

## Architect, or Whatever



Michael Hanson for The New York Times

**BARGAIN BASEMENT** John Morefield is one of thousands of unemployed designers who are reinventing themselves. Last year, he put up a booth at a farmers' market in Seattle, advertising his skills for a nickel, and ended up earning more than \$50,000 in commissions.

By KRISTINA SHEVORY

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At the Ballard Farmers' Market in Seattle on a recent weekend, passers-by could be forgiven for thinking John Morefield was running for political office. Smiling, waving and calling out hellos to everyone who walked by his stand, he was the picture of friendliness. All he needed was campaign buttons and fliers.



Sally Ryan for The New York Times

Unable to find design work, Richard Chuk of Illinois, above, began truck-driving school this month.



Stephanie Diani for The New York Times



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Natasha Case and Freya Estreller have an ice cream truck in Los Angeles.

In fact, Mr. Morefield, 29, is no politician, but an architectural designer looking for work. He was seated at a homemade wooden stand under a sign reading “Architecture 5¢,” with a tin can nearby awaiting spare change. For a nickel, he would answer any architectural question.

In 2008, Mr. Morefield lost his job — twice — and thought he could ride out the recession doing design work for friends and family, but when those jobs dried up, he set up his stand. As someone in his 20s without many contacts or an extensive portfolio, he thought he might have an easier time finding clients on his own.

“I didn’t know what I was going to do,” Mr. Morefield said. “I had no other option. The recession was a real kick in the shorts, and I had to make this work.”

A troubled economy and the implosion of the real estate market have thrown thousands of architects and designers out of work in the last

year or so, forcing them to find or create jobs. According to the latest data available from the Department of Labor, employment at American architecture firms, which peaked last July at 224,500, had dropped to 184,600 by November.

“It’s hard to find a place to hide when the economy goes down,” said Kermit Baker, the chief economist at the [American Institute of Architects](#). “There aren’t any strong sectors now.”

And it’s not clear when the industry will recover. Architecture firms are still laying off employees, and Mr. Baker doesn’t expect them to rehire until billings recover, which he thinks won’t be until the second half of this year at the earliest.

In the meantime, many of those who have been laid off are discovering new talents often unrelated to architecture.

When Natasha Case, 26, lost her job as a designer at [Walt Disney Imagineering](#) about a year ago, she and her friend Freya Estreller, 27, a real estate developer, started a business selling Ms. Case’s homemade [ice cream](#) sandwiches in Los Angeles. Named for architects like [Frank Gehry](#) (the strawberry ice cream and sugar cookie Frank Behry) and [Mies van der Rohe](#) (the vanilla bean ice cream and chocolate chip cookie Mies Vanilla Rohe), they were an immediate hit.

“I feel this is a good time to try new things,” said Ms. Case, who did a project on the intersection of food and architecture while studying for her master’s in architecture at the [University of California](#), Los Angeles, in 2008. “You do things you always wanted to do, something you’ve always been passionate about.”

Since she and Ms. Estreller rolled out their truck, Coolhaus, at the [Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival](#) near Palm Springs last April, they’ve catered events for Mr. Gehry’s office, Walt Disney Imagineering and the Disney Channel.

Their initial investment was low: they bought a 20-year-old postal van on [Craigslist](#) and had it retrofitted and painted silver and bubblegum pink, all for \$10,000. With seven full- and part-time employees, they now make enough to support themselves and have

plans to expand (a Hamptons truck is in the works and they are trying to get their products into [Whole Foods](#) stores).

Leigh Ann Black was working as an architectural designer in Seattle when she lost her job over a year ago. After a long struggle to find work, she finally moved back to her hometown of Water Valley, Miss., in June, to take care of her sick grandmother.

Ms. Black, 30, is now living above her parents' garage, but she finally has time to indulge her love of pottery. She recently converted an old horse barn on her family's farm into a studio, plans to apprentice with local potters and has applied to several post-baccalaureate ceramics programs, with the hope of selling her wares at farmers' markets and someday teaching art.

“This is not where I imagined I'd be when I turned 30, but I feel really inspired being back,” she said. “There's something about being with family and not feeling upset about meeting rent, car payment and groceries every month. Now I have some breathing room.”

When Debi van Zyl, 33, was laid off by a small residential design firm in Los Angeles in May, she decided to do freelance design work for as long as she could, and she picked up jobs doing exhibition design for the Getty and Huntington museums. In her spare time, to relax, she started knitting what she describes as “kooky” stuffed animals like octopuses and [jellyfish](#). Then, at the urging of the readers of [her blog](#), she began selling them on Etsy. Les Petites Bêtes Sauvages, as she calls them, have helped her pay the rent and other bills for the last few months.

“You think you're in charge of your profession, and then the recession hits and you realize that your career is market driven,” Ms. van Zyl said. “It's forced me to push myself and become more individual. My motto is don't say no to anything.”

Richard Chuk, of Lombard, Ill., said that since he lost his position as a commercial designer a year ago, when two of his firm's clients — both developers — lost financing for their projects, he has been looking for any job he can find to support his wife and children, ages 6 and 7.

Mr. Chuk, 38, began his job search in a good mood because of the wave of optimism surrounding the presidential election. During the

first three months, he sent out nearly 150 résumés, applying for many jobs he was overqualified for. (Sears, [Home Depot](#) and [Lowe's](#) all turned him down for jobs as a designer because he was overqualified, he said.) He had only one interview.

After that, he said, he applied for the rare job that popped up but spent most of his time taking care of his children, studying for his architectural licensing exam and renovating his basement.

This month, he began commercial truck driving school.

“You feel this year of your life is gone,” Mr. Chuk said. “It’s lost wages and lost experiences. But you have to keep positive and move forward. I look at this as an education. It opens up more doors and you never know when it’ll help you.”

As for Mr. Morefield, the architect in Seattle, he started his booth (and a Web site, [architecture5cents.com](#)) with the hope that it would bring in sufficient income to get by until he could find another job. As it turned out, he received so many commissions — to build a two-story addition, a deck, a master bedroom — that he realized he could make plenty of money working for himself.

Last year, he made more than \$50,000 — the highest salary he ever made working for someone else — and he expects to do even better this year.

“It’s developed into what I was supposed to do,” he said. “It’s a lot of work, it’s scary, but I love every minute of it. If someone offered me \$80,000 to sit behind a computer, I wouldn’t do it.”