



Follow THE Leader

Does nature or nurture determine a designer's success? What kind of mentorship breeds the headline names we know and love? And with more and more young designers eschewing the apprenticeship model altogether, are there still lessons to be learned working in-house for an established firm? *BOH* spotlights top talents and rising stars for insights into their success. **BY KATHRYN O'SHEA-EVANS**

No matter how illustrious their careers or deep their clients' pockets, nearly all top designers began at the same place: the bottom rung. But not all entry-level positions are created equal. Take Brian J. McCarthy, who, after graduating from Pratt, kick-started his career at one of the most storied bastions of design history in America. "When I went to work at Parish-Hadley, I knew I believed in their values and aesthetic—and I knew that if it worked, I wasn't going to want to leave anytime soon," he recalls. It did work—in large part because Albert Hadley was a dream mentor for the young designer, who stayed at the firm for 10 years. "Albert was just amazing," says McCarthy. "I could not imagine my life today had I not been taught by somebody who took the time to mentor. And it was natural—it wasn't like he was making some effort to be professor in the classroom." The learning experience was hands-on, allowing him to work in Hadley's shadow. "The big thing is being included. The only way projects become real is if you're really a part of the process. If you're only brought in for bits and pieces, you're never going to get the whole picture."

Many of the designers *BOH* spoke with agreed that working at a larger firm was a vital experience before they broke out on their own. "You would never become a doctor without going to medical school and doing a residency," says Nashville designer Stephanie Sabbe. The 2016 *House Beautiful* Next Wave honoree had a textbook career path:

first school, then practicing under other designers, before launching her own, now-flourishing firm. "There are very few [careers] where you would just show up in a field and start doing it—yet for some reason, in design, people do."

Seattle designer Andy Beers, founder and principal of OreStudios, worked for Jessica Helgerson after finishing graduate school—and considers his time there one of the foundational linchpins of his career. "Interior design is a trade, and best practices are really only learned on the job," he says. "Working for a talented, established designer

provides younger designers an opportunity to work with vendors they might not otherwise know about, understand detailing in a richer, more specific way, and see firsthand how to run a successful project from intake to final installation. There is such a learning curve in this industry, and working in another office provides a safe place to learn the ins and outs of the business.”

The New York School of Interior Design (NYSID) reports that about 75 percent of its graduates go on to work at established firms, with the remaining quarter launching their own businesses or freelancing. “Although we don’t require internships, all of our students want to do them,” says Ellen Fisher, dean and vice president for academic affairs at NYSID. The school has a longstanding policy of promoting only paid internships to students, based on the philosophy that while students should value the learning experiences they gain, their work should be valued too. And although Fisher encourages students to pursue those opportunities, there are other experiences she values just as highly. “We’re creating fully rounded human beings, especially at the undergraduate level,” she explains. “If our students want to travel, that’s contributing to their growth as a designer. If they have a love of drawing and rendering, that’s a great asset to them in their future. People can’t only think about work-work-work; they have to think about what they love and what’s meaningful to them.”

Though Charleston-based designer J.P. Horton went solo early in his career—two years ago, he launched his own firm at the age of 26—he recommends taking a traditional approach to learning the business. “I’m 100 percent an advocate for interning with an established firm once you graduate, because there’s no way to understand the business without living it,” he says. “You need to be able to read a floor plan, draw, know what types of textiles work in what situation, and understand how wholesale works. It’s definitely business; it’s not easy, and it’s not as glamorous as it appears to be. Yes, the end result is glamorous, but it’s quite a process.”

Horton gained essential insights from working for other firms before founding his own. “The biggest, most important part of the learning experience was that I was working on every project with a senior designer,” he says. “Learning the ins and outs of how to properly talk to a client, how to present or place orders, how to deal with something when it comes in damaged or late, how to set up meetings—that was all a positive learning experience.”

