



Advertise on NYTimes.com

Renovating an Industry



Stephanie Diani for The New York Times

BETSY BURNHAM created a consultation service offering clients online master plans of their rooms.

By **KIMBERLY STEVENS**
Published: August 19, 2009

PHOEBE HOWARD, an interior designer in Atlanta and owner of four retail stores in the South, admits that clients are buying less these days, doing smaller jobs and taking their time with projects.

SIGN IN TO RECOMMEND

TWITTER

COMMENTS (9)

SIGN IN TO E-MAIL

PRINT

REPRINTS

SHARE

ARTICLE TOOLS SPONSORED BY



More Articles in Home & Garden »

Health Update



A weekly dose of health news on medical conditions, fitness and nutrition.

Sign Up

[See Sample](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)

[Pink Ribbon Jewelry T Shirts & More](#)

thebreastcancerpinkribbonshop.com

[Fat Burning Colon Cleanse - All Natural](#)

www.bromacleansetrial.com

[FREE 3 Nights Luxury Royal Getaway Resort Vacation](#)

www.ztra.info

Advertise on NYTimes.com

MOST POPULAR

E-MAILED BLOGGED SEARCHED

1. [In Portland's Restaurants, a Down East Banquet](#)
2. [Mind: When a Parent's 'I Love You' Means 'Do as I Say'](#)
3. [Thomas L. Friedman: Have a Nice Day](#)
4. [Maureen Dowd: Rapping Joe's Knuckles](#)
5. [Indian Women Find New Peace in Rail Commute](#)
6. [Why Did Tavern Fail?](#)
7. [Rosh Hashana, Circa 1919](#)
8. [David Brooks: High-Five Nation](#)
9. [Books: One Injury, 10 Countries: A Journey in Health Care](#)
10. [Maureen Dowd: Boy, Oh, Boy](#)

[Go to Complete List »](#)



New York Fashion Week

ALSO IN STYLE »

[Feminist fashion in a man's world](#)
[Model-morphosis](#)

Related

Decorating's Answer to Online Dating (August 20, 2009)

[Enlarge This Image](#)



Armando Bellmas for The New York Times
PHOEBE HOWARD Hosted more in-store parties, started blogging and expanded her retail chain in the South.

[Enlarge This Image](#)



J. Emilio Flores for The New York Times
LINDSEY DANN MILLER Started a Web site that sells slightly-worn high-end furnishings at a discount.

[Enlarge This Image](#)



J. Emilio Flores for The New York Times
BY DESIGN Lindsey Dann Miller, right, and her sister Courtney Mack take a sofa's dimensions at a client's home.

[Enlarge This Image](#)

ADVERTISEMENTS



KNOW
 Register for writing courses at nytimes.com/knowledge
 Click here for full details. >

The New York Times
Knowledge Network

Ads by Google

[what's this?](#)

Interior Design College

Interior Designers Institute Newport Beach, CA design college
www.idi.edu

TempleHome Architects

Award winning residential designers Free Design Consultation - Call Now
www.templehome.net

Do you need to...

Design, Build, Renovate, Expand, or Locate a Church? We can help!
www.solideogloriagroup.org



Stephanie Diani: For the New York Times
Betsy Burnham's Instant/Space kit provides clients with swatches and source materials.

Readers' Comments

Readers shared their thoughts on this article.

[Read All Comments \(9\)](#) »

For Mrs. Howard, 51, that has necessitated being more aggressive and more creative, trying to make her work accessible to a larger range of people. She has started hosting more in-store parties and events and is writing a blog, www.mrshowardpersonals shopper.com, with the help of a young employee. She didn't know what a blog was until a few months ago, but now, she says, she plans to get acquainted with [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#).

Mrs. Howard has been pleasantly surprised by the response. And at a time many shops are closing, she opened her latest one on Aug. 6, in Charlotte, N.C. "I find myself trying things I thought I would never try," she said. "Even if I'm feeling a little bit stressed or worried, I act like I'm having a good time. The attitude is contagious."

