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**MULTIDISCIPLINE PRACTICE FOSTERS
GOOD BUSINESS AS WELL AS GOOD DESIGN.**

BY DAVID WHITEMYER

JUST OFF MAIN STREET
IN THE SMALL TOWN
OF CANTON, GA.,

there is a nondescript, brick retail façade with white trim. The boutique inside sells rugs, wall coverings, handmade journals and cards, even matches and toy jacks. Opened in the summer of 2009, The Store, as the entry sign reads, is the brainchild of a group of nine interior, industrial and graphic designers who work upstairs – led by President and Creative Director, Bill Grant, who crafted not only the interior space, but all of the products and packaging as well.

The Store isn't Grant Design Collaborative's (GDC) main focus, but it is a way to advertise the firm's services and talents to area businesses. The bulk of GDC's work involves designing showrooms, furnishings, and branding strategies for major corporations, including Herman Miller, Geiger International and Georgia-Pacific. Founded in 1996, the firm is among a growing number of studios practicing multidisciplinary design, where interior architecture is

only one arm of their full design expertise, and where clients look to solve multiple challenges.

Multidisciplinary design means having the creativity and the team to look at a project through many design lenses concurrently. As a business concept, it also means having the ability to take on several individual projects, each with their own design focus, such as a logo project for one client, a Web site for another client and a retail display for another.

The concept of multidisciplinary thinking is not new. The great opera composer, Richard Wagner, popularized the word "gesamtkunstwerk" – meaning "synthesis of the art" – in the mid-1800s when writing about performances that cohesively blended theater, music and dance.

More specifically, the notable architect and interior designer, Frank Lloyd Wright, is famous for envisioning and designing every aspect of a project: the building, furniture, lighting fixtures, textiles, signage and even custom masonry. Furniture designers, Charles and Ray Eames, worked successfully in interior architecture, graphic design and sculpture. In doing so, their creations included far more than just iconic chairs, but also games, movies and splints for injured military members during WWII. Like Wright and the Eames duo, many innovative design leaders understand that working creatively in several disciplines is good for business – both for the contracted firm and the end user – and most importantly, good for design.

EGGS IN MANY BASKETS

Like a sound financial investment strategy that encourages diversity in stocks, bonds and savings, design firms that haven't put all of their eggs in one basket seem to be surviving the economic doldrums of the past two years. When the market for one design service slows down, there are others on which to fall back. "We don't do pure interior design," clarifies Grant, who has received several awards for showroom and exhibit design. "We consider the whole design of a space in terms of our clients' strategies," he says. So factors such as environmental graphics, Web design and mar-

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keting elements are all looked at equally and integrally in a project. And, he adds, that's why clients hire him.

Creativity is a commodity. "Design thinking can be applied to anything," Grant says, which is an important consideration

when a firm is working to market itself and broaden its project base. In recent years, GDC has added product design to its workload, creating interior goods such as rugs for Jaipur and the Best of NeoCon® award-winning SET wall covering system for System One.

Grant's advice for aspiring multidisciplinary design firms is to look

beyond single-transaction services, such as showroom or residential work, and persuade clients to consider other related projects. "Ask them, 'Are there other things I can help you with – branding, brochures, a Web site?'" he says. Some clients need a bit of a push understanding that it's in their best interest to consider their design needs holistically.

Tom Marquardt, Principal of Design Collaboratives (no relation to Grant's collaborative) in Chicago, agrees. He suggests a "discussion with the client about what brand strategy continuity can do for their business," rather than just focusing on one medium for which a designer has been hired.

Marquardt's firm of about a dozen employees hasn't struggled too much through the recent economic storm, but has noticed that it takes a bit more pushing to get work, and to convince clients it's worth their while to focus on – and pay for – designing the "big picture."

"It's important that clients maintain a big picture view of the benefits of design and not undercut the success of budget constraints by going for the lowest bid only without considering the return on their investment," he says.

Marquardt speaks excitedly about his firm's recent interior, branding and architecture retail project for Cirque du Soleil. "We're able to bounce quickly around from one thing to another," he says, adding, "this is a product of the economy, where the timeframe of a project is restricted, and we have to work faster and more focused."