For San Francisco designer Suzanne Tucker, working for an established firm before breaking out on one’s own is absolutely critical, whether that experience comes with or without a degree. “Look back on any of the great designers in interiors, fashion or furniture, and they all had the benefit of tutelage under someone in their early career,” she says. “Getting that hands-on education with a design firm is invaluable.” Tucker herself spent her formative years working for the legendary Michael Taylor, whose breezy California style is still referenced in her work. (See “Leader with a Legacy,” page 37.) “I always say that in hindsight, you should feel like you should have paid your employers for the education you gained under their mentorship.”

Architects also often begin their careers as apprentices, notes Ken Pursley of Charlotte, North Carolina-based Pursley Dixon Architecture. “The firm you work for shapes your worldview and becomes your professional foundation,” he says. For Pursley, that early guidance came from seven years working under the legendary Southern architect

What was the best advice you ever received?



“Know and understand your weaknesses, then surround yourself with the best people possible so you’re able to focus on the things you excel at.”

—Andy Beers



“Always trust your instincts, especially when it comes to business decisions. No one has your best interest at heart more than you do.”

—J.P. Horton



“You cannot let them see you cry. If you need to cry, go to the bathroom.”

—Stephanie Sabbe



“Give them what they never knew they wanted.”

—Brian J. McCarthy



“You don’t need to be perfect to start. Perfect is the enemy of good.”

—Cheryl Lockett

Bobby McAlpine. “His knowledge and insight unveiled a point of view within me that takes the best of our architectural traditions and fuses them with current patterns of living,” says Pursley, who sees himself as part of an ecosystem of architects working throughout the South that are part of the McAlpine family tree. “The root of our design decisions is founded in emotional impact much more than intellectual correctness,” he explains. “We share a common passion of infusing a traditional skin with a modern bone structure. Although our work translates differently, there is a similar visceral viewpoint.”

McCarthy cautions aspiring designers not to launch their own firms right away: “If you have no experience with somebody who can teach you the ropes, you cut yourself off at the knees,” he says. “Developing your references, your best, most creative ideas—that comes with time [on the job]. You’re only as good as the hard work you put in to anything you do, and that includes working for somebody—gaining experience, ways of problem solving, and confidence. And having some consistency.”

A dream career may also germinate from a side hustle. Charlotte-based Cheryl Lockett worked full-time as a registered dietitian at a Fortune 500 firm for 10 years before she transitioned into a human resources role in order to have time to pursue a career as an interior designer. She started from the ground up, taking night classes at the local community college and launching her own blog. “I wanted to do things the right way, so I hired a blog designer, developed a logo and business name, purchased a domain—and before I knew it, I had a business,” she says. “I blogged two to three times per week, and interest grew and my blog quickly brought in clients.” Yet Lockett continued working full-time, juggling design work with her HR position for five years before quitting her day job—time, she says, that wasn’t wasted. “Those years enabled me to establish a brand presence, connect and develop relationships with successful designers, complete design school and finance the investments needed for my business.”

During her second year of blogging, Lockett attended the Design Bloggers Conference, where she connected with the seasoned interior design professionals who would serve as mentors as she established her business. “I’ve consistently invested in education, whether attending conferences and markets or hiring a coach,” she says. Today, as a full-time designer, she has plenty of lessons to share with her design assistant. “There’s no substitute for hands-on training,” says Lockett—including skills gained while working in other industries. “After a 15-year stint in corporate America, there were lots of transferable lessons that I was able to roll over into my business.”

Beginners can garner career takeaways from anywhere, agrees Tucker, who found one of her best mentors while working at a department store shortly after college. “I had landed a coveted manager position at I. Magnin Beverly Hills under the watchful eye of a legendary store manager. She told me how I would conduct myself at the executive level with clients like Nancy Reagan (difficult) and Betsy Bloomingdale (lovely); how I would dress (in designer clothes) and wear my hair (in a chignon at the nape of my neck); and how I would be addressed by my sales staff (*Miss Tucker*),” recalls the designer. “She was a formidable lady, but a marvelous mentor. At a young age, she taught me the value of superlative service—and that the customer is always right!”

