



Interior designers tackled eight demanding projects that push the **boundaries** of **innovation**. By Michelle Taute

Solutions



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Whether it's a tight budget or a difficult client, every design project starts with a problem. However, the tightest constraints often yield the biggest creative breakthroughs. Take a look at how these eight interior designers approached challenging projects – everything from restaurants and apartments to retail stores and office spaces – to shift negatives into positives.

Blowfish Restaurant

TORONTO

This new Asian-fusion restaurant in the competitive King's Street West entertainment district needed to make a bold statement within a tight space – only 2,700 square feet – and on a tight budget. “We had to make it look like they spent more money than they actually did,” says Johnson Chou, principal of Toronto-based Johnson Chou Inc.

The firm took a decidedly DIY approach to cut costs. Chou's team



At Blowfish Restaurant, a unisex bathroom promotes a sense of unity and offers a distinct talking point for nightclub patrons.

designed large chandeliers – a nod to the historic bank building where the restaurant is housed – at substantial savings over readymade versions. Designers produced large, but simple fixtures with fewer arms.

A translucent screen that separates the bar and dining areas is a nod to shoji screens, helping reinforce the restaurant's Asian-fusion theme. It creates more intimate mingling spaces without eliminating interaction between the two. “We

were trying to create a series of moments in the restaurant,” Chou says. “It's so important that designers appreciate this notion of dining as an experience.” Screens typically used for this purpose would have blown the budget, so designers created a less expensive version from a stainless steel mesh normally used for water filtration. “We're one of those firms that tends to feel like we need to design everything, so it's all consistent,” Chou says. “We end up designing all the furniture.”

When the restaurant turns into a nightclub after hours, the space-saving unisex bathroom becomes another spot within the restaurant's limited real estate where people can talk and mingle. “There are those who are confused by it because co-ed bathrooms are a relatively new concept, of course, but I think the majority of people appreciate it,” Chou says.

Thomas Patrick Footwear Store

DUBLIN, IRELAND

This family-owned store had to be classic and attention-grabbing to compete with trendier Grafton Street neighbors. “The client was reluctant to put anything in the store that wouldn't last a long time,” says Stefan Zachary, a managing partner with Zachary Design in High Wycombe outside London. Another challenge was working within the confines of a small and narrow space that's spread over three floors.

Since the client wanted a design that would still be relevant in 15 years, the retailer vetoed the use of lifestyle graphics and most colors. Designers created a white interior

with a gallery-like feel and turned their attention to lighting. “We used concealed light to create excitement,” Zachary says. Florescent lights under the shoe stands and behind wall panels create a warm, inviting glow within the store while long-focus, narrow-beam display lights make merchandise pop. The lighting choices draw customers in from the street, create a sense of glamour within the store and make the products extremely visible.

Diffused lighting and strategically placed mirrors help the store appear larger. As customers take the stairs between floors, for example, a mirror lining the wall creates the illusion of additional space. Floor-to-ceiling mirrors within the shopping areas have the same effect. “We used a lot of mirrors to relieve the feeling of being in a compressed space,” Zachary says.

Apartment Renovation

NEW YORK

Architect Bill Peterson created an urban apartment that effortlessly blends the past with the present. “The main design objective was to do something that dealt with and acknowledged the project's context,” Peterson says. In this case, the framework was a railroad-style apartment in an 1880 tenement building in Manhattan. The chief problem was marrying the clean lines of modernism with the decoration and opulence associated with Victorian-era design.

Peterson reinstalled period molding throughout the apartment and chose a dark floor color – a popular choice in the Victorian area. Other elements are distinctly

modern: A tile wall topped with glass separates the stark kitchen and bathroom. Still other details mix the two: A George Nelson daybed is upholstered in Victorian-style fabric. The living room chairs modernize Victorian ideals by cross-dressing the gender-specific chairs in fabric reserved for the other sex's seating. The woman's chair is covered with horsehair fabric (traditionally male) while the man's chair is upholstered in velvet (traditionally female).

Beyond the bedroom lies a combination bedroom/dining room to help economize space in the 600-square-foot apartment. A Murphy bed folds against one wall while a Victorian table hangs on another like a piece of artwork. Both pieces are functional. Another ingenious space-saving solution is a living room floor hatch that reveals storage space.

RTKL Headquarters

BALTIMORE

When RTKL Associates Inc. was designing the speculative office building that would house the company's new headquarters, the firm sought a space that would lead the local market in sustainable design. “If we aren't going to do it in our own office, how can we educate our clients about it?” says Jennifer Barnes, IIDA, associate vice president. The challenge was creating a green interior with the technology and visual appeal necessary to attract high-tech tenants.

The base building, which RTKL also designed, and RTKL's finished space use the latest advances in green design. Raised-access floors help create a plug-and-play environment



A Manhattan apartment renovation integrates the past with the present, catering to a modern lifestyle without denying the building's context.

and increase energy efficiency. For the headquarters, designers chose attractive recycled materials – everything from carpet and wheat board millwork to poured-concrete countertops decorated with recycled glass. A head-turning grand staircase uses bamboo planks, a renewable alternative to hardwood that doesn't sacrifice beauty.

