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BUSINESS OF LIFE

Designers tap into a lucrative market: Single men

By ANNE MOORE

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Photo by Manuel Martinez Consultant Andy Carter turned to an interior design professional when he found himself living alone for the first time in decades.

For the first time in his life, intellectual property expert Andy Carter had the place to himself: a three-story, single-family home in Old Town built in the 1980s, which needed updating and reconfiguration. In the past, as a married father of two, he'd been given the basement to do with as he pleased. Now, divorced and with his children grown, it was his turn. Problem was, he had no time and no expertise to reimagine and furnish his space, so he did something he'd never done before: He hired a design professional.

Carter, 51, who says his sense of design is so poor he can't even match clothing, embraced professional expertise for his new home. "I'm one of the best in my business, I specialize," says

Carter, co-founder of Chicago-based Ocean Tomo, a consulting firm. "In other areas, like my house, I want someone who's the best in theirs. It's money well-spent."

Chicago interior designers say there's been an uptick in "single-guy" (divorced, widowed, never-married) clients, who now account for 10 percent of business—and 40 percent of billings. Credit our high-design-focused world (nonstop Instagram images on phones and tablets), young professionals who have outlived frat housing and executives who travel for work and want to come home to the same high-quality surroundings they find in luxury hotels.

With this rich vein to tap, designers are setting up shop downtown, shifting ad dollars to business and men's publications, adding staff, and pressing clients and real estate agents for referrals.



Photo by Manuel Martinez

"This is the first time their home tells their story," says Susan Brunstrum, founder of Sweet Peas Design in Old Town, whose team took on Carter's "single guy who's always traveling" project. She and her team acted as interior designer and lifestyle adviser, insisting, for example, that he install a true oven in addition to the warming oven for pizza.

Families, urban and suburban, are the bread and butter of interior designers, but nearly a third of the U.S. population now lives alone. And it's not families filling all those glassy towers in River North and the West Loop. To wit, Sweet Peas' move from suburban Libertyville to an Old Town storefront brought a new clientele to Brunstrum—all single, mostly men. For some of those clients, it's a no-brainer to employ a design professional.

"I'm a single guy and I like nice things, but the choices can be overwhelming," says Patrick Cott, 49, who works in corporate IT and moved this year from the suburbs to a Lincoln Park condo with good bones, in need of an update. He leaned on designers for their advice as he buffed floors, painted walls, furnished living spaces and homed in on one big-ticket item: a fireplace that "pops" and holds

a retractable TV. "Hiring a designer makes the decision process very quick," says Cott. "For me, it's 'Yes, no, don't show me anything with a 12-week lead time.' "

A DIFFERENT APPROACH

Men, regardless of marital status, want different things from a home than women, designers say. "With most women, the home represents comfort," says Elizabeth Krueger, principal of her namesake firm in River North, whose client base is mostly executives. "With men, the common thread is, 'I travel a lot for work, I stay in beautiful hotels. When I come home I want to feel like I'm walking into the Peninsula.'" Krueger, who moved her studio from Lakeview, doubled her staff to four to serve new downtown clients, whom she gets from word-of-mouth referrals. "Clients appreciate the proximity to their work and like the loft style of our office."



Photo by Manuel Martinez "Single-guy" clients like Andy Carter now account for 10 percent of business for interior designers—and 40 percent of billings.

Men spend more and make snap decisions, says Aimee Nemeckay, vice president and senior designer at Fredman Design Group in Lincoln Park and Union Pier, Mich. "If they love it, budget is not as much of an issue: 'If it speaks to me, I buy it.'" Nemeckay says men are specific about a personal aesthetic, the vibe they're giving off. "Male clients say, 'I want my house to feel like this,' which is fun to interpret." Men are also often ahead of the curve with technology, addressing lighting, sound systems and security early in the planning, she says. "We designed a wall for a TV that's not even on the market yet."

It's not just the furnishings that differ with men; designers say their male clients demand an orderly flow to their project. That means set weekly meetings, a top-line progress summary, narrowed choices finalized by designers. "We're making every decision, down to the hinges," says Brunstrum. "We're buying sheets and towels." These clients are on their own once in the home, so designers often create a notebook that explains fabric, counter and wood care and holds user manuals and warranties.

Housing for a collection is another request made by single male clients, so watches, paperweights and sports memorabilia call for custom cases, lighting and prominent placement. For Carter, his collection of Chicago sports teams T-shirts, which he wears when he's not in a suit, needed a space where they could stay neatly folded and stacked. The solution? Narrow closet shelves that hold two T-shirts. "Friends come over and say, 'Dude, that's genius.' "

Designers with single male clients also find themselves aligning televisions to seating, lounging (including the bathtub) and kitchen prep space. TV placement was critical to Carter, who'd spent much of his adult life trying to watch the game playing in the den from the kitchen, so he put a TV in the kitchen. He also had a minifridge installed in the master bedroom, so he wouldn't have to make a late night run to the kitchen two floors below. Says Carter, "Just the other night, I was so tired—I reached for a beer and thought, 'I am so glad I installed this fridge.' "

Sounds like Carter designed the space only for himself, right? Not so. Chiefly he wanted a house that was both classy, comfortable and durable for his 20-something sons and nephew, his septuagenarian mother, women he'll entertain, clients and friends. "I wanted it to be a place where a bunch of different people would say, 'Wow! This place is a knockout,' and who would be comfortable coming over in a tuxedo or jeans."