





LESSONS LEARNED

Every project has a lesson to teach. It's up to designers to apply those lessons to future work. **By Judi Ketteler**

Mistakes on the job are made every day, but few in the public eye. The 2004 recall of several *Kryptonite* U-shaped bicycle locks was one such instance when a company's mistake was broadcast across the globe. The recall resulted from the discovery that a simple pen tip could open the steel locks. Cyclists from San Francisco to New York suddenly feared for the safety of their sometimes expensive bicycles. No doubt the company has applied the lessons learned from this costly mistake to the design of current and future locks.

Most design mistakes won't go down in the history books as *Kryptonite's* did, but interior designers have plenty of lessons to learn from missteps in their own projects and those of their colleagues.

LESSON NO. 1:

LOOK BEYOND THE OBVIOUS

Innovation often comes out of tackling different types of projects, says Cheryl Brown, IIDA, a Principal with SmithGroup's Washington, D.C. office. Her firm is working on the design of the James Lee Sorenson Language and Communication Center (SLCC) at Washington D.C.'s Gallaudet University, one of the world's leading institutions for the deaf and hard of hearing.

Because the space wasn't a typical learning environment, Brown's design team had to re-think all previous notions of design. "It's required us to design for how our end user sees the world," Brown says. "It has been a very collaborative process

with the client, the school's Architectural Consultant Hansel Bauman and our consultants." Gallaudet wanted a progressive piece of architecture, but the team quickly learned that sharp angles, rich colors and hard surfaces — a great solution for many corporate or other educational applications — would be the completely wrong approach.

Since visual cues are very important to the deaf community, curves and organic forms provide a more comfortable means for the students to navigate through the building. In addition, students aren't able to see other people signing if the background is too dark. In a world organized around sight, they

Measuring Client Satisfaction

Most design firms rely on repeat business and recommendations to determine if their clients are truly satisfied. Gensler's London office has developed a more formal method that not only measures client satisfaction, but also uses client feedback to make changes, says Monica Parrott, Quality Manager for the London office.

Parrott requests to meet with the client in person for about an hour, at which time she administers a questionnaire that includes inquiries about the overall experience, whether expectations were met and post-project completion issues. "We try to get a lot of specifics because we really want to see where we can improve," Parrott says.

Another Gensler manager analyzes the data and then calls a team meeting to discuss it. "It's never a finger-pointing exercise, but it sparks some great discussions," she says. At the end of the year, the office looks at all the data and creates a results sheet, which is sent to all of Gensler London's clients that took part in the review. The entire Gensler London staff also is invited to an annual presentation that highlights both the positives and the negatives from the reviews. "It's incredibly helpful for our design teams," Parrott says.

The program is in its third year, and though not all clients are on board yet, Parrott expects the program will continue to grow.

rely on color and color transitions to guide them — almost like a visual language. Hence, the spaces had to be filled with soft curves and clean lines, without sharp corners and dark colors. Major considerations were space, light, composition, form and materials. "We have learned that the space really needs to be intuitive. There is a definite emotional component to the design that must foster

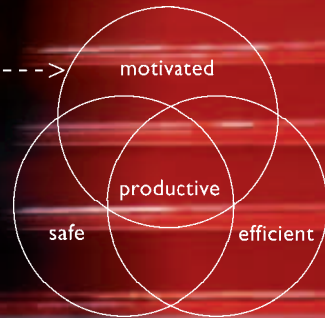
a sense of well-being," Brown says.

Working on this project has forced Brown and her team to take a second look at how they approach the design of more typical spaces. For example, using lighter backgrounds in spaces where the sole purpose is face-to-face communication makes good design sense in any application.

Paul Mankins, a Partner at Des Moines, Iowa-based Substance Architecture, has



What motivates you 15%?



Research shows that well-designed spaces, where interior elements work together, can increase productivity by as much as 15%.* A Johnsonite floor can be a big part of the equation. It is at Foote Cone & Belding, a \$400 million ad agency in Los Angeles. Connie Kozlowski of Foote Cone & Belding says, "Our space creates value for our brand. It differentiates us from the competition, motivates our staff, and inspires our clients." Find out how Johnsonite can help you create high-performance environments that deliver economic return. 800.899.8916 www.johnsonite.com

*Walter Kroner, Director of Workplace Design Program at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute's School of Architecture in Troy, NY

a sure-fire method for designing outside the box: Force your design team to generate multiple options. Not just two or three, but four or more, he says. "With four options, you can't get married to one, and you can't keep re-creating the same one. By the time you get to that fourth option, you have to think differently," he says.

Long's team was brought in late, and the whole project had a very short schedule. "The client was a very linear thinker, and he wanted to understand the space from all sides," she says. "He would say, 'So, if I'm 100 feet away, what do I see?'"

The team considered creating computer

**LESSON NO. 3:
BE A PROJECT MANAGER
AND DESIGNER**

As the sole proprietor of Brian G. Thornton Designs LLC in Silver Spring, Md., interior designer Brian Thornton, IIDA, AIA, IIDA Vice President of Communications, learned the importance of balancing creative duties with

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—Brian Thornton, IIDA, AIA, Brian G. Thornton Designs LLC, Silver Spring, Md.



Clients love it too, he says, because they never feel they are being sold too heavily on one option.

**LESSON NO. 2:
GO BACK TO BASICS**

Technology has revolutionized the way we work. But, as most people will attest, at times it can be a hindrance. In those cases, it's better to take a step back and opt for a low-tech approach.

