

Hudson design firm helped clients get cozy with their homes to thrive during COVID

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Contributed photo

Laura Yeager Smith, surrounded by some of her design work.

Laura Yeager Smith Home & Design was already growing in Hudson when the pandemic struck.

Then business really took off.

Smith, an Ohio State University-educated interior designer, said she had grown her firm, which she established in 2014, to 10 people when COVID began spreading in early 2020. Today, the firm has 19 people and is looking for more.

At the start of the pandemic, she said, "I was like everyone else: fearful. But my industry was affected differently. ... People wanted to invest in their homes and make it feel like a resort. So, our business came out of that stronger and our relationships with clients were stronger, too."

Smith came to Hudson via the long way from Mentor, where she was born, and Cleveland, where she was raised. After graduating from Ohio State, she worked for some designers in Columbus, then went to San Francisco and its high-end work, then back to Ohio, to Virginia and finally back to Ohio, in Hudson.

It all helped her to become a better designer and to start building a list of clients around the country, especially in and around northern California, she said.

"We did projects that ranged from San Francisco penthouses to Lake Tahoe family homes," Smith said.

In 2014, she rented a small building in downtown Hudson, then hired a part-time employee to help her. But her needs quickly grew, she said, and so did her payroll and her footprint in town.

"I slowly took over the building and bought the land," Smith said.

She bought that first building, which is 4,000 square feet in size. Then she bought an adjacent building, this one about 2,700 square feet, and opened a curated home design store in July 2022.

The store, which employs three of her people, is not only a retail outlet producing some extra revenue, but also a place where Smith's design firm can illustrate design concepts and show off products it might recommend to clients, she said.

"We do a lot of space planning with builders and architects in Northeast Ohio," Smith said. "Now we can show them curated rooms."

Smith said her business is mostly local, but she still stays active nationally with some of her previous clients.

"I would say maybe 20% of our work is in Hudson, and then another 60% is in Northeast Ohio. The other 20% is all over the country," Smith said. "It could be a client we've worked with in the past who has a vacation home."

Smith said she wouldn't be opposed to working on an apartment project, or a conversion of an office building to apartments, but so far she has not done that and has focused on single-family homes.

"Mainly because the opportunity hasn't presented itself," Smith said.

She also doesn't need to chase that work, in part because she's finding plenty to do already, especially in far-flung suburbs to the east and south of Cleveland, like Hudson, Hunting Valley, Gates Mills and other high-income communities.

Currently, Smith said she's working on a 15,000-square-foot home in Hunting Valley.

"We've been working on that project since 2019. ... It's set to be completed this summer," she said.

That's a massive project, but most of the work her firm does is substantial, Smith said.

It's also, as one might guess, not cheap. Smith said her projects start at six figures, and many go past \$1 million.

That's not a phenomenon limited to Smith, either. High-net-worth homeowners have been a good source of business for designers, remodelers and contractors generally, and the pandemic only increased their desire to improve their homes, according to Smith and others that cater to that segment of the industry.

"We not only survived the pandemic, we thrived," said Ken Badalamenti, owner and president of Alair Homes Solon.

Badalamenti said his company had already embraced remote work before the pandemic, so it transitioned easily to new work-from-home rules while it took advantage of increased demand.

A strong stock market before the pandemic meant that many clients paid cash for even expensive renovations, while others took advantage of historic low interest rates to finance them, Badalamenti said. Guest suites and home offices were popular, he said, but so were kitchen remodeling projects and other improvements.

"Demand for renovations grew exponentially in spite of the shortages of materials and the challenges of shipping and lead times,"

Badalamenti said. "So, what was crucial was managing clients' expectations and scheduling in a way that we could accommodate these issues, especially with lead times. It really drove when we started projects in order to eliminate down time."

Nestor Papageorge, president at Alexandra Fine Homes in Chagrin Falls, agreed and said he's also been busy with projects. That includes work he does with Smith's firm, he said.

"She does a lot of our design work," Papageorge said. "We do mostly custom new construction. We've done several (renovations) with her as well."

Papageorge said Smith presents outstanding designs and makes it easier for clients and contractors to work through a growing number of options when it comes to materials, fixtures and other features — something he said the store in Hudson helps accomplish.

"They're great. They're very organized, and they work well with different personalities," Papageorge said. "I think their team works well to follow the client's needs, and I think they get their taste and what the client is after, like we do when we design the home, and then elevate it. ... It's also a lot of work to sift through all the various options available, and they're really good at that."