



Illustration by George Wylesol

Business Analysis

What Will the Interior Design Profession Look Like 10 Years in the Future?

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What is the future of design? What will the interior design industry look like in 2029? If the last 10 years are any indication, it will appear remarkably different than it does today. In 2009—when brass, barn-wood paneling, and exposed-filament Edison bulbs were still seen as stylish—most designer products were sold exclusively to the trade, pricing was often a closely guarded secret, and Instagram and Pinterest didn't even exist. In the decade that followed, technology loosened the industry's laces as online services and apps increased transparency, made affordable online design services a reality, and inspired manufacturers to sell direct to consumers. These changes thrilled many homeowners but sent design's gatekeepers into a panic.

To gauge where the industry is headed in the decade ahead, AD PRO talked to experts in digital design services, interior design, social media, retail, and antiques. Though 2029 may seem far off, in many cases the trends and innovations that will continue to transform the business are already in our midst.

Design Will Be Increasingly Digital

Once reserved largely for the wealthy, interior design services are gradually becoming available to almost everyone, thanks to a bevy of online outfits like [Homepolish](#), [Modsy](#), and [Havenly](#)—a trend that will strengthen in the years ahead. “Your budget won't determine whether you can have a home you like or not,” says Noa Santos, the chief executive of Homepolish. “There will be a solution for everyone, at every budget category.”

Homepolish offers a service where designers typically work in-person with homeowners but are supported by [online tools](#) for purchases, communications, and more. Santos believes those tools will become increasingly sophisticated in the decade ahead. “It's going to provide designers with efficiencies that help them do more designing rather than the operations, communications, tracking, order management, and other stuff that has historically made up 75 percent of their job. A lot of that will be off-boarded to technology-enabled services.”

As visualization apps and communication tools continue to improve, designing rooms in the virtual realm with far-flung designers will also become increasingly easy and attractive. “We will not distinguish as strongly as we do today between what we consider the offline physical world, and online,” says Shanna Tellerman, the chief executive of Modsy, which already offers design help with 3D renderings starting at \$69 per room. “For designers, that opens up the idea that they can have clients anywhere.”

Indeed, as technology improves, Tellerman expects 3D visualization, including advances in the augmented reality and virtual reality services already offered by some start-ups, to be at the heart of most design decisions. “Ten years from now, people will use visualization for buying furniture no matter whether they’re going into a store to buy a piece, trying to lay out an entire room, or hiring an interior designer. It’s going to be an expected part of the flow,” she says. “You’ll be able to take a few pictures of your room, and it will be developed into a 3D model in a couple of seconds.”

Originality Will Be More Important Than Ever

As designer products and services become increasingly accessible to a broader audience, and as services like Pinterest, Instagram, and [Houzz](#) spawn lookalike interiors, the wealthiest clients will increasingly search out one-of-a-kind interiors from the pros.

“There will always be a market of people who want something that isn’t seen everywhere, and that isn’t available to everyone,” says the New York designer [David Kleinberg](#). “People in the high-end, bespoke marketplace will look further for novel things, one-of-a-kind things, and commissioned pieces. In the last number of years, we’ve seen an expansion of creative people working at a small scale, doing really beautiful one-off work. That kind of craftsmanship will become even more prized.”

Jamie Drake of the New York design firm [Drake/Anderson](#) concurs. “For designers working for the very lucky people, the few who are the one-tenth of one percenters, the business will continue to be pretty much the same,” he says. “We get to do things that are truly bespoke and couture—two terribly overused words, for the most part—but what we and our peers do is about creating beautiful solutions that are totally fabricated for the specific clients and their needs.”

However, that doesn’t mean the business won’t evolve. As manufacturers that once sold exclusively to the trade become increasingly open to dealing with individual homeowners, many design firms may shift their focus to charging fees for up-front design services and away from markups on purchased goods. “The markup on purchases may become old school because people can click and purchase things on their own,” says Kleinberg.

Social Media Will Mean Business

Over the past decade, social media has changed from online curiosity to big business. For designers, it is now an effective way to showcase completed projects, highlight new product launches, and ultimately meet clients. In many cases, “it’s become their portfolio,” says Elizabeth Blitzer, founder of the design-focused public relations agency [Blitzer & Company](#), which works with clients such as Thomas O’Brien, Alexa Hampton, and Bunny Williams Home.

