

HOMES

For Black Designers, a Surge of New Visibility and Business is ‘Bittersweet’

Architects and interior designers of color welcome more attention, but feel conflicted over the industry's lack of representation and diversity

By Nancy Keates
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In late May, on a road trip from Cleveland to St. Paul, Minn., Suzanne Rivera and Michael Householder spent time talking about updating the new house they were moving into on the campus of Macalester College, where Ms. Rivera was due to begin her term as president on June 1.

Somewhere in Michigan, their conversation turned to race, amid the news of George Floyd's May 25 killing while in the custody of the Minneapolis police and subsequent wave of protests.

By the time the couple reached their new city, they decided they would hire a Black interior designer.

Mr. Householder says they normally would have found a designer by calling friends, but since they were new to St. Paul, and they wanted a designer of color, he searched online for "African-American interior designers in Twin Cities" and "Black interior decorators in Minnesota," but found only a few blog posts and articles. After reaching out to local design schools and business groups, he finally found a designer whose approach he liked through the Black Interior Designers Network.

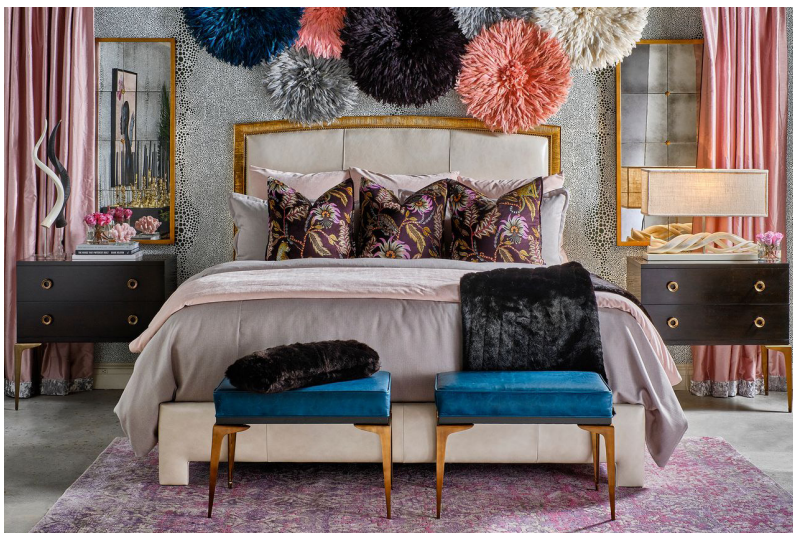
"The one thing we could control right away was where we spent our money," says Ms. Rivera, who is Macalester's first Latina and first female president. "We see this as a small contribution in the effort toward social justice."

Many Black architects and interior designers have experienced a surge in visibility and demand since the end of May, part of a wider focus on diversity in a range of industries. The attention, Black design professionals say, has led to an uptick in invitations to sit on design panels, speaking gigs, features in magazines—and new clients and referrals.



Keia McSwain, who is president of the Black Interior Designers Network, says her work reflects her culture and lifestyle.

PHOTO: WILL STERLING



"This is a grand start to something that could be amazing," says Keia McSwain, owner of Atlanta-based Kimberly & Cameron Interiors and president of the Black Interior Designers Network. Since May, she has gained three new clients who hired her for residential projects, including Ms. Rivera and Mr. Householder. "When I heard how important it was to them to work with a designer of color, I was pleased they were taking that step," she says.

Ms. McSwain says a space she created in High Point, N.C., is reflective of her culture and lifestyle. It includes rich and colorful rooms with paintings by Black artists, pillows and lighting sourced from the indigenous African design-focused Ngala Trading Co., and juju hats from Cameroon. She says all the new attention is bittersweet. "We've been trying for 10 years to encourage the design industry and clients to partner with Black designers," she says. "We are now noticing an influx in attention from white counterparts who are finally lending an ear to what we have to say. There was a serious lack of representation. I often share with people it's hard not to look back."



Linda Hayslett of Los Angeles-based LH.Designs, says her Instagram followers have more than tripled since the end of May.

PHOTO: CHRISTOPHER LEE

Designers welcome the interest, but still feel resentment at the historic lack of representation of Black designers and architects. They also want to make sure people are seeking them out for the quality of their work.

"I don't want someone to hire me just because I'm Black," says Eneia White of New York-based Eneia White Interiors, who gained 3,000 new Instagram followers in a week. "I don't specifically market myself as a Black-owned business. The new business I have comes from people liking the quality of my work."

Kiyonda Powell, of Washington, D.C.-based Kiyonda Powell Design Studio, agrees. "The events of the last few weeks have indirectly amplified many Black designers," she says. "I am happy to be included and grow a wider audience, but I admit it feels bittersweet in the current climate of social injustice."

