

# perspective

2008  
POWER  
OF DESIGN

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INTERNATIONAL  
INTERIOR DESIGN  
ASSOCIATION

**Back in the 1980s, Cary Johnson, FIIDA, LEED AP,**

was asked for a simple favor by colleague Spes Mekus, IIDA, now of Tanager Design Group. Mekus, active in the Illinois Interior Design Coalition, requested that Johnson join her and offer a little assistance getting legislation passed in the state.

Now, more than 20 years later, that favor is still being carried out. Illinois passed its interior design title act in 1990, but the coalition – still with Johnson's support – continues to fight to protect that legislation.

True, it took some positive peer pressure to first get Johnson involved, but he soon realized on his own the necessity of interior design legislation. "It's important for the public to have a way of discerning whether the [design] professionals they are considering are qualified to do the job," he says. The realization that poor service places lives at risk was the driving factor in his decision to fight for regulation.

Johnson found one of his most prized supporters to be Timothy Hennessey, the coalition's original lobbyist. It was Hennessey's

experience in association management, public relations strategies, executive and financial management, and strategic planning that helped map out a strategy for dealing with legislators. Hennessey introduced Johnson to appropriate supporters and helped handle the opposition. "Lobbyists know what legislators are all about, and can identify committee members that are critical to convince and which legislators should be your sponsors on the legislative floor," he says.

One of Johnson's priorities was communicating with those who opposed legislation: end-users, the general public and other design professionals, many of whom did not understand what Interior Design involves, nor how regulation improves accountability. He scheduled one-on-one meetings to help educate the opposition and conducted public forums where issues were brought to the table and noted for later legislative meetings. The information gathered was then used to tweak the bill's wording to address the opposition's issues.

Johnson was also charged with defining



Cary Johnson,  
FIIDA, LEED AP

**Cary Johnson, FIIDA, LEED AP, Senior Associate, Gensler, Chicago**

**Years in the profession:** 36

**Legislation:** Illinois title act, 1990

**Coalition:** Illinois Interior Design Coalition

**State board:** Illinois Department of Financial and Professional Regulation

**Additional involvement:** International Building Code

which specific professions would fall under the act. "Crafting legislation wording so that other design professionals weren't compromised was an important part in dealing with the opposition," he says. To avoid disenfranchising

certain individuals, the proposed legislation incorporated the words "or equal" when referring to a specific qualification, such as the National Council for Interior Design Qualification (NCIDQ). That way, professionals