

INTERNATIONAL FURNISHINGS AND DESIGN ASSOCIATION

# NEW ENGLAND

Quarter 2 | 2016

{ PRESERVING  
HISTORIC CHARM }

SUPER CHIC  
STORAGE SOLUTIONS

IFDA'S RESPONSE TO HB2

IFDA International  
Platinum Sponsors

THE  
SHADE  
STORE

sunbrella™





## A DESIGNER'S PERSPECTIVE ON CO-OPS

Michele Zajkowski is an accomplished Interior Designer practicing in Portland, Maine and the greater New England area. A Residential Interiors graduate of Boston Architectural College, she decided to go to design school after remodeling two older homes (c. 1912, and c. 1930) in the Mountain View Park neighborhood of Cape Elizabeth, Maine. In 2014, she started her interior design business, Ocean View Designs, LLC, after her husband's colleague asked for design help with the remodel of their coastal home. After research and consideration, Michele decided to join a co-op with Annie Stickney Designs, LLC, James Light Interiors, and Annie K Designs, LLC – their co-op is called Studio 416. IFDA-NE Board Member, Gloria Robertson asked Michele about her decision to join a co-op.

**GR: What were some of your main considerations before deciding to join a co-op?**

*MZ: Location of co-op, is the location convenient for both designers and clients? Start up costs expenses, rent and insurance. Shared decisions of how the office will look and be organized – could we all decide on lighting, desks, bookcases, fabric and wallpaper storage, what kind of printer? – little things like the coffee machine, water, microwave. Does the location need a little landscaping outside? Who will plow the snow? Is there ample parking for designers, clients and vendors when they visit? Will FedEx and UPS deliver to your location? As residential designers, the location on the first floor was important because of deliveries,*



taking samples in and out of the office – even the occasional piece of furniture you may take for a client to be upholstered needs to fit in your office and be stored safely.

We are a co-op of four (4) designers who each have an independent design business (i.e. LLC or Sole Proprietor). Marketing/branding and website costs are each designer's own responsibility. We do not market ourselves as Studio 416.

### **What are some of the challenges of being part of a co-op?**

Managing shared expenses, trash and dirty dishes. Keeping the office tidy and presentable. Designers are in many places in a day, not always in the office – sometimes getting everyone together for a meeting with a vendor or an office meeting can be challenging with everyone's schedules. For example, last summer, I missed a group meeting we had planned a couple of weeks out – I was in the ER with my son. Another designer filled me in on the meeting the next day and I was able to write checks for all of the expenses we needed to cover. Be flexible.

### **What are some advantages of joining a co-op?**

Professionally, each designer has their own perspective and brings their personal experiences and design style which helps broaden all our horizons. Not working alone and having other designers to share and critique your designs - the ability to bounce ideas/experiences around.

We are all learning from each other. Designer camaraderie – everyone has a different style but we share the same goals.

Getting out of your house, getting dressed and having a real office to go to! Design related items are shipped to the office not your house!

A co-op is a wonderful tool when setting up accounts with vendors – it allows us greater buying power, better customer service and vendors will meet with us in our office. We are taken seriously as a group of designers. Each vendor is different, it will take some research and one designer may have to take responsibility of a vendor account.

Flexibility, you work for yourself and can make your own hours. I have two extremely busy teenagers, and sometimes, I have to work around their schedules. Occasionally, I have to work at night or on weekends – that's my juggling act as a working mother. I try not to miss a hockey, lacrosse, baseball game or music concert because I work for myself – I have that option.

### **In what ways do you feel being a co-op member has broadened your business skills?**

Shared rent, expenses and a full designer library at your disposal are a big financial advantage for both new and veteran designers. Each designer has a Rolodex of trade professionals that they prefer to work with and have built relationships with over the



years – as a designer in a co-op you can share your preferred contacts.

Let's be honest, the business of design is 20% design and 80% paperwork! The opportunity to ask other designers questions on pricing, mark-ups, invoicing, contracts and billing practices sharpens individual business skills. We all make mistakes – that's how we learn...but they can be costly in this business – working with other designers in a co-op helps lessen the fear of making one. Working in this co-op gives to so many advantages to strengthen my design skills.

*Pearls of wisdom shared.*



**What would you say to a new designer considering joining a co-op?**

*Open your heart, be generous, and a good team player. This is not for competitive spirits – remember there is plenty to share. Be honest and evaluate your financial situation before joining. We all share in each other's success – we are each other's cheerleaders. Are you open to other design styles, comments, criticism and praise?*

**What design strengths only got better as part of being part of a co-op?**

*The business side of design - taking more chances with design choices. The ability for your design style to evolve – design confidence.*

**How will being part of a co-op strengthen your long-term career goals?**

*It allows you to grow professionally and chart your career path based on what you learn from others. It should be financially advantageous if done correctly.*

---

*Interview conducted by Gloria Robertson, VP of Education.*