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By Jeff Gavin

Cheer

Sometimes it's tough for designers to stay passionate about their profession day after day.

Designers can get stuck. The muse becomes elusive, and creativity can seem out of reach.

Procrastination sets in. How can designers stay inspired and passionate about their profession and individual practice after several decades in the industry? Is it possible to avoid burnout?

“You do need to find a way to be inspired,” says Michael Vanderbyl, IIDA, Principal, Vanderbyl Design, San Francisco, and a designer of 50-plus years. “You can’t call it in. I won’t grind away at a project if I’m stuck or lack inspiration. I’ll step away, do something else and then come back to it.” For veteran designers, inspiration can spring eternal. It all depends on where you look.

THE LEARNING NEVER ENDS

Some designers find inspiration in teaching part-time at local colleges and universities. For students, all that interior design

encompasses is fresh and new. They’re anxious to get their careers started and eager to see what awaits them. Veteran designers can get energized by this animated spirit of learning.

Giselle Newman Young, IIDA, ASID, Principal of Environments in Life Inc., Nashville, Tenn., has 25 years’ experience as an interior designer and serves as a guest instructor at several colleges in Tennessee. With the pressures of running a firm and a number of years in the profession, Young cultivates three actions to stay inspired: teach, research and design.

“I’ve witnessed great designers getting burned out and leaving the field,” Young says. “It doesn’t have to be that way. I never stop learning, especially when I teach. Students inspire me with

their fresh ideas and enthusiasm. Research, whether historical, artistic or otherwise, helps inform my designs. The more I discover, the more excited I get about an idea and the quicker I get back to designing.”

Young has found mentoring proves advantageous for designers seeking to renew their passion. She created an effort devoted to interior design career mentoring for high school students. Part of the program educates high school counselors on the profession.

“Mentoring is a big deal to me,” she says. “Some of the older designers think they need to retire at a certain age, but you don’t. You can get so much out of volunteering and sharing your knowledge. As a senior designer, you are passing down a respect for quality, a world of knowledge and the love of design.”

Vanderbyl takes one day a week to teach at his alma mater, the California College of the Arts in San Francisco. He also serves as the school’s Dean of Design. But mentoring doesn’t necessarily have to

be formal or direct. Though she doesn’t teach, Barbara Zieve, IIDA, Associate Partner with Butler Rogers Baskett (BRB) in New York, stays inspired by keeping abreast of what design students are doing. That’s why she participates in school portfolio reviews and project critiques for graduating students at Pratt Institute and FIT in New York.

Whether it’s through attending programs during industry shows like NeoCon or actively staying current with Continuing Education Units (CEUs), interior designers can keep inspired by ensuring the learning process never ends.

KEEPING IT FRESH

While it may be inevitable that repetition leads to monotony, passionate designers know how to shake things up enough so that they and their colleagues remain energetic and inspired.

Vanderbyl, who began his career in graphic design and whose practice eventually evolved to include other areas including interior design, says

diversity helps keep project work alive for him and his staff. To keep the work diverse and interesting, and to keep employees on their toes, Vanderbyl's firm relies on a multidisciplinary approach that incorporates different mediums and industries. His studio designs packaging, signage and other brand awareness materials, as well as furniture, textiles and fashion apparel.

Vanderbyl's initial experience as a graphic designer is part of what keeps him inspired. "Graphic design is all about communication, winning customers over," he says. "It's a classic problem/solution scenario that drives my creativity as I look for answers. I never get bored. A diverse background gives me multiple ways to contribute to the client?"

That sort of diversity and a sense of keeping things fresh are what allow designers to stay engaged and committed.

"I feel like I've come full circle," Zieve says. "I come from a sculpture and interior design background. Today, I'm also involved in product design.

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Each discipline informs the others. The more muscles I flex in my work, the more I'm engaged in fresh ideas and new inspiration.”

Designers who concentrate on creating custom solutions for their clients prevent themselves from becoming “pigeonholed,” Young says, which can result in the death of

inspiration. “My frustration early in my career at one firm led me to go out on my own and then to graduate school to revitalize and learn new skills,” she says. “I found I don't need to repeat myself because each client is different. Our clients realize we design for them individually. It's our calling card”

But creating custom solutions can be daunting. Vanderbyl was faced with a perplexing client assignment where the design solutions were not readily apparent. His firm was asked to design a furniture showroom in Los Angeles in a very odd space. “[The space] was two stories high, very narrow; almost

Rekindling the Flame

Stay Competitive. “For me, competitions are a good check answering, in part, if the work is still compelling and interesting,” says Michael Vanderbyl, IIDA, Owner of Vanderbyl Design, San Francisco.

Scare Yourself. “When you take risks, you grow,” says Barbara Zieve, IIDA, Associate Partner for Butler Rogers Baskett (BRB), New York. “You don’t need to jump off a cliff. Take the 70/30 approach, using 70 percent of what you know and the other 30 representing something new.”

Excite Your Client. “I can’t be excited if my client isn’t,” says Giselle Newman Young, IIDA, ASID, Principal, Environments in Life Inc., Nashville, Tenn. “If they are thrilled, I’m invigorated and the creativity flows.”

Engage Your Employees. “Everyone has their strengths and weaknesses, but they should be given challenges that allow them to fly,” Zieve says. “That inspires as much as anything.”

Volunteer Your Services. “Non-profit projects help me remember why I got into design in the first place,” Vanderbyl says. “When you start doing something you care about, it’s infectious and you want to recreate that in your other work.”

a parallelogram. I didn’t know what to do,” he says. “So I kept looking at the negative dimensions of the space and found a solution in turning the negatives into positives.”

Vanderbyl and his designers played up the tallness and narrowness of the space. They installed a set of draperies from floor to ceiling, accentuating the building’s height, adding

drama and providing a walkway into the show-room. Other draperies were used to create product bays. Giant shelves were suspended 20 feet high to showcase chairs from various collections.

“Every design should test you or make you question yourself,” Vanderbyl says. “You should be a little unsure when you embark on a project to keep from being complacent.”

LOOKING OUTSIDE FOR INSPIRATION

When it becomes difficult – or even impossible – to pull inspiration from the design world, it’s time to look outside of it for reinvigoration.

“As designers, we draw from the world around us. The better we understand it, the more relevant our design ideas and the more engaged we remain in our profession,” says Zieve, adding that she reads *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times* to keep current of the world around her. “Architecture and design are a reflection of society. They are influenced by what’s going on socially,

economically, culturally and politically.”

For some designers, calling on the outside world for inspiration means a glass of wine and a good book; for others, it means a nature walk or a short trip away from the daily hustle and bustle.

“I like to travel, consciously studying what I see. I come back inspired and want to do great things,” Vanderbyl says. “I see and appreciate the greatness that others accomplish in their fields, and that inspires me.”

Zieve agrees that taking a much-needed break from it all helps inspire and recharge her.

“I’ll go out to a ranch in Wyoming to ride horses. I love taking in my surroundings, which fuels my design sense,” she says. “But even back home, I ‘close the door’ on my office, leaving my work behind when I leave for the day. That’s important.”

The result of a break can be priceless if approached the right way. “The challenge of any break is to come back and look at something with new eyes,” Vanderbyl says. ☐