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The Survivors

Sure, Chicago's interiors community has taken a hit. But a number of savvy designers are not only surviving, but thriving. The secret? Grieve, accept, move on—and get seriously resourceful
by Lisa Cregan | Photographs by Mireya Acierto

Find a New Market

It broke Kim Merlin's heart to shutter her 13-year-old floral/lifestyle shop, Ex Floreus, last February—according to her, the business at the Lake Forest shop had taken “a terrible turn.” But you can put your handkerchief away, because when Merlin turned floral free agent—a sort of ‘have Felcos, will travel’ gun for hire—the opportunities came rolling in. Like the invitation from the White House. By August Merlin was filling in as First Floral Consultant—doing arrangements, working events and helping plan the Christmas decorations. “When one door closed, a big white door opened,” laughs Merlin, who says every experience has been unforgettable, from getting tackled by first-dog Bo (“he’s very soft”) to sitting in on meetings with the first lady (“warm and genuine”). These days Merlin’s on a different flight path. Pre-market crash she’d been dabbling in movie and TV set décor (see Indy’s wedding in *Crystal Skull*), but she’s free now to take on full-time movie jobs—like working on the sets of a new Noah Baumbach film with Ben Stiller and Jennifer Jason Leigh. Just another Lake Forest shopkeeper gone Hollywood!



Floral consultant Kim Merlin.



MRS. WRITE?

Designer Anne Coyle and (inset) the cover of her new unrelated book, *Undateable*.



Dish Dating Advice

Men, I have bad news. Last winter Anne Coyle's bustling interior decorating business stopped as suddenly as an elevator in a blackout. That left single girl Coyle on a break and looking for a project. She chose you. The results aren't pretty—*Undateable*, a book Coyle co-wrote with her BFF, television producer Ellen Rakieten—hits bookstores this March. Its subtitle? “311 Things Guys Do That Guarantee They Won't Be Dating or Having Sex.” Ouch. Luckily, a makeover is a makeover to Coyle, and after she and Rakieten get done explaining what it is you're doing wrong, they're kind enough to tell you how to fix it. Hint: This will not be good for sales of men's bronzers or Tommy Bahama sportswear. But don't get too rattled: *Elle Décor* is featuring a glossy spread of an Anne Coyle Interiors project in an upcoming issue. So Coyle may be switching her focus from dissing dudes to glamping up living rooms.

Expand Your Store and Services

Face to face with the Hydra of the housing recession, the (almost) five-year-old home design store Urban Source did the only rational thing: They doubled their space. You've got to love their brass. Owners Jenny Rossignuolo and Rose Tejada-Navarre believed so strongly in their concept—retail access to great lines of wallpapers and fabrics with experienced interior designers on hand—that they decided the solution to tough times was to offer even more lines (replenished weekly) to pull even more customers into the store. So last August they moved into a much bigger West Town space. And Urban Source's offerings have turned out to be a perfect match for the kind of bite-sized, budget-friendly freshening homeowners are still willing to do. Rossignuolo and Tejada-Navarre will also provide design consultation in small servings—one- or four-hour packages—a godsend to DIY home designers.

CONTINUED...

Hide in the Closet

Chicagoan Lindsay Segal, a 26-year-old fashion stylist who'd worked at *Vogue* and *Women's Wear Daily* in Manhattan, had just moved home to launch her lifelong dream—an interiors firm—only to watch in horror as business dropped off the housing cliff. Scrambling back to her roots in fashion, Segal decided to begin offering interiors clients some wardrobe styling, too. She'll pick a living room wall color while inventorying your closet, then take you shopping to the Mart, Barneys or the Container Store—all for the same fee—\$75 an hour (lindsaysegal.com). "Interior design and wardrobe consulting are both about lifestyle needs," says Segal. "Building a wardrobe is a manifestation of personality, just like your home. They're interchangeable disciplines."



PRICELINED! Clockwise from left: Bedroom by R Studio; living room on a budget; another client's living room; pattern brought in with pillows.

Create a Budget Spin-Off

Designer Michael Richman hated turning down calls from young homeowners with big dreams but small budgets. So last spring he came up with a solution: R Studio. For a flat, room-based fee (\$1,050 for a living room, for example) R Studio clients get four design sessions with Richman where they choose color palettes and pick from a pre-edited selection of reasonably priced furniture presented on flash cards—photos on the front/prices on the backs. "I think a lot of people see our work in national and local publications and think they can't afford our services," says Richman. Now they can.

Skip the Storefront

When the economic floodwaters started rising, the owners of two quirky-cool design stores independently came to the same conclusion: Better a virtual presence than no presence at all. Willow's owner, Amy Doehla (shopwillow.net) says she closed her Ukie Village shop last April but soon realized operating Internet-only made her a better retailer. "All of a sudden I had time to do the part of the business that's a blast—looking for new products." At Lille (lilleashop.com), Lydia Lando had a secondary motive for closing up shop: a new baby. She finds her robust Web business much easier to service. "I can track an order from anywhere." Like say, the pediatrician's office?



ONLINE FINDS From top: Bird mobile from Lille; carafes from Willow.

Moonlight

Uber-designer Tom Stringer had just segued into a new business sideline, Chartwell Lifestyle Management, when the Great Recession took hold. Demand for help stocking the Aspen fridge and keeping the Nantucket hedges trimmed was suddenly not quite as robust as envisioned. Solution? Keep segueing. Chartwell (chartwellhome.com) discovered that one thing people with multiple, gadget-stuffed, luxury homes still needed was reminders on how all their great stuff actually worked. Blanking on operating your state-of-the-art music/video/climate/lighting/security system? Contractor's phone ringing through to a Taco Bell? Chartwell will create (very) detailed manuals specifically for your (very) complicated home. Like the 300-pager with accompanying photographs just completed for a new California homeowner. Jeeves, fetch me the Chartwell binder!

Add New Talent

Pavilion Antiques is legendary for its offerings of spectacular 20th-century European furniture. But they felt the economic crunch just like everyone else. Their solution? Lower prices. Now don't get too excited. There won't be any Crazy Eddie giveaways on Adnet chandeliers or Mangiarotti coffee tables, but Pavilion has begun offering artful contemporary items like jewelry and ceramics from young European designers in a broader (i.e. lower) price range. Over the holidays Pavilion even offered space to the Object Design League, an organization that promotes experimental design, for a pop-up store stocked with pieces by emerging indie designers. "I've always wanted to do this," says Deborah Colman, who co-owns the 13-year-old Damen Avenue shop with partner Neil Kraus, "but the recession gave me an extra push." ■



Deborah Colman and Neil Kraus at Pavilion.