From the small design studios of GDC and Marquardt's Design Collaboratives to an architectural and engineering mega-company, the practice still holds true. "Multidiscipline design is a huge advantage for a firm," says Angie Lee, IIDA, FAIA, and a Vice President at SmithGroup, often listed among the ten largest A-E firms in the world. She speaks of the resourcefulness of having engineers, interior designers, architects, lighting designers, way-finding specialists and urban planners all right at their fingertips. "From a financial standpoint, it's incredibly efficient," Lee says. "We don't have to hire many sub-consultants." Coordinating and ramping

up numerous out-of-house specialty consultants can drain profit and often can fragment what should be a cohesive design process.

Even SmithGroup, an established 150-year-old company, is taking advantage of its multidisciplinary staff and pursuing new market avenues. They recently designed custom lighting fixtures for a large software company, and now, at the request of a manufacturer, they're working on a line of furnishing products.

ONE-STOP SHOPPING

Efficiency and earnings from multidisciplinary design isn't limited to the design firm. The client benefits as well. For starters, if the different professional disciplines required for a single project are scattered amongst multiple offices, then the project will inevitably take longer and may not be as cohesive as if they were all in one place.

"Whether we need interior designers or structural engineers, we can tap these resources from our own company in order to best serve our clients' needs," Lee says. She also points out the built-in synergy of her multidisciplinary teams. "We all have the same agenda and vision, and thrive in the same work culture." And for clients, one-stop shopping is economical.

But there's more to a client's needs than just money-savings. They also deserve a quality product. "A multidiscipline approach to design will allow a team to look at a client's project in the big picture," Lee says. SmithGroup has four main category focuses: health-care, learning, science/technology and workplace. Each requires simultaneous input and proficiency from multiple disciplines in programming and design.

Using the company's large healthcare practice as an example, she explains how important it is for a project to be looked at and designed from the inside out, both literally and figuratively. "There's more than just interior layout and finishes," she says. "We need to think programmatically, about a hospital's complete function, from patients to staff, about mechanical systems, unique healthcare equipment, operational

needs, parking and way-finding – even the client's growth plans and marketing strategies." Hiring a specialist isn't the way to go if what a client needs are designers who see the forest from the trees. It's a holistic approach that is best done, she adds, by having everyone on the same team.

The client also benefits from the experience of a well-rounded group of designers. "Working in a multidiscipline firm helps team members see and respect what the other disciplines' needs and expertise is," Lee says. "We learn from each other. There's a huge education for everyone when they're in a multidiscipline design environment?"

GOING BEYOND

When a firm with many disciplines tackles a project on their own, another benefit is having more designer control, according to Michael Vanderbyl, IIDA, AIGA, AGI, Founder and Principal of the 35-year-old San Francisco-based firm Vanderbyl Design.

Vanderbyl's small firm of nine includes a variety

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of, what he calls, 2-D and 3-D designers, all of whom have a range of design backgrounds, including finish carpentry. "Each discipline brings a different ability to communicate a client's needs and ideas."

Vanderbyl Design is a leader among multidisciplinary design firms, providing services in graphic design, retail and showroom environments, packaging, furnishings, textiles and fashion apparel. But rather than work on any of these products in a vacuum, Vanderbyl gets his clients to understand that what they need is a comprehensive design, incorporating all of those disciplines simultaneously.

Sometimes it means going beyond the contracted scope of work, and doing a bit extra. The Robert Talbott Company, maker of high-fashion men's clothing, hired Vanderbyl to design their New York retail venue after seeing some of his showroom projects. "In the working model, we put a new logo on the store's awning," Vanderbyl says. "Mrs. Talbott liked

the way it looked and asked if we knew anyone who could design their stationery with it." And as it turned out, Vanderbyl went on to design not only the stationery and the store, but also a larger strategic branding campaign for Talbott.

A NEW CHALLENGE

In a video production Vanderbyl created with Aquent, an international talent agency for marketing and design professionals, he suggests that the current economic climate is ripe for multidisciplinary design. "It only helps a client to have someone who is broader in their approach to design," he says in the video, "and that understands different aspects and attributes that communicate the core message that a client has."

As the global marketplace grows, and as consumers become more product-savvy, corporations will rely on

multidisciplinary designers to come up with creative ways for their brand to stand out and retain loyalty. And interior designers who remain single-focused could be faced with a challenge.

"There is no 'Mother Art,'" Vanderbyl says. "Sometimes the graphics pull the work, and sometimes it's the interior architecture, but they all have to work together, and ultimately it's about solving a design problem." ■

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