“A lot of local developers were interested in the economics of this type of building,” Barnes says. “We

tried to demystify the solution. If you come at a project with a holistic approach, you can achieve a lot more with sustainability than if you approach elements individually.”

Andel's Hotel Prague

PRAGUE, CZECH REPUBLIC

When it was constructed, Andel's Hotel Prague was one of the first truly high-design hotels in Prague. The client wanted to achieve the kind of destination status that boutique



The modern design of Andel's Hotel Prague welcomes customers while creating a sense of excitement and comfort.

hotels in New York enjoy. “It was hard to make a clearly contemporary hotel but also to make it comfortable,” says James Dilley, an associate in the London office of Jestico + Whiles. “Those two don’t always happen.”

Another challenge was catering to the hotel’s three distinct groups of customers: business travelers, tour groups and independent leisure travelers. A large lobby accommodates busloads of guests at once but still feels welcoming to individuals. To achieve the latter, there are diaphanous curtain panels hanging from hidden tracks that can be re-arranged to define distinct areas. The curtains are translucent when lit from behind and opaque when lit from the front. Guest rooms also offer a range of amenities to meet varying needs – everything from a DVD player and mini bar to a LAN connection and two phone lines.

“It had to be a high-energy environment but also had to be relaxing,” Dilley says. In many cases, this goal is achieved through material choices, including glass – a nod to the glass-manufacturing tradition in Prague – along with rough and smooth stone. Natural materials soothe, and interesting juxtapositions among them create excitement. Behind the reception desk, for example, the limestone wall features embedded strips of red glass.

Women’s Pavilion & Birthplace

CARY, N.C.

To compete in a sophisticated market with a highly educated and affluent patient population, designers needed to give the Wake Medical Center a competitive edge. The resulting Women’s Pavilion & Birthplace offers patients the privacy and amenities of home wherever possible. “It’s more of a hospitality feel than a

hospital,” says Wendy Parrow, an interior designer with FreemanWhite’s Raleigh, N.C. office.

The center is connected to the main hospital, but a separate entrance and warm, inviting interior give it a distinct personality. Transitional furniture, soft colors, indirect lighting and carpeted hallways all give the hospital a homier feel. Large planters separate the common areas from labor and delivery rooms to add another level of privacy. This friendly atmosphere extends into the rooms themselves, which have exterior views and wood elements. There also are landscaped courtyards for relaxation and sleeper sofas available for dads. Commissioned artwork adds another layer of comfort and meaning to the space.

One of the project’s hallmarks is creating home-like spaces where families can truly relax and bond. “When people are in healthcare situations in hospitals, it’s extremely

stressful and anxious," says Lynne Manning, Director of Interior Design. "The correct lighting, the correct texture and colors, any elements that make it look like home, or any of the amenities of home, all those things reduce stress in people." She also notes that positive distractions – things like aquariums, bubble walls and artwork – allow people to interact with the environment and take their minds off someone who's in surgery or the hospital.

The Pod

BROOKLYN, N.Y.

Ben Checkwitch wanted to provide an industrial loft with all the amenities of a bedroom – namely privacy and storage – while maintaining an open floor plan. The 6.5 x 15 x 8-foot Pod creates a private sleeping space without the dividing nature of walls. "I wanted to make something that was a room but was also a piece of furniture," says Checkwitch of Ben Checkwitch

Design in Brooklyn, N.Y. "If you don't think about it as a room or as furniture, you can go beyond the boundaries of what those can actually do."

The structure blurs the boundaries between architecture, furniture design and interior design. The wooden base is on wheels, so it can be rearranged within a floor plan just like any other piece of furniture. Its translucent walls further the illusion of open space and turn the structure into an oversized lamp when the built-in florescent lights are turned on. There's also ample storage space within each end piece. "When you're inside it, and it's all enclosed, there's a womb-like feel to it," he says. "It was this private, floating island"

It's also part of Checkwitch's overall push to bring the level of detail associated with furniture design to the realm of architecture. He believes that architecture is becoming less grounded, less static and more flexible.

Game Show Network Headquarters

SANTA MONICA, CALIF.

Eighteen months after completing an award-winning office design, HOK got word that the client was downsizing. Helping to find a new space, HOK suggested that the Game Show Network consider a newly available furnished space. The big hurdle was overhauling the space's edgy personality without sending a lot of high-end materials to the landfill.

"When we first got it, they were talking about more of a major overhaul," says Pam Light, FIIDA, Senior Vice President of HOK Los Angeles. "We took the old photographs and drew on top of them and re-colored them" The client was sold on the selective remodeling and retaining open spaces – a choice that meant some employees sacrificed private offices.

After spending a great deal of time getting a sense for the culture of the company, designers walked away with a practical, intuitive sense of who Game Show Network was. This process allowed HOK to drastically alter the feel of the space with a few well-chosen changes. "We try to separate the personality of the space from the architecture of the space in this project to support the original design integrity while supporting the client's culture," Light says. Repainting soffits in warm colors more appropriate to the TV network made a big difference. Hot pink chairs were reupholstered in silver. Fun gobo lights were added to project the company logo, and a few additional offices were built. "It totally changed the energy of the space," Light says. 📍

At the Game Show Network's new headquarters, designers attempted to infuse the client's unique personality without completely replacing all of the existing accoutrements.

