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Green Designer Interview

Meet Amy Hinck, designer and project manager for Orfield Design & Construction.

Please share your name, title, and a description of your job duties.

My name is Amy Hinck, and I am a designer and project manager for Orfield Design & Construction, Inc. an award-winning residential design/build remodeling company since 1978. I work independently as needed, and with other employees or company owners to meet with clients at their home, draft plans, estimate construction costs, put together contracts, schedule and manage projects, specify and select materials and fixtures, lead on-site walkthroughs, and assist with office administrative duties, marketing, and accounting.

What is a typical day like at your job?

Because we are a smaller company, I get to do a lot of different things, and it varies each day according to the deadlines I have. I usually start by checking my email and then answer any important questions or follow up on what my clients or subcontractors need. Oftentimes, I will have at least one meeting during the day. During an initial sales call, my boss (who does a lot of the same things I do) and I go out to a prospective client's home for the first time to discuss their wants/needs and draw/measure the home and take pictures. Otherwise, my meeting might be at an existing construction project that is in-process, going over aesthetic and dimensional details with a sub-contractor and or owner, making sure what I've designed is implemented properly or figuring out solutions to hidden unforeseen conditions. Another meeting I might have would be presenting initial concept project plans to a client or a price contract for proposed construction. In addition, I schedule and follow up with sub-contractors/vendors regarding bidding projects, current information on projects in progress, communicating this and any changes to clients, creating change orders, punch-lists or invoicing for work completed to date. I may also spend time drawing existing plans, proposed plans and elevations, sections and structural or architectural details for a client. I often research and specify project materials (plumbing fixtures, tile, cabinets, doors & windows, trim, etc.) Occasionally, I do work related to marketing, such as preparing professional photos for local and national award submittals, writing case studies, and communicating with writers/editors on magazine articles as directed.

How did you get started working in this field?

Well, I had a feeling I would be in the construction industry in some way or another because I grew up working with my dad, who is a professional mason. I have always been interested in architecture and drawing and drafting and I am a very visual/spatially oriented person. Orfield happened to be looking for a drafter just after I graduated with

Production Supervisor

my undergraduate degree from the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. I actually found their job posting on the U of M's website and applied, and here I am today!

Recycling Coordinator

Remediation Hydrologist

Supply Chain Analyst

Sustainability
Director/Coordinator

Water Resources
Engineer

What sort of training or education do you have?

I have a Bachelor of Arts degree in Architecture and a minor in Business Management. I also am an Associate Kitchen and Bath Designer certified through the National Kitchen and Bath Association. To receive this accreditation, one must have a certain amount/kind of education (my undergraduate degree fulfilled this requirement), have a few years of work experience in the applicable industry sector, obtain letters of recommendation (thanks to my great boss and subcontractors) and study a huge amount of information on everything possibly related to our construction and design industry, and pass an intensive exam. Most recently, I went through a similar extensive study program and testing process to become a U.S. Green Building Council's LEED® Green Associate™. While I may not be able to certify residential projects with this program, I felt it was important to understand what the standards are in the construction industry as a whole and become involved and to offer more knowledge on what opportunities my company and our clients have to create a greener project.

What sort of tools, machines, or equipment do you use regularly?

I use a computer (PC), running Microsoft Word, Excel, Outlook, Adobe Photoshop, and the internet! Our office is equipped with scanners, color printers, fax machines and postage scales as well. I carry a tape measure, paper, pencils in my purse (smile) and use a drafting table, drafting tools & equipment for plans.

What skills or personal qualities are good for this job?

Math (to calculate dimensions and scale), research, listening, and communication skills are all good to have. Being able to ask questions and listen to people's wishes, while balancing that with educating them on current construction costs and new materials available. Being detailed, organized, patient, a leader, open-minded, reliable, honest, quick on your feet, and confident are some personal qualities that would help you excel. The ability to multi-task and constantly prioritize, daily and even hourly are important. It's also important to have a positive attitude and be willing to think outside the box, and have a natural talent and appreciation of art/color/scale/architecture/design and materials. Have an internal motivation to learn, and contribute to achieving personal goals, and to helping your company grow and facilitate better processes. It's not just about having good ideas, but also the willingness to take on any aspect required to achieve them. Being humble and accepting "everything as your job" goes a long way. Respecting others, no matter what their role, will guarantee reciprocation. It's important to be willing to learn from any resource or trade. Having experience with the residential construction or remodeling industry and being able to artistically and accurately draw is vital.

What do you enjoy most about your job?

Making an impact on someone's life, and seeing how happy and easier their lives will be by changing their home for the better. Creating projects that are both functional and aesthetically pleasing. I love getting a job done on time and making it as cost-effective and easy on my client as I can. Receiving internal commendation from my boss and co-workers on a task well done and receiving external commendation from clients, vendors, and other outside resources is an added bonus!

How does your job benefit the environment?

Instead of building new homes, we make existing homes habitable on current properties, thereby saving on greater material waste, carbon footprints, and a monopoly on natural land. When remodeling, we allow owners to stay in their own homes and thereby reduce the increased costs to them and the environment of moving. This also allows for reuse,

salvage and recycle of many materials. I also have the opportunity to educate/advise clients on environmentally-friendly products, materials, and fixtures and recommended building practices.

Are there any common misconceptions about this type of work?

I never thought I'd still be drafting by hand, with how far technology has come along, but I am, and clients seem to like this rare talent. While the industry is very focused on CAD and most jobs require that experience, it's still very important to be able to draw/sketch on the spot for clients and trades people.

What changes in this field do you expect to see in the future?

I would think that at some point, building code will increasingly follow the guidelines set forth by U.S. Green Building Council's LEED program and the MN GreenStar program. I also think that with iPads and other technology coming out we'll be able to sketch electronically while on-site, give clients estimates faster with new applications that are created, and be able to gain more information about a house with infrared cameras and other tools that will be the norm when they are eventually affordable to all. It also seems that clients tend to do a lot of comparison shopping and researching online, and I think that will only increase with time and clients will be even more knowledgeable and ask for green items to be incorporated.

What is your advice to someone interested in this field?

If you are still in school or just getting started, volunteer for Habitat for Humanity or do informational interviews with people in the field. Get an internship in a design firm, or work as a laborer over the summer to gain experience and see if you like the industry and the various personalities and situations you'll encounter within it. It's okay to not know everything when you graduate from school or first start out. You'll learn an astounding amount of information while working. Find a good mentor and strong network of reliable subcontractors and suppliers, and don't be afraid to ask them questions. I've had the opportunity to work very closely with my bosses who have been in the business for years. You learn certain methods for doing things from them, whether it's related to design, learning how to work better with clients, or handling an on-site issue. I have learned that this field is very team-oriented, and that should be honored for the best end result.

One other thing I learned to do over the years is draw a few options when you're in the early design stage (just real quick with trace paper—nothing fancy). Provide one proposed layout that shows exactly what the client or teacher asked for, and one that thinks outside of the box and really changes things, as if there were no budget or as many constraints, such as structural issues or requests from the instructor or homeowner. It helps you to find different ways to do things and stay creative, and often times you'll end up incorporating some of the new ideas.

Any final thoughts you'd like to add?

This might seem like common sense, but if you like solving puzzles and problems and having some sort of parameters given to you, rather than creating something from scratch, remodeling is probably a good field for you. By the same token, expect the unexpected to come along in some way or another on each project. Nothing is ever perfect, although we can keep trying. Be willing to go with the flow and find resolutions to all sorts of situations and people!