

Process vs. Progress

Has the design process evolved? How? The pros weigh in ...

By **CHRISTINA TRAUTHWEIN**

Hotel Business Design gathered together eight members of the design community during HD Boutique in September for its Executive Roundtable to discuss the evolution of the design process and, more specifically, key points affecting that all-important aspect of their jobs. The participants were asked questions by *Hotel Business Design's* Allen Roller, which addressed issues ranging from technology and its impact on the design process to collaboration both within and across disciplines to the amount of time devoted to each project. The group was not shy; the answers were candid and personal—and even sparked some friendly debate among the peers. And though there were many common themes that popped up during the 90-minute discussion, one clear message stood out: For the design process to go more smoothly, they urged, “Respect our expertise and time.”

Held at Z Ocean Hotel in Miami, the panel included: Robert Laschever and Toby Schermerhorn, Cauhaus Design; David Messersmith, Feltus-Hawkins Design; Nicole Gould, Hospitality Furnishings & Design; Mary MacDonald, Macci Design; Teri D'Amico, D'Amico Design Associates; Randi Rodriguez, Gettys; and Brooke Pearsall, HVS Design. The Roundtable was sponsored by Valley Forge Fabrics, Aqua Hospitality Carpets and Kohler Company.

Most of us would probably agree that technology has helped streamline our jobs. But, many would also assert that it can create undue pressure in terms of instant-access, when we already have busy schedules. The members of this Roundtable spoke frankly about this, emphasizing that the ever-increasing involvement of technology in the design process has been both a blessing and a curse.

“One of the interesting things about technology is that the advent of computers started to make owners and clients think that design can be pumped out far more quickly and easily; that somehow the computer is thinking for us and that somewhere, there are these wonderful ideas buried deep within the machine that we can pull up,” said Laschever. “But hospitality design is a very tactile, interactive process, and if you're not out there experiencing light and sun and people, I think you're missing something. Sadly, a lot of kids coming out of school who have been brought up on the computer think abstract lines represent life and living and, in fact, it's far from the truth. Yes, we can do a lot more with technology, but the downsides are interesting.”

Pearsall agreed with Laschever about today's young designers. “When they're directly out of school, I almost have to make them step away from the computer because they

think if their computer can't do it, it can't be done. Sometimes, you have to be willing to get out sketch paper. Ideas are still a birthing process that come with a lot of research and brainstorming and through experiences.”

Added Schermerhorn, “I loved the world before the fax machine. We used to hand-draw things. Now, everything is in real time, which has put an immense amount of pressure on us in terms of meeting deadlines.”

But, as D'Amico pointed out, “Computers are great for repetitive work, for guestrooms. The ‘old school’ would say young designers are not creative, but they need to be because with computers, it's garbage in, garbage out. You really can't be vague; you have to be detailed with renderings. The best part is, you can then PDF the design to clients and it goes right out. Information comes in fast these days, so you have to expect it to go out fast.”

And one of the main advantages of technology, said D'Amico, is “your library. You don't have to redo your bookshelves to update, you just go in and download.” She also pointed out that it's just a tool. “As a designer, I don't have to measure and divide in my head so I get that perfect geometry. Students still need to learn how to draw, but computers do save time.”

Laschever cautioned, though, not to let computers create a disconnect with the goal. “With a computer, it's like an idea and—bam! Like my brain doesn't have that moment of reflection and pause. Are you really thinking about what you're doing? It's not to create beautiful CAD drawings or images on our screens. Ultimately, it's to create places and spaces for people. I think computer drawings sometimes look better than how they represent that space in reality.”

MacDonald went a bit further, believing that minimalist design is a result of CAD. “We're supposed to be lifestyle designers. Designers and architects love square lines, but the people who walk into these spaces are uncomfortable.”

And because the level of communication is now 24/7, the owner's, manager's and brand's involvement in the design process seems to have increased as well, forcing designers to more thoroughly manage expectations. But how involved are they—and do they aid or challenge the process?

Over-involved?

Said Messersmith, “We actually had a client ask us if we really needed to send our team out to his property to see it. He said that, surely, we can do this over the computer. The thing is, we're creating environments that have to resonate with the guest and that's hard to do over a computer. Clients have a hard time, especially in this newer age of technology, knowing what good design involves. And it's a lot more than sitting at a computer.”



**Randi Rodriguez
Gettys**



**Nicole Gould
Hospitality Furnishings & Design**



**David Messersmith
Feltus-Hawkins Design**



**Mary MacDonald
Macci Design**

"It's been a rough few years," said Schermerhorn. "And it seems like everybody just wants to hurry up and get the project done because they're afraid the money is going to dry up. Schedules have become compressed. Everything is made overseas, the lead time is long and no one wants to wait for product. We're stuck in the middle of designing things that are within budget and that they can get fast. Clients want responses quickly yet want something unique. It's a tough place we're in." Added Gould, "The designer is pressured to turn things around quickly and get it out."