In a business where tradition can squelch creative ways of doing things, it is often difficult to introduce fresh ideas, but the economy is encouraging experimentation. Designers who say they are doing well in the recession are taking risks and changing what has been a very conservative business. And while luxury items and services are the first to go in hard times, these new approaches are benefiting customers who are finding design more accessible and less expensive.

In a recent survey, the American Society of Interior Designers reported that 65 percent of its members said they were taking smaller projects than they once had, compared with 50 percent who said that in 2008. Of course, there have always been designers who offer relatively inexpensive services, but they haven't been those whose work is shown in shelter magazines or shops frequented by wealthy customers. Now designers of status are reaching out.

Two years ago, Betsy Burnham, 47, a Los Angeles-based interior designer, added a service called Instant/Space (instantspacedesign.com). For a flat fee (a living room plan is about \$1,500), Ms. Burnham creates a master plan on line, including resources and unlimited phone advice. There are no budgets, fees and markups — just a creative design plan.

Ms. Burnham said she came up with the idea when she saw the economy trending down; it is an alternative to the traditional full-service designer who comes to your house, expects a large budget and spends the next few years with you. But when she started it, her colleagues sneered.

"Designers are a snobby group," she said. "I got a lot of funny looks and catty comments behind my back. Now, I have designers telling me they wish they had thought of it first."

For those who have used her site, it has provided access they could not have achieved in a booming economy.

"It was like having a really great friend with fabulous style who was willing to share their thoughts and ideas about your space in great detail," Molly Clark Kircher said. She used the Instant/Space service in her home in Walloon Lake, Mich., as well as a weekend house in Montana. Ms. Kircher said accessibility and ease attracted her to the service — and the fact that she got a high-end designer in a place where they are few and far between.

"Being in a small town in the Midwest, there weren't a lot of designers I knew of with a style I really loved," she said.

Many designers are testing new concepts and taking risks they never thought they would take. Celerie Kemble, 36, a designer with offices in both New York and Palm Beach, said she recently worked on a project she never would have taken a few years ago. She decorated the lobby and other public spaces in 200 West End, a luxury condo building on the Upper West Side, and gave design services to the first 10 buyers, paid for by the developer. "I really felt like it was risky because typically I don't design building lobbies, and I was being handed a clientele that really wasn't picking me — they were being handed

to me," she said.

As it turned out, though, "I ended up meeting amazing people, gaining more clients from the project, and it has kept the jobs flowing through my office," she said.

Niche businesses like color consultation, art hanging and personal shopping for specific rooms are popping up across the country as designers try to gain an edge. Kimba Hills, 56, a designer and owner of the shop Rumba in Santa Monica, Calif., wanted to reach people who needed a second pair of eyes but not a costly long-term relationship with a decorator. She came up with Speed Design, a concept that is both educational for the client, and fast. She goes to a client's house, assesses what should be kept or sold, offers advice and resources to change a room instantly, and typically finishes in less than a month. Her fastest turnaround so far has been three days.

"It's really more about teaching a client how they can reinvigorate a room by changing the placement of the furniture, maybe hanging the art on the wall differently, or simply have a few tired chairs reupholstered."

Ms. Hills is known in the design world for her expertise in local art and her eclectic array of midcentury collectibles; she sells through 1stdibs.com, a site that many top decorators use to buy items for their clients.

The economy has also pushed some back-burner ideas to the forefront. "I had a crazy idea for a business in my back pocket," said Lindsey Dann Miller, 29, a designer who has been in the business for about 10 years. "And when the economy shifted I decided to put all my energy into it." In January she started a site called formerfurniture.com, based in Los Angeles. On the site, she showcases a variety of designer and trade pieces that are slightly worn or have come directly from high-end furniture companies. Although Former Furniture ships anywhere, she buys only locally, for quality control. The pieces are inspected in person, photographed and put up for sale.

