

BANKER & TRADESMAN

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IN PERSON

The Science Of Design

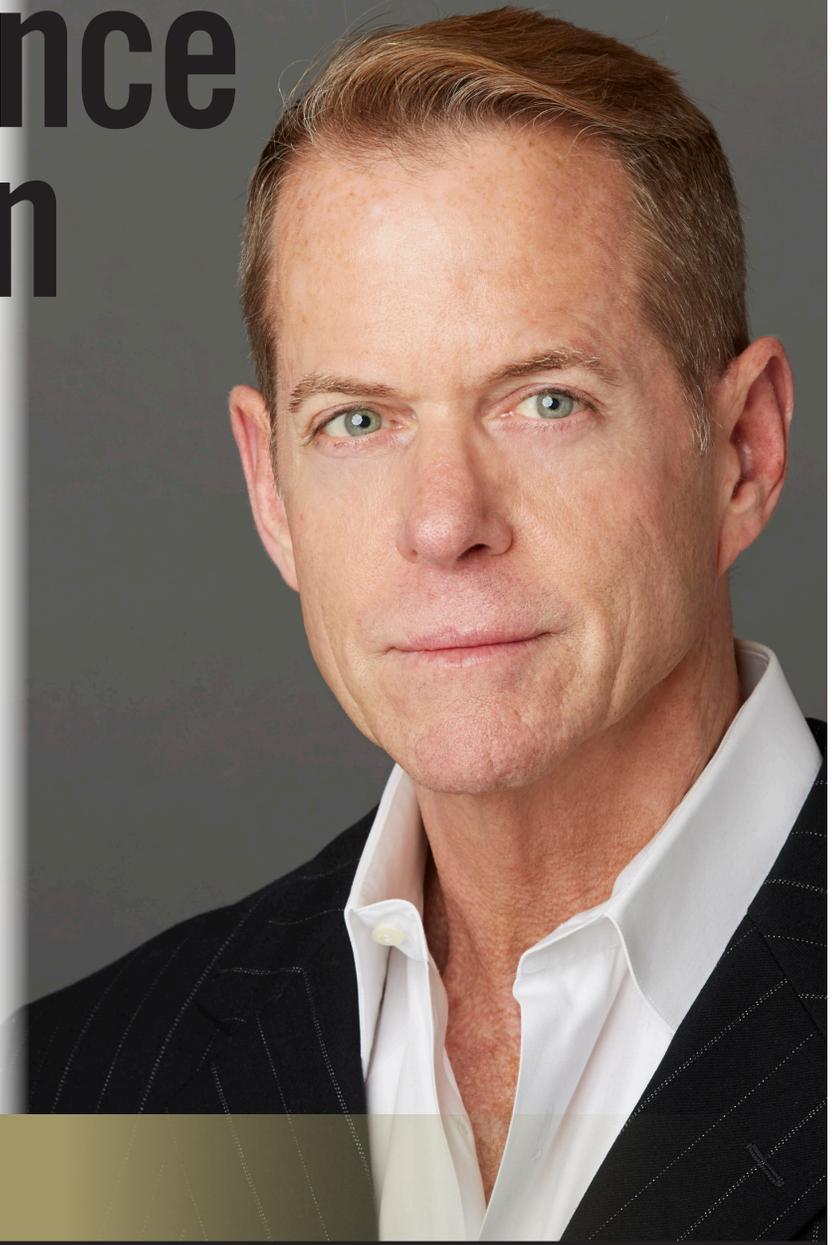
BY ANNA SIMS | BANKER & TRADESMAN STAFF

Dennis Duffy, principal of Duffy Design Group, entered college planning to go to medical school. But when, by chance, he stumbled into the world of interior design, he knew he'd found a much better fit. Duffy recently sat down with Banker & Tradesman to discuss his time in the field he calls "the perfect balance of science and art."

Dennis Duffy

Title: Principal, Duffy Design Group

Experience: 28 years



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Q: You studied chemistry and biology at the University of Miami. How did you become involved in design?

A: I was planning to go to medical school – I was kind of being pushed in that direction and had always been good at science – then, this sort of personal situation happened. ... That put the skids everything and I said, “I’m not really sure I want to do this ... I’m just going to take some time off and decide.”

A friend of mine worked in the Design District in Miami in sales, and he asked me just to cover for him. And I said, “Well I don’t know anything about interior design” – I’d never even heard of it, actually. ... He said, “You just have to be intelligent, and answer the questions and be able to do customer service.” So, I did that for like three weeks, and it was just such a fascinating world. It was so far removed from chemistry that it was like another planet.

Q: Is there any overlap between your science background and your design work?

A: Oh, yes. I mean, it is a very visual profession. You have to think abstractly about conceptual space and conceptual form, but you also have to understand the technology. ... As [interior designers], we don’t alter any structure; we have to understand the structure. We have to understand the mechanical systems, all those things. You didn’t have to back when I started this, but now you do. So it’s kind of interesting. I also use the logical sequence problem-solving [process] in the way that I approach my projects. ... One of the

great things about interiors, whether it’s commercial or residential, but especially residential, you have to be able to listen. You have to hear what they say, and what they don’t say.

Q: Do you prefer working on residential or commercial spaces?

A: I always like to have a balance of both. Right now, we’re doing more commercial than residential, but there are always at least two or three clients in residential. Actually, I would love to do hospitality design. One of the things we do a lot of, we do a lot of multifamily development projects, and we focus primarily on the amenity areas, so like the club room, the hospitality areas. I’ve done a couple of restaurants [and] a small hotel. It’s so much about form and function because the function is so specific. Even just designing the wait stations and the back bar, you know, behind the service bars, there is so much function that has to go into that. It has to fit like a glove. And yet it is entertainment. All said and done, you are seducing the customer. You have to support the food with this experience. I love that.

Q: How did you end up in Boston?

A: I opened my office in New York probably in 1987. Then hit the recession in 1990, and I went, “Oh my God, no one told me about this. There was no textbook about this.” I didn’t know what to do. ... So, ultimately, long story short, a client that I’d done a big renovation for in New York – they’re opera patrons, that’s why they had this place in New York – they lived in San

Juan. So they said, “We’re thinking about tearing our house down. We really love the site [and] we want to rebuild. Would you work with us on this, with [our] architect?” And I said, “Would I? I’ll be on the next flight. Really, how fast can I pack?” So, I did that, and that was a three- to four- year project, because things don’t move that quickly in the Caribbean. ... Ultimately, I had a very dear friend who moved [to Boston], and I had come to help her with her space. She convinced me that I couldn’t live on an island forever. ... So, I decided to try Boston, and here I am.

Boston has changed a great deal. Even in the 17, 18 years I’ve been here, it’s changed tremendously. People’s awareness of design [has changed] and it’s much a more modern-focused city than it used to be.

Q: Tell us about your community service work.

A: We try to look for venues or organizations that can use our services, so I’ve worked with Room To Dream. They create spaces for generally young kids that have illnesses, and they are being treated, generally in underprivileged homes. We come in, and we kind of create their kind of dream environment, which is therapeutic and healing. ... We have to take into consideration their treatments, whether they have oxygen or the different needs they have, disabilities they might have. So, I love doing that. ... I’m [also] very committed to HIV/AIDS research. ... I think [when] the universe gives stuff to you, you have to give back. ■

DUFFY’S TOP FIVE MOVIES:

- 1 *Avatar*
- 2 *The English Patient*
- 3 *Suddenly Last Summer*
- 4 *Cosmos – A Personal Voyage*
- 5 *Doctor Zhivago*

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