

Mixing the right interior designer/facility manager cocktail

Do you have the right mix of interior design and facilities management? Think of it as a good cocktail — complementary ingredients can produce a smooth, relaxing experience, while the wrong combination could lead to a souring result. Mixing individuals' goals and personalities into one project can often be unpredictable, but it doesn't have to be. The right ingredients, which include a common, clear understanding of work scope and early involvement of all design professionals, can make any project a success and result in a quality product.

When an organization plans for a new building or a renovation of an existing building, they are essentially looking for a mix of three elements — a solid, healthy structure; a functional building that meets the needs of those using it; and a space that is aesthetically pleasing. To meet these requirements, a project must include the input and expertise of clients, architects, interior designers, engineers, and construction professionals. The wrong mix — or a missing ingredient — can ruin the outcome of the cocktail; whereas, the right mix of professionals and communication will develop a cocktail that everyone will want to return to time and time again.

Facility managers and interior designers both need to play an active role when coming together at project time. When a designer is in-house, a relationship has been molded over multiple years and the understanding of priorities for the facility is already in place. When a designer gets mixed in as an independent or as part of project design team, basic project expectations must be established. Interior designers provide various services — from choosing interior finishes and furniture specification to coordinating with the architecture of the interior space. The scope of the interior designer's services should be determined early in the project planning stages.

BUILDING A FOUNDATION

The right mix can sometimes be hard to define, but starting with the right ingredients always helps. To begin: Select an interior design professional who will be an integral part of the design team; provide information up front identifying goals and benchmarks; be flexible when listening to new ideas and concepts; and practice continual and open communication. Putting effort into the front end of a project is much easier than repairing damages after completion.

A few tips to get the interior designer/facility manager relationship off on the right track:

- Create trust between the interior designer and facility manager. This requires both parties to bring professional talent and knowledge to the team. A facility manager knows and understands their building and strives for efficiency and smooth of operation. An interior designer is looking to create an aesthetic

image for the owner's concept. Both of these goals need be met, but not at the cost of an explosive relationship that ends in a project disaster causing project delays and added cost to the owner. One good way is to go back to interior designers who have a proven track record with client. Aviar Design has developed strong relationships with facility managers because of responsiveness and good communication that includes sitting down to discuss how we can improve the service we provide. We use an informal review process to get feedback from the facility manager allowing us to provide better service to them. Being open to where the ideas of change are coming from is also important. A facility manager who has new concepts introduced that may cause the FM department more work, may be concepts that are directed by their upper management and not the interior designer. Aviar Design was asked to put more color and textures in a hospital color pallet to move away from their institutional look. At first the facility management staff was upset with our design work, but through communication we came to the understanding that the focus of the hospital had changed. Aviar Design helped the FM department by providing information on cleaning methods for different finishes and proposing finishes that required less repeat maintenance such protective door jam surrounds to reduce repetitive painting to cover scratches.

- Invest time in the selection of an interior designer — just as time is spent in the selection of architects and construction entities. The combination of reviewing an interior designer's qualifications and past projects, as well as touring the existing facilities of the client, will provide information to both professionals on what is expected for the project. Asking for certain qualifications both in experience and education has worked for the UA in helping them receive solicitations from firms that have meet a level of qualification requirements. Some states require minimum levels of qualifications which will help a facility manager, but in states that do not, it is up the the facility manager to ask qualification requirements. The UA also uses past performance evaluations which can take time, but will help get background of previous work experience, either with the UA or with other clients on related project types.

- Discuss how certain aspects of work will be implemented. Set the responsibilities, but also bring up issues early on before they become problems. The development process needs to be open to color, shape, lighting and other elements that can result in great design project. Once a sense of commonality is established, the focus moves to continuing involvement throughout the design and construction process.

COMMUNICATION IS KEY

Communication between the facility manager and the interior designer is crucial to creating a successful building. It is important for the interior designer to ask for information on maintenance and building standards from the facility manager and communicate this throughout the project. The facility manager in return needs to listen to the interior designer's suggestions and ideas. Aviar Design had presented a floor covering with the client's logo in the floor. The facility manager was against the idea perceiving the

detailing would create more maintenance problems and more installation costs. The interior designer explained in the process that was being proposed, the pattern would be cut by computer operated water jet equipment that provides a very precise cut, then the seams are sealed and the flooring material placed on a backing. Once ready, the product with the logo detail ships and installs as a solid piece which reduced installation costs and time. Through understanding the facility managers concerns and providing information to reduce doubt, the interior design was able to convince the facility manager that the design element would be successful, and it was and has been used in other locations for this client because management liked the branding advantages. This communication starts at the initial building programming. Bringing an interior designer into the project at the conception of the design phase will create a cohesive final product and reduce costs by eliminating change orders later in the construction phase. When an interior designer works with other design team members, the building's electrical and data sources can be better located, finish materials are better detailed for installation and project scheduling is more effective, all of which help to keep cost under control.

Involvement from the interior designer should be multidirectional and should include all members of the design team, engaging in multiple discussions. Involvement as a stakeholder from the beginning — as conceptual or schematic drawings evolve — allows an interior designer to provide input on special features or design elements that make the project a real success. Well thought-out design with good communication from all disciplines is critical early on avoid costly change orders later.