As such, Blitzer expects social media will become increasingly polished and business-centered. “It’s going to get more and more refined, and less and less haphazard,” she says, noting that the current rage for paying influencers to pose with a company’s products is already making social media less authentically personal than it used to be. “People are going to be investing money in photo shoots that are meant for social media, versus more casual posts.”

Laura Bindloss, founder of the design-centric public relations agency [Nylon Consulting](#), predicts that social media will grow to include full virtual walkthroughs of designer projects. “You will be able to walk a real home or a conceptual home using visualization and virtual reality on a social media platform,” she says. “That will impact the way that designers pitch clients.”

At the same time, by allowing them to tell their stories in such a rich way, “designers are going to go the way of the celebrity chef,” Bindloss says. “Ten years ago, chefs weren’t celebrities, but TV made them famous. I think interior designers will follow.”

Brick-and-Mortar Will Get Smarter

As e-commerce sites have nibbled at the profits of traditional shopping giants, the retail landscape has undergone its most radical change in a century. But that doesn’t mean brick-and-mortar retail is dead—there’s a reason digitally driven companies like

Casper, Warby Parker, and Everlane continue to open newer, bigger stores in select locations.

Where 20th-century retailers focused on economies of scale and saturating the marketplace, “we are now moving into an era of economies of presence,” says Jay Goltz, founder of [Jayson Home](#), the furniture and accessories retailer with a store in Chicago and national e-commerce presence. “The smart companies are using economies of presence and leveraging their physical locations to build relationships.”

In the decade ahead, says Goltz, we are likely to see retailers with fewer stores that are more experiential, with top-level customer service and quick turnaround times to make the buying process as painless as possible. “You have to have the right number of stores, which doesn’t mean you need one in every market,” he says. “I can be more successful with one well-stocked store, and good people who can ship things quickly, than by spreading myself thin with numerous locations, which used to be the only way to do it.” For architects and designers, that could potentially mean fewer, but more engaging and inventive, retail commissions.

Online Retail Will Get Slicker

Ten years ago, many designers scoffed at the notion of buying furniture online without giving clients the opportunity to try pieces out in the person; today, it’s commonplace. Now the next major shifts in online retail are beginning to take shape. “Visualization is going to be a really big part of it,” says Anna Brockway, the cofounder and president of [Chairish](#), which also runs Decaso and Dering Hall. “Allowing people to see and fully customize pieces will be a regular part of our reality.”

More sophisticated visualization tools will also help streamline the process for creating and buying custom furniture, she says, noting that it currently remains a laborious, time-consuming process for designers. “Even just getting a customer’s own material onto an existing upholstered piece has a lot of steps,” says Brockway. “In the future, all of that will be more automated.”

Finally, she predicts that shipping furniture to people’s homes will become a much easier experience. “This notion of a truck coming through one day a week, and you have to wait around for it, will be over,” she says. “There will be significant innovation in our transportation systems, which will alter the business. I dream of drones carrying beautifully wrapped sofas.”

Antiques Will Make a Comeback

Antiques, in general, have had a difficult run over the past 10 years, as once fashionable periods and designers fell out of favor and collectors increasingly focused on contemporary works. But much like the stock market is cyclical, many industry watchers say that antiques are overdue for a comeback. “As design becomes mainstream, people are going to want individuality and the special touch that will make their interiors remarkable,” says Benoist Drut of New York’s [Maison Gerard](#), which sells both antique and contemporary furniture.

And that’s the appeal of antiques—many pieces are truly one-of-a-kind, and made with a level of craftsmanship that can be otherwise impossible to find today. Indeed, Drut is already stockpiling antiques in preparation for the resurgence. “I’ve never bought so much 18th-century furniture as I have lately—that’s by choice.”

Anthony Barzilay Freund, the editorial director and director of fine arts at [1stdibs](#), already sees signs of a changing marketplace. “Antiques have been woefully underappreciated by collectors and the design community in the last decade or so, but we’re seeing an uptick in interest, both in the transactions taking place on our online marketplace and in the work of interior designers that we feature,” he says. Prices have dropped so much that “many pieces can be had for less than you’d spend at Restoration Hardware,” for something equivalent.

Just don’t expect those fire-sale prices to last for long. He predicts “a full-blown renaissance that’s certain to be in full flower by the end of 2019.”