Susan Long, Director of Interior Design at Columbus, Ohio-based Karlsberger, says her team learned this while working with a children's hospital on an elevator lobby project.

renderings to show the 3-D space, but time was limited and the client was growing frustrated. Taking the back-to-basics approach of building a physical model turned out to be the best solution. Long even put an LED light under the model to demonstrate how light would change the look of the sculptural pieces they created. She's also a big proponent of having designers pull out pads and sketch as clients describe a project. "Sketching and making changes as the client talks demonstrates that you're really listening to what they're saying," she says.

basic project management tasks. In fact, his ability to do both is what salvaged a café project that was quickly heading in the wrong direction.

Thornton's client was a restaurateur new to the food and beverage industry. Shortly after Thornton and the team broke ground on the project, budgetary and communication issues arose between the client and the contractor, and the contractor walked off the job. In addition, Thornton discovered the mechanical designer hadn't allowed enough room for the correct utilities to be inserted in a newly

poured concrete slab. “Typically, these types of things would kill a project,” Thornton says. “I literally opened my Rolodex and had to assemble a new team within a week.”

He quickly stepped into a project management role and helped the client get the project back on track. The project was completed within eight weeks. “I think stepping up and putting a face to a task was the lesson here,” he says.

It paid off: This spring, the project won a Bronze

Award for Hospitality Design from IIDA’s Mid Atlantic Chapter.

LESSON NO. 4:

ACTIVELY LISTEN TO CLIENTS

When Substance Architecture had the opportunity to design a new space for a management consulting firm, the design team went through an extensive programming stage to learn how the members of the firm work and who they work with, both internally and externally.

“During this phase, the client brought a lot of

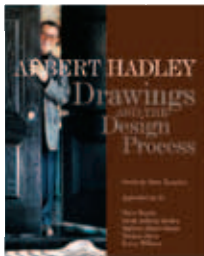
benchmarking information to us,” Mankins says.

He and his team would have designed the space very differently had they not taken the time to listen to the client and understand how work flowed through the office and how employees needed the space to be organized. “We really had to listen and set aside our preconceived notions about what we thought the interior of a firm like this should look like,” he says.

Another case in point: Ginny Dyson, IIDA, Senior Designer at

Northern Virginia-based DMJM-Rottet, wanted to use a dematerialization strategy to design the interior of a non-profit foundation located in a 100-year-old brick building. “My goal was to use a minimum of applied materials,” she says. “That was the ‘one big idea’ that informed the rest of the project.”

Contractors stripped the drywall, exposed the brick and re-used the wood from non-structural joists to create shelving and a conference table.



Albert Hadley: Drawings and the Design Process

Based on an exhibition of Albert Hadley’s drawings and sketches held at NYSID, the book features over 160 drawings and explanatory comments by the man *The New York Times* called “the éminence grise of interior design.”

176 pages, hardcover, NYSID and Elements Media, \$45.

Color for Interior Design

by Ethel Rompilla and the New York School of Interior Design

A lavishly illustrated, comprehensive introduction to an understanding of how color shapes interior spaces, including the basics of color theory, and a practical guide to the use of color to enhance interior settings.

224 pages, hardcover, Harry N. Abrams, Inc., \$40.



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But when it came to the flooring, Dyson had to rethink the low face-weight nylon carpet — a key part of the dematerialization concept. Ultimately, the carpet was very uncomfortable for their purposes and not well-suited for dedicated employees and volunteers who worked such long hours that they sometimes napped under their desks. “I had to step back and look at the client’s culture

design that will meet their specific needs today and in the future. Without flexible design, clients are boxed in, and they can’t evolve in the way their business model requires, says Kim Sheppard, a Partner at Gabellini Sheppard in New York. “In retail, flexible design creates movement and sales. Customers want to come in more often because they’re afraid they’ll miss something if they don’t,” she says.

way altogether. The team also created a modulating ceiling with flexible lighting.

Whether in the retail or corporate environment, if flexibility isn’t figured into the design of a space, there’s a good chance the client may be forced to redesign down the road and opt for a different design firm in the future.

When Gabellini Sheppard began designing studio space for a film and television editing business,

“I had to step back and look at the client’s culture and find a way to make it work. You can’t always be a purist.”

—Ginny Dyson, IIDA, Senior Designer, DMJM-Rottet, Virginia



and find a way to make it work,” she says. “You can’t always be a purist.”

Ultimately, the client asked the design team to use a wool carpet. In the end, Dyson had to look beyond her first choice to find the best solution to suit the client’s needs.

LESSON NO. 5: BE FLEXIBLE

With technology moving at the speed of light these days, design now is forced to keep up or lose out. Clients are in search of

The work Gabellini Sheppard did for Bergdorf Goodman’s 5th floor, which houses women’s contemporary collections, shows how flexible design figures into retail. Store managers needed to be able to change and rotate designers’ collections, tweak the lighting accordingly, and create more display and rack space during high-sale times. Sheppard’s team’s solution involved sliding panels that group together in twos and threes or slide out of the

the design team quickly realized that flexibility was the No. 1 mandate. The client relied heavily on editing technology, which changes every year. “Even the direction of how the technology will change is unknown,” Sheppard says.

So the team designed the space using as many prefabricated units as possible. Team members learned that anything they designed should easily fit into the space and be removed from it just as effortlessly. 