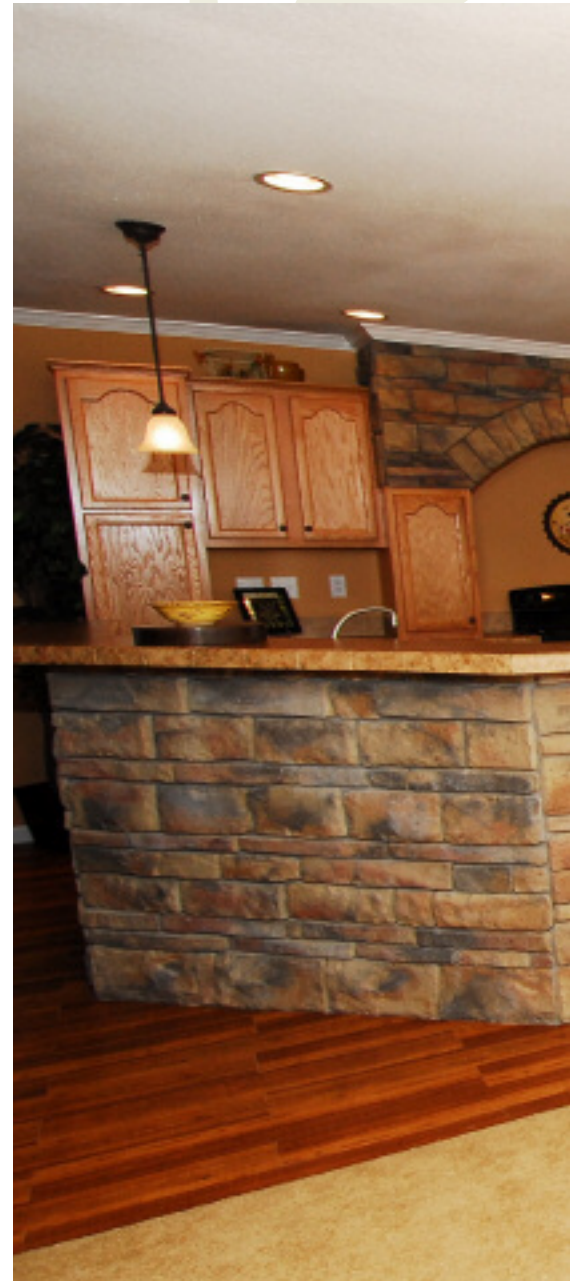


The role of the interior designer came into existence in the early 1700s in Western Europe with mostly men of diverse backgrounds, such as William Kent. Kent was a trained history painter and is often cited as the first person to take charge of an entire interior, including internal architecture, furniture selection, and the hanging of paintings.

Modern interior designers, such as Elise DeWolfe, really came into play in the late 19th century. Cities like London, Paris and New York became “design hubs.” Some of the most famous 20th century interior designers include Sister Parish, Mark Hampton and Mario Buatta. These interior designers carried their “creative signatures” into their client’s lives. For example, Sister Parish liked bright colors and had the Oval office in the Kennedy White House painted yellow, while Hampton and Buatta were known for their use of flowery chintz fabrics and together worked their magic on the Blair House (the White House guest house) for dignitaries visiting the President in Washington, DC.

While today’s interior designers for the manufactured and modular housing industries don’t have the President of the United States as a client, industry designers share the same enthusiasm, strategic and creative approach to designing a home’s interior that consumers find warmly welcoming. There is one very significant distinction, however, between the industry’s interior designers and the famous designers above...they design interiors to sell the home, not the furnishings. As Mark Hampton said “A house must tell a story.”

Susan Yoder, President of Expressions (a design and merchandising company that serves many home manufacturers, retailers and communities, as well as other clients) describes herself as a stage designer. “There are several factors that we consider in designing a home including regional demographics, the manufacturer’s marketing strategy, the architecture and the manufacturer’s “signature style,” whether it is stone fireplaces, tiled bathrooms, wood floors or a pots and pans iron rack over the kitchen island,” says Yoder. ■ ■ ■ ■



She points to Kentucky as an example of how demographics affect her approach. “Most of rural Kentucky is made up of people who are often associated with the equestrian world, so we play to that in the design of homes. These are people who are hands on with horses, they want to come home to something comfy, floors that are easy to clean, deep colored textured fabrics that can take a “beating” as well as coffee tables where you can put your feet up with your boots on and not have to worry about ruining the furniture.”

Margie Lewis-Wright, Vice President, Interior Design at Palm Harbor concurs. “There are different buyers and lifestyles in different markets. Our design goal is to create a welcoming home that the customer wants to buy as soon as they walk through the front door,” she says.

“Our homes in the South East are very different from our homes in the South West. The most noticeable difference is the color palette, South East homes tend to be more neutral and tropical with blues and greens, while South West homes are rich warm colors that better reflect the region’s landscape,” says Lewis-Wright. “We also take into consideration generational and cultural differences when designing our homes. Baby boomers are very different from those who are retiring and the Asian market is different from the Hispanic market.”

Suzanne Felber of The Home Idea Factory calls herself a stylist. “Seniors going into second homes want a fresh start and an exciting new experience, so often my designs are a balance between traditional and contemporary design. They also tend to like lower sitting sofas because they are easier to get up out of and bar table size tables and chairs for the same reason,” Felber said. “And, both Seniors and many first time home buyers in their twenties like to entertain, so you can’t overlook the kitchen and dining room.”

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AN INSIDE JOB

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All three designers conduct a lot of research before going into any given market and work closely with architects, factory managers, marketing departments and retailers to design homes that will successfully compete against

the industry's biggest competitor—site built homes. Functionality, quality of life, culture and aesthetics also enter into every creative and technical decision. And, retailers, like Leo Poggione, President, Craftsman Homes and Doug Gorman, President, Home Mart, Inc., agree that designers make a big difference in selling homes

“They (designers) have to be right brained. Give a designer a blank space and they become creative, I don't,” says Gorman. “Our particular customer base are NASCAR and country music fans, so we tailor our homes to appeal to them...large, comfortable furniture”.

“We recognize the value that good interior design brings to selling a home.



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We want our customers to see how they can live, not just have to use their imaginations,” says Poggione.

“Buying a home is an emotional experience, and the emotion we create in our design helps sell the home,” says Felber.

“We have had to challenge our vendors to think outside the box,” says Lewis-Wright. “Our duty is to meet the needs and desires of our customers. We need to give them what they want—the kind of things they see in magazines—high quality and cutting edge. Customers want something they can be proud of no matter what the price point.”

Interior design is another important step forward that has evolved over the last decade. “The industry, generally, had not done a good job of presenting itself to the public in the past,” Yoder says. “The industry got so bogged down in financing and codes that they forgot what sells homes. That has dramatically changed.”

Today, in every step of building a manufactured or modular home, the customer is top-of-mind. From the exterior to the interior, most manufacturers are taking a team approach to selling a home. And, it is widely recognized that interior design is an important sales tool for homes of all sizes and price points.

Design trends today include stone gas fireplaces, large kitchens and bathrooms. Closets are roomier and porches for outdoor entertaining are strong selling points. Offering high grade carpet, cabinetry and other upgrades has brought the industry new respect that

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even famous 20th Century designers could appreciate today.

“We have a passion for what we do,” says Lewis-Wright. Yoder says, “We have 17 seconds to appeal to a consumer, if you don’t pull them in during that time you’ll likely lose the sale.” Felbers adds, “We have really gotten into the consumer’s head and personality.”

Look out Toll Brothers, Pulte and Ryland. The manufactured and modular home industries are nipping at your heels. ■



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