A professional interior designer will want to create and develop an interior space that looks good and functions to the required use and ensures the health, welfare and safety for the people using the building. This goes beyond selecting furniture and finishes. It requires the interior designer to be continually educated on products, codes and materials, and be able to successfully communicate this vision to others.

The facility manager's role in the partnership is to openly express and believe from the start how important the input from the interior designer adds to the overall outcome. There may not be complete buy-in on all ideas or concepts, but the overall philosophy of a comprehensive team needs to be embraced and design ideas need to be aired, shared and dared. The facility manager's responsibility to the design team includes bringing building standards information and including other departments that will have an approval in the overall plan. These departments would include organizations such as risk management to gather information on client standards for ergonomics. Corporate hierarchy regarding space and finishes also needs to be discussed early in the project.

Communication between interior designers and facility managers can assist in creating a more sustainable interior environment. One important area where the facility manager and interior design need to share ideas early is the development of the building's space uses. Shared or dual use spaces will save real estate

resulting in costs savings, but will also reduce material headed to landfills by reduced renovation. Aviar Design worked on an education grant project with a focus on creating a new learning environment that was geared to how students learn, not the standard “desk in a row” design that has been used for centuries. We meet with different departments individually in a daylong session to gather what each group needed. Then we meet with a group of students representing how they wanted to learn and what they needed out of the space. Obviously two different set of requirements resulted. Aviar Design combined the requirements into one space that could change quickly to support different teaching and learning styles. Incorporating ergonomic and flexible furniture with the A/V into the design reduced the need for multiple spaces to support the different uses. Traditional row style arrangements could become group learning stations within minutes, thus reducing the need for both lecture and training space that otherwise sit empty part of the time. This also reduces scheduling confusion in moving classes to different locations. As reducing the negative effects on the environment and providing healthier interior spaces for people becomes the priority for owners undertaking building construction, working with an interior designer knowledgeable about the LEED process is beneficial for the project.

SEEING IT THROUGH TO THE END

As the design process begins to finalize, other critical information need to be added such as maintenance and custodial support. The facility manager should provide existing standards for cleaning and maintenance. These discussions will assure the look and feel at opening is carried through for years to come. As materials, colors and other design elements solidify, it is critical for the facility manager to know what is ahead, so they can prepare or procure equipment essential to the upkeep and maintenance. Interior designers may bring ideas on materials to reduce maintenance time or finishes that require less toxic cleaning chemicals that produce effective results. The University of Arizona had a new requirement for “greener” cleaning products to keep their building healthy and sustainable. The interior designer provided information on cleaning methods for sustainable products that were less toxic then the products the University housekeeping staff had been standardized on. This helped to create a healthier environment and less handling of toxic chemicals by the house keeping staff.

As the process enters the shovel in the ground stage, the design team needs to continue their vigilance and involvement. As no surprise to anyone involved in construction, the blueprint-to-built process sometimes leaves a gap. That is what the Request for Information, or RFI, process is for. As questions arise, the facility manager and interior designer need to continue to communicate, making sure alterations, additions or deletions do not interfere with the original goals.

This cooperation continues during the submittal process, as the general contractor submits what exactly is going to be used. Submittals for interior finishes and furniture may vary from the original design intent.

These variances should be reviewed by the interior designer and the facility manager for aesthetic and maintainability considerations. Final inspections and punch list should be completed by both the facility manager and the interior designer to make sure both are accepting the final product. It may mean an agreed upon change that fits both the design concept and the ability to maintain the space in the future.

As the facility is occupied, the need for informational manuals, warranties, and other documentation is vital to the facility manager and is something the interior designer should be asked to provide up front as part of their services. This type of documentation should be detailed and easy to store and retrieve. It should also provide references for repair or replacement in the future. The value for the interior designer is that the design will stay looking good for years to come, and the value for the facility manager is access to important information in maintaining the newly design space.

FINISHING TOUCHES

A facility manager, who is responsible for the health, welfare and safety for the occupants, often have the added responsibility of protecting and caring for items brought into a project, including artwork and plants. The facility manager may not be a part of the selection process, but can be part of how it is secured. One proven method that has excellent results is collaboration between the facility managers staff and the interior design team early on. Art, whatever shape, and plants can both be protected by using alarms and signage. At the University of Arizona, the use of original artwork and native plants in the residence halls has become a facility standard to enhance the education of the students. A small, battery-operated alarm is placed behind and attached to the piece of art and the wall. If the art is removed, the connection between the wall and the art is broken and the alarm goes off. The alarm is fixed to the art, so the sound of the alarm travels with a removed piece of art. The batteries are on a replacement schedule with the Residence Life Maintenance staff that have been trained and understand the value of their work in protecting the artwork. In additions to the alarm the University has had the interior designer create a plaque for each piece of art that is posted next to the art piece. The plaque states the description and artist along with the text: "This artwork has been alarmed." Since using this method, theft has not been problem.

This same concept is used with live plants. Using live plants in a public setting, especially in residence halls is a challenge. Again utilizing a framed information plaque on the plants helps to communicate to everyone the plants needs. This information plaque provides the plant specifics and a simple statement indicating that the plant is maintained by the University, no additional watering is required.

Employing strategies presented here can help in finding the right mix of interior designer and facilities manager for a smooth and relaxing project experience.