

30 Trends to Watch Today

by James P Cramer, 2002

1. *Research and innovation are increasingly differentiators for design firms.* Some firms conduct specialized research for their clients on a fee basis. Others conduct research as a part of their overhead and include the information in special reports that are circulated to the press and to client organizations. Buzz results. When architects and designers put forward innovative ideas to benefit their clients they are seen as change agents who create strategic new business models.
2. *Design in all building segments is going through transformation.* Take for example transportation, which is changing, morphing, and bringing the world's populations ever closer together. Some firms are creating new business potential in light rail stations while others are creating master plans for toll roads across entire countries. As a percentage of market share, transportation will continue increasing.
3. *Overt, quantifiable benefits are increasingly expected. Providing tangible, measurable service excellence and innovation creates new playing fields for designers.* Some firms now guarantee school buildings will be ready for fall classes. Others tell their biotech clients that laboratory buildings can be delivered in a third less time, which translates into many millions of dollars to the client.
4. *Medical advances, wellness and health agendas will become increasingly important to design firms.* And genomics are changing life, work, health, and wellness.
5. *The Internet is growing logarithmically and globally.* Collaboration models create "no excuse" project management. This new zone of connectivity will aid productivity and responsiveness.
6. *Training and education become re-engaged at new levels of sophistication and expand to all corporate levels and generations.* Savvy design firms are there with "designs on learning environments." A new mantra: smarter buildings=smarter students.
7. *For all professions the signs are clear: The professions will change or die.* Hyper specialization and expertise as true solution providers will become the new table stakes – and will not be commoditized any time soon.
8. *The global economy will expand despite pockets of extreme resistance.* Clients will seek global solutions where the richness of design and the reach of competency are assured.
9. *Genders will achieve equality in the construction industry and in the design professions.* Women will increasingly provide leadership to an industry seeking transformation.
10. *Retirement will be redefined* – due to economic considerations and more meaningful lifestyles people will work for a decade or two longer than they had envisioned five years ago.
11. *Some associations and unions will lose power.* Union membership is expected to decline from 16 percent to 12 percent market share by the end of the decade. *Associations and unions will daily have to pass the "nine question test" to thrive in the future. 1 (see related sidebar: "Trusting Your Association.")*
12. *Patron architecture will expand.* Increased wealth is creating huge markets for high-end residential projects, mixed use and corporate facilities. Many wealthy, however, will live below their means – creating environments of quality design and less bombastic and wasteful conspicuous consumption.

13. *Generation X will provide highly innovative new leadership to design firms.* It is the genuine differences inherent in the younger generations that will provide new edgy understandings and value propositions.
14. *Time will become an increasingly precious commodity.* The concept of “time is money” is being modified with more respect being given to time. An understanding unfolds that, as Gandhi said, “There is more to life than increasing its speed.”
15. *Knowledge-based design organizations will replace the old guard command and control types.* To leverage talent and intellectual capital, firms are unleashing creativity through high-powered collaboration. This is not forced to happen by a barking leader – but designed to happen by compassionate leadership.
16. *High-performing firms will have flatter structures and more informed decision making.* The firms will communicate using Internet tools interactively. Thus, communication will be improved and will create new knowledge-sharing cultures.
17. *Trust, ethics and confidence will become a key designer selection criteria.* Not only will character count, but the most trusted firms will create a magnetic field, “a centrality of trust” unlike we have known in the recent past.
18. *New security risks create new value propositions.* There are design specialists now who are designing extreme safety into facilities – new functional and aesthetic solutions unheard of until now.
19. *Environment and green movement gets increasingly strategic.* The future design professions will be digital and green – good design will also automatically include sustainability.
20. *Technology will annihilate traditional practice.* New tools give leverage to talent – but they also expose marginal talent. Thus, an exodus of mediocrity in the design professions can be anticipated. There will be no place to hide for those with marginal human or artistic or design competence.
21. *Building solutions will be pre-assembled at a large scale.* New alliances are being created between owners, designers, contractors, and manufacturers. New systems are being set up to disintermediate inefficient processes. Some solutions will come on like a tidal wave – others will move slowly, quietly, yet will devastate waste.
22. *There will be diminished labor requirements in A/E/C.* In the last few years the revenues per staff in an architecture firm have increased from \$83,000 average to well beyond \$112,000 average. This trend will continue as productivity rises. To accomplish the same work, fewer professionals will likely be required.
23. *Design appreciation reaches new levels – as does “uglification.”* There is a counter reaction to the new intersection between public and professional tastes in the world of design. This creates both beauty as well as uglification at new levels to contend with.
24. *Building construction will be 30 to 40 percent more efficient.* Consider the start-stop nature of today’s hand-off processes where waste (not quality control) lives.² (Autodesk/Design Futures Council: Phil Bernstein, Peter Beck) The efficiency between the points of responsibility will gain momentum just as the recent new levels of efficiency have taken place in the vertical silos. The horizontal links will have even more efficiency potential.
25. *Architects and designers will morph and expand their relevancy – but they may also become marginalized.* It will be an exciting new design profession – but it will be unforgiving for those unwilling or unable to change.

26. *Design-build and new integration models become 69 percent by 2010.* Single points of responsibility are valued and competent integration translates into timesavings. Contractors are transforming into “professional service firms” and have taken off their hard hats in favor of assuming process and financial leadership. Architects and engineers will take on construction leadership roles – others will move on to the client’s staff and represent the client. Satisfying options are unfolding, but the threats are also obvious.
27. *There are radical new value propositions.* Firms are exploring outside the traditional definitions of the design professions and are growing their business at the feasibility and planning stages. Others are taking on facility management. Still others are merging their practices with industrial design or other design disciplines. All offer overt benefits and new solutions to their clients.
28. *Design firms are increasingly asymmetrical in their strategic planning.* When the tools, methods and metrics of traditional practice no longer work or are less satisfying, firms seek out new often-counterintuitive solutions. Unfamiliar strengths in the A/E/C industry can be adopted even when outside the boundaries of your firm’s traditions. Potential value lies outside the mainstream – beyond the current symmetry.
29. *Clients will see themselves as architects and designers.* The intersection between professional and amateur will produce more sophisticated solutions and better designed communities.
30. *Change will change – alert firms can anticipate wildcards.* Linear change is still a factor, but non-linear transformation should always be factored into your future scenarios. These “future potentials” are where both danger and opportunity will present themselves for future peril or advancement.

There is no way to know exactly what will unfold – we cannot predict the future. But you should always use your imagination about the future. Indeed, leading architects, engineers, and designers create the future every day.

In the market in which your organization serves, there will be new, meaningful services delivered. There is no longer a natural order of things in A/E/C, and despite the overseeing jurisdictions, it’s not always a rational or predictable world that we live in.

So are we optimistic about the future entrepreneurs in the design professions? Yes. This planet has growing needs for professional design services and we see patterns developing that absolutely will require creative and innovative services. You and your firm should be positioned for increasing relevance.

However, in order to be optimistic about the future, we must be able to imagine the future as a better future. Our communities and clients expect this vision. It will be a future of our own making. The success in this future depends upon the alignment of your imagination with tomorrow’s real challenges.