

Opinions

6 strategies for managing the design process

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To make your design project successful, set clear expectations and guidelines for your team.



By **Becca Chester**

[In a previous column](#), I offered guidelines on how to find a suitable designer for your project. Below are some strategies that will help with the management of the design process. Note that not all administrative issues are discussed, but crucial elements are highlighted.

Define the roles

The interior designer is but one member of a creative team. To start out on the right foot, it's important to ensure that the roles are well-defined between the players. Once you've appointed the designer, it is time to organize the other consultants and begin the process.

"It is better to first get the right people on the bus, the wrong people off the bus, and the right people in the right seats, and then figure out where to drive." —Jim C. Collins, *Good to Great*

A tool that's often introduced during the RFP process is the responsibility matrix or differentiation document. This graphic spreadsheet helps define the role of each team player and their interface with rest of the team, as well as the deliverable items required. An overall protocol or flow chart should be set in place for all communication between team members, especially with regard to reviews and approvals.

Team effort

Meetings should be scheduled with the interior designer and the majority of the consultants at development milestones. These progress meetings should occur at the 50% and 100% completion points of the schematic, design development and construction document stages of the project.

The progress meetings should occur without any distracting communication to the outside world: phones turned off and no checking of emails, except during agreed-upon, scheduled short breaks. Without interruptions, there is focus, resulting in greater productivity.

"Design is not just what it looks like and feels like. Design is how it works." —Steve Jobs

Sidebars with separate team members should be held at these meetings to allow for important coordination work. For instance, M&E may require ducting to run across a ceiling space; the interior designer can offer solutions, such as incorporating the duct into a soffit that enhances a space, consistent with the overall look. A meeting at the project's inception between the designer and the purchasing agent to review potential suppliers can eliminate wasted time and resources later in the process.

Design reviews

Presentations by the designer should be scheduled in advance of progress meetings, with a limited audience of the client, operator and the client's design manager.

Reviewing the status of the design against the established goals is crucial at these times. Items approved, critiqued and adjusted accordingly can be presented again and reviewed for coordinated solutions at the progress meetings. Bear in mind that at times the designers may present an element that does not seem to match the client's goal and the client might not immediately appreciate its value. If the concept seems to have potential merit, it should be given fair consideration.

Large samples

Any finish can look great when shown in a small piece, but unexpected surprises in the overall pattern may show up later in the final installation. To avoid this problem, the designer should provide large samples, including:

- Full-scale samples of tile laid out on the floor to view the overall pattern;
- 3-yard samples of wall covering to pin up on the walls and flooded floor plans; and
- full-scale printouts of public space carpeting.

"A designer knows he has achieved perfection not when there is nothing left to add, but when there is nothing left to take away." —Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

From time to time, the designer may enthusiastically load the design with many terrific ideas jammed into one space. Although one can appreciate the effort extended, it's crucial to view the design work in its context. There should be one, or possibly two, iconic elements as the "stars" of the show, with other design concepts playing the supporting roles. If there are too many strong design elements competing for attention, they will tend to clash, negate one another and, overall, create a very chaotic vision.

White box

If the project is a hotel, a model guestroom is implemented well ahead of the schedule of other areas of the property. Evaluate the room first without the distractions of the furniture, art and accessory items. A "white box" review is a modeling of the architectural shell, which includes the finishes (paint, flooring, countertops, etc.), as well as all electrical and mechanical elements.

"A camel is a horse designed by a committee." —Sir Alec Issigonis

Clear the room

The average layperson doesn't typically offer opinions on how plumbing is engineered nor how the drywall is attached to a building. However, when it comes to interior design, it seems that



everyone has an opinion, and most are happy to voice it.

For the final model room and the majority of the design reviews, it is crucial to clear the room of anyone not relevant to the process. Otherwise, little or no progress will be made. Disintegration into aesthetic arguments over color choices and personal preferences jeopardize the reviews.

The owner, design manager, operator and designer should all be present; other members of the team can be invited, but should be asked to limit their comments to their field of expertise. The operator is key, as he will be aware of considerations not always obvious to the designer or the owner. The experienced design manager provides an oversight and view of things that may not be immediately apparent to the owner, operator or designer.

Proper management of the design is fundamental to the successful realization of the owner's vision.

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