"I started the site with a handful of designer pieces and half of my own living room furniture, and I was shocked at the response," she said. She now has close to 600 pieces on the site, including a [Ralph Lauren](#) queen-size bamboo bed valued at \$2,400, and listed at \$750, and an apothecary chest "once owned by a top-notch Hollywood TV and film producer" valued at \$2,100 and listed at \$1,000. Her sister Courtney Mack, 31, has come on as a partner to help her with the growing venture.

"The business offers designers a way to get rid of furniture that their clients aren't interested in anymore with complete anonymity," Ms. Miller said. "It's possible to purchase pieces on the site for a third or even half of what people paid."

Designer tag sales, pop-up stores, auctions and weekend events that mix shopping with picnics and cocktail parties are another way designers are reaching a different clientele. A recent Venice, Calif., designer tag sale attracted hundreds of people who paid \$10 at the door to rub elbows with design-world stars and buy discards and extras from local designers. [Anjelica Huston](#) stopped by, and the free designer consultation area was packed all day.

Nathan Turner, 36, a Los Angeles-based interior designer, hosted a Spring Bazaar in June with a number of designers selling their wares and offering advice. "It was a way to bring a variety of people together to sell things at a lower price point, which is a real draw right now," he said.

He noted that openness to change is essential. "If you're not flexible right now, you're simply being silly." Clients who used to have their homes decorated by designers now prefer a consultant rather than a designer with an open-ended budget, he said.

Many designers have decided to stop worrying about what their peers think and simply focus on the client. Frank Fontana, 35, the HGTV host of "Design on a Dime," runs a high-end interior design business, Frank Fontana Designs, in Chicago. He said other high-end designers looked down on him for his TV persona, snickering behind his back

when shopping for expensive items at the Chicago Merchandise Mart and snubbing him at parties. "If you buy into it, you'll be a goner," he said.

"A lot of people in my position would never put themselves out there like I am, but again, we all get up in the morning and put our pants on one leg at a time," he said. His tip to other designers: Do as much viral marketing as you can because it's free. "That means blogging, Twittering, Facebooking and Myspacing your heart out," he said.

Mr. Fontana is optimistic about the changes and believes that designers who try to connect with clients will do fine.

"I don't buy into any sort of snobbery," he said. "I don't care what business you're in, everyone is suffering. And if you get creative, this recession can make you a millionaire."

[Sign in to Recommend](#)

A version of this article appeared in print on August 20, 2009, on page D1 of the New York edition.

[More Articles in Home & Garden »](#)

- [COMMENTS \(9\)](#)
- [SIGN IN TO E-MAIL](#)
- [PRINT](#)
- [REPRINTS](#)



The finest journalism in L.A.? The New York Times, as low as \$3.70 a week.

Ads by Google what's this?

[Web Site Design Services](#)
 Unique Website Design Experts. See Our Portfolio. Beverly Hills.
[PolymerWebSpinner.com](#)

[Interior Design College](#)
 Interior Designers Institute Newport Beach, CA design college
[www.idi.edu](#)

[TempleHome Architects](#)
 Award winning residential designers Free Design Consultation - Call Now
[www.templehome.net](#)

Related Searches

- [Interior Design](#) [Get E-Mail Alerts](#)
- [Shopping and Retail](#) [Get E-Mail Alerts](#)
- [Recession and Depression](#) [Get E-Mail Alerts](#)
- [Luxury Goods](#) [Get E-Mail Alerts](#)

INSIDE NYTIMES.COM



SPORTS »



After Tour in the N.B.A., a Life in the Army

OPINION »



Op-Ed: Afghanistan's Other Front

N.Y. / REGION »



Proposal of Smoking Ban Stirs a Sense of Tolerance

OPINION »

Olivia Judson: Cracking the Spine of Libel
 Britain's libel laws are making things tricky for science writers.

DINING & WINE »



In Portland's Restaurants, a Down East Banquet

THEATER »



Exiles With Tales From War-Torn Iraq