Johanna Howard's Montclair, N.J.-based home company Johanna Howard Home has seen online orders for its décor products go from one or two a week to five to 10 a day, including one 48-hour period in which they got 100 orders. She attributes this to the doubling of her Instagram followers since early June. She has also doubled her new clients in her trade business. "What catches their eye is a desire for a Black-owned business," she says.

When Keisha Gilchrist started her design and real-estate firm outside Washington, D.C., she used "K" instead of "Keisha" on her business cards because she worried clients wouldn't hire her if they knew she was Black. Since the protests, she got two new projects where the clients said they hired her because they liked her aesthetics—and because she is Black.



Ms. Gilchrist designed this kitchen recently finished home in Davidsonville, Md., using cabinets from Reico Kitchen & Bath, marble counters, a marble backsplash and chandeliers by Palecek.

PHOTO: AMANDA HEPTINSTALL

For Nicole White, owner of Nicole White Design Interiors near Fort Lauderdale, Fla., the first sign of change was on social media when she got 10,000 new Instagram followers in one week in early June. "That kind of flood is what will bring new clients," says Ms. White. She says she has gained new business from around the country in the past month.

However, she says, she suspects most of the people are now calling her not only because they are specifically looking for a Black designer, but because they didn't know her firm existed and just found out by seeing shares of her posts. "I believe clients are just happy to see there's diversity among interior designers across the country and that's likely pushed some off the fence to decide to hire us. Most would never know Black designers exist from the design publications. The lack of diversity there has been an offensive pill to swallow over the years," she says. Ms. White's style is evident in a space she designed for herself that she calls a "mom cave." Filled with colorful art, dark walls, lots of books and comfortable furnishings, it is intimate and warm.

"It keeps growing," says Linda Hayslett of Los Angeles-based LH.Designs, whose Instagram followers surged by 3,000 in one day, more than tripling since the end of May. One new client who called, a Black couple with three children building a new house in Santa Monica, told her they wanted to support a Black designer and have now asked their contractor to try to hire Black subcontractors and workers for their project. Ms. Hayslett describes her style as both warm and modern. She says most of the people calling her now about projects are Black people who didn't know Black designers existed. "They didn't realize we are there," she says.



Keisha Gilchrist, a former advertising executive who is also a licensed real-estate broker and general contractor, started a design and real-estate firm outside Washington, D.C.

PHOTO: JPIX PHOTOGRAPHERS

She says she doesn't feel the new interest is necessarily an assessment of her value, and ideally she would like to be judged on the merit of her work. At the same time, she feels the playing field hasn't been equal for Black designers. She understands that it has never just been about the quality of work and race has always played a role. She plans to put her full name on her cards.

Janelle Harris picked Ms. Gilchrist because she loves her style—but also because of her name. "I was thinking, if I choose someone named Keisha, I think that person might be Black," says Ms. Harris, a video media producer who hired Ms. Gilchrist to work on the interior design of a new house she is building in Tacoma Park, Md. As a Black entrepreneur herself, she has long supported hiring Black businesses, but the protests made her decisions more intentional.

There is no question the fields of architecture and interior design lack diversity. According to the American Institute of Architects, only 2% of its members are African-American. The American Society of Interior Designers reports that Black designers account for less than 2% of its membership. Both organizations have announced in recent weeks they are examining steps to advance racial justice and equity in their industries. The AIA will be taking a look at system changes in areas such as governance, board appointments, workplace culture, committees, awards, juries, business practices, and staffing to ensure the profession has a diverse group of leaders, according to a spokesman. "We realize we have a lot of work to do as a profession, and it is our responsibility to step up as an association," says ASID's interim CEO, Gary Wheeler.

Design magazines also see a need for more diversity. "We are committed to supporting and amplifying underrepresented voices on every one of our platforms; to providing resources for our readers who wish to be better allies; and to leading efforts and conversations to foster much-needed diversity in the design industry," says an Architectural Digest statement.



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These steps need to be big and concrete, says Jack Travis, a well-known Black architect who is also an adjunct professor at four design schools in New York City, including Pratt Institute and the Fashion Institute of Technology. "I worry that although well intended, it may not be enough."

"People are reacting with performance, when it is more important for everyone to take a pause and reflect on strategic changes they can make," says Samantha Josaphat, a prominent Black architect and founder of Brooklyn-based firm Studio 397 Architecture. She is advocating for educational changes in architecture and design, such as widening the focus beyond Eurocentric design and increasing financial opportunities to a broader range of students and professionals.

Elizabeth Margles, vice president of marketing for quartz manufacturing company Caesarstone, says the racial justice protests shocked her into an awakening about racial inequalities in the areas she oversees in her company. While her company has joined with designers from around the world, none have been Black. Ms. Margles, who is white, says she wants to showcase a Black designer at one of the major design shows, and remove requirements that might block Black designers from becoming more closely tied to the company. "I need to broaden my personal view," she says.

Write to Nancy Keates at nancy.keates@wsj.com