But, if clients are more aware of the design process—and of good design, in general—wouldn't it follow, then, that they'd understand what it takes to produce and execute on a concept, and be respectful of the process? The answer, according to the participants, seems to relate to awareness and education. "There's this newer tier of owners and managers who are very savvy, a lot more interested and in tune with design, whether because of the media or the internet," said Laschever. "But it's a double-edged sword: It's great they understand our references and speak our language but, at the same time, they start to think that they know where things should go."

Added D'Amico, "They want to touch and feel every piece, which slows the process. They need to put faith in us. It's wonderful that they're interested, but if they want it on time and on budget, you need to know up front how involved they're going to be."

This is especially challenging with the franchisees, said Gould. "They want to do what they want to do, not necessarily what the brand is telling them. We have to convince them to focus on the standards and designs of the brand and what the brand wants."

"Yet," said MacDonald, "if the client's education about design is good, they know you're the expert. And we can do a better design if they hear and understand us."

It is a tricky situation, though, as Pearsall pointed out. "I have a client who wanted to be educated about design and fell in love with the process and he almost cut himself off at the knees. He'll watch a TV show, go to another hotel and travel all over the world and I will get a change weekly. Consequently, we've been working on this boutique hotel for three years now. Just designing. It should be built by now. There's a point where you can't get your work done."

"Just because you stay in a hotel doesn't mean you know how to design one," quipped D'Amico. "One of the questions to ask your client is, 'Do you want us to expedite your idea or are you really coming to us for true creativity?'"

To avoid some of that "always changing your mind" scenario, MacDonald recommended her strategy to the group: "Visit hotels with your clients and find out what they like and then, from that, write the story. You can always go back to that when they come up with a new idea and say, 'We made the decision together earlier based on our discussions/touring.' It's a great communication tool."

And it's all about understanding the goal: Designing for

the user experience. "As an architect, it's about the public interface, not about 'this is what I've always wanted to create,'" said Laschever. Added Pearsall, "There's a difference between what looks great for the moment and what is durable, for instance. It's up to us to educate the client, which is all part of the process."

And when there are multiple designers on a project, all involved in the process, how does it get pulled together so a cohesive design with fluid spaces is created?

Working together

Rodriguez has been fortunate in her experiences. "I've worked with six different designers on one project. The brand selects a design team and we all get in a room and present our ideas in a charette or workshop. For example, if the spa designer presents something, we'll evolve our design to complement it, to keep the identity of the brand or owner's desires intact. You become one group, almost one design firm, even though your specialties might be in different areas. We'll even move money around for each other, if necessary, to meet the design goals. We become a community and, over the process, we check out each other's spaces, ask advice and offer solutions."

Added Messersmith, "Open communication is key when there are multiple firms involved." D'Amico chimed in, "And someone has to be the orchestra leader, the conductor."

Said Pearsall, "It takes a special person to be that person. They have to be clear, have a plan and be open and respectful. A lot of creative energy can come from that."

In conclusion, the group was asked how they'd like to see the design process evolve in, perhaps, the next 10 years. It was unanimous: More time. "There's a strong sense of speed-to-market," said Pearsall. "We're rushing. New trends are fabulous, but taking a step back and having more time for thoughtful design and really researching the area, demographics and creating something great, would be nice." Said Gould, "It's become just a matter of getting it out the door."

But it's not just about time, it's about respect, and they're closely tied, as D'Amico stressed: "We're schooled, we've taken exams, we don't just throw pillows. If we're given more time to research, we'll produce a better product. Put us ahead of schedule, include us earlier in the process."

But respect yourself and each other first, advised Rodriguez: "I'd like to see designers be a little more supportive of each other. If you're not a specialist in a particular area of design, refer the client to another designer. Just as they do in the medical field."

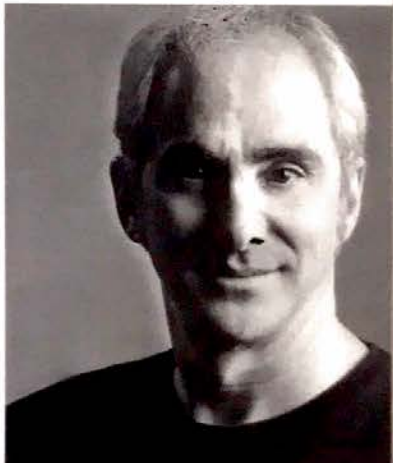
It all comes down to this, as Pearsall concluded the session. "I had this developer who works with a lot of branded properties say to me, 'What's the value of design anymore?' Well, what's your goal? If you're trying to create an experience, then having someone who is educated and puts the time and effort into the design process can make a huge difference in ROI and repeat business."



Brooke Pearsall
HVS Design



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Robert Laschever
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