Unfortunately, not every mentor is on par with the likes of Tucker's, or offers the hands-on training McCarthy experienced under the tutelage of Hadley—but sometimes emerging designers can learn just as much from the bad jobs as from the good ones. As a young graduate, Sabbe worked at two large firms in the South. When she moved to the East Coast in 2009 in the midst of the recession, she found a job at a small firm, working for a designer who was “a total mess,” she says, describing how he built his business around the practice of hiring recent graduates for short-term projects then firing them en masse after the jobs were complete. “He had all these international projects, yet he was still working with the student version of CAD! His business was not at all like the streamlined corporate structure I had come from, but he was still successful, and I felt very motivated by that,” explains Sabbe. “After working for him for several months, I thought, If he can do this, I could try.”

Horton had a similar experience. “Even if you are working as a junior designer for someone and it's a bad situation, you're learning what is correct or not correct in the business,” he says. “I wouldn't have been able to open my own company right after college—a college degree isn't enough. In a firm, you learn what works and doesn't work, what not to do, what to do. Obviously, there's a lot of moving pieces when you're working on a home, and a lot of things can go wrong.” Beers agrees that all kinds of mentors have value. “I worked for people I admired greatly, like Jessica, and have modeled my own practice on lessons from that office. I have also held jobs where I struggled with the way the business was run, and have used those lessons in what *not* to do in equal measure.”

The most insightful career guru could very well be sitting next to you, in the trenches at work or at a dinner party. “Mentors are the people that are critical and inspirational at the same time, whether or not they're industry-related,” says designer Richard Mishaan. “My friend Manolo Valdés, an influential painter and sculptor from Spain, came into my offices one day and said, ‘Are you an accountant?’ I said, ‘You know I'm not.’ ‘Well, your office looks like you are. I would never hire you walking in here. You should have a space that, when you walk in, it blows your mind.’ That conversation changed my entire life. Now, the office is the perfect example of the quality craftsmanship we can execute and use in your home.”

Perhaps the most important part of being mentored is passing your hard-won wisdom on to the next generation. “It is interesting to shift from the role of mentee to mentor,” says Pursley. “What I immediately came to appreciate is the amount of patience Bobby had for his younger staff as they grew from interns to architects. Now that I find myself in a leadership role, I try to remember that nurturing perspective and carry it forward. I'm not always successful—but I do try!”

Tucker coaches her junior designers, teaching them not just how to run a business, but also how to think critically about design decisions. “I encourage my team to think outside the box, take initiative, and come up with new ideas,” she says. “Even if they may not be the right ideas, I'll have them tell me why they think it's right. That in and of itself helps a young designer start questioning, and ultimately develop a discerning eye. When I'm working on something, be it making edits or shifting something around, and they don't ask, I always say, ‘Don't you want to know *why*?’ Ask questions and listen. That's how you learn.” ■

Leader With a Legacy

Suzanne Tucker spent her early years working for Michael Taylor, the legendary West Coast designer who pioneered the airy, light-filled “California Look” in the 1950s and '60s. (Diana Vreeland once called him the “James Dean of decorators.”) Tucker explains how her mentor's oeuvre left an indelible mark on her work.

MICHAEL TAYLOR



THEN

“Michael Taylor had a wonderful way of pairing mirrors and consoles, and I've always been inspired by the drama he would create with unique pieces, like this magnificent antique Venetian mirror and 18th-century George II console from Luttrellstown Castle.”

SUZANNE TUCKER



NOW

“Here, I paired a George II giltwood mirror and a spectacular William Kent console from one of his earlier projects with an exquisite pair of Venetian dolphin torchières, lead planters and a watchful 17th-century Buddha to set off a dramatic entry hall.”



THEN

“In the 1980s, Michael Taylor designed this memorable living room for Dodie and John Rosekrans with classic architecture painted off-white and large-scale furniture.”



NOW

“This 2007 showcase living room was directly inspired by that room, and included Dodie's own antique William Kent armchairs, which she let me borrow.”