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THE

KINETICS

OF

SPACE

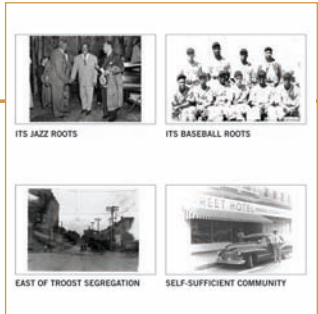
How New York architects transformed a tiny Soho store into a **dynamic** experience



by **Andrew Blum**

Step **1**
RESEARCH

WHAT'S UNIQUE ABOUT 18TH & VINE?



To capture the essence of Kansas City's 18th and Vine neighborhood, IDEO explored the area by foot, interviewed people on the streets, and photographed sites of particular interest. Left: the cover of IDEO's book for the neighborhood.

IDEO's URBAN PRE-PLANNING

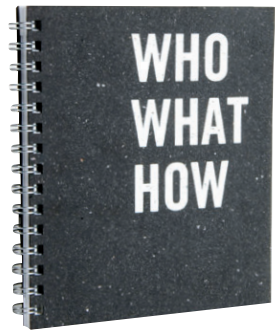
Can its "Smart Space" practice shake up the lumbering world of infrastructure, zoning, and public process?

Step **2**
ARGUMENT

Eighteenth and Vine—Kansas City's historic but down-and-out jazz district—had a vision problem. "I always heard people say, 'The vision for 18th and Vine is this, the vision for 18th and Vine is that,'" says Daryl Williams, director of research and policy for minority entrepreneurship at the Kansas City-based Kauffman Foundation. But whenever he asked people in the community what the vision looked like, nobody could ever produce a picture. "It was just people talking," he says. "But a vision is not something you talk about, it's something you look at."



The Kauffman Foundation, with \$2 billion in assets, bills itself as "the foundation of entrepreneurship"; but 18th and Vine, right in its backyard, had for decades been struggling to reinvigorate its storied past as a center for both jazz and black-owned



Don't confuse the **NEEDS** of the neighborhood with the **IDENTITY** of the neighborhood

MAKE IT FUNCTION.

BASIC NEEDS TO SURVIVE
the basics
rooftops (homes)
food, clothing, health care, banking
transportation
security

GIVE IT EXPRESSION.

BASIC CHANGES TO THRIVE
architectural style
look and feel
cultural activities
amenities
history
flavor



CASE STUDIES
IDEO's books try to communicate the essence of a shared space or community. Clockwise from top left: a page from the firm's downtown Los Angeles study, the book's cover, a book for Uptown Oakland, and a page from their Oakland Children's Hospital study.

Books photos: Evelyn Diiworth; graphics: Mary Foyder/courtesy IDEO



Photographs from research in the field depicting, from left to right: an interview, “man on the street” conversations with members of the Zodiac Club, neon signs within the American Jazz Museum, the sign for a landmark neighborhood restaurant, and a close-up of a jazz mural.



businesses. In the late 1990s the American Jazz Museum opened, but rather than revitalize the community it seemed to turn a living place into a museum. For nearly a decade the Jazz District Redevelopment Corporation (JDRC) had been struggling to attract commerce back to the neighborhood without much success. So over lunch with now former JDRC president David Whalen at Peach Tree, the Vine’s famous soul food restaurant, Williams offered to “bring some resources to bear” to help develop a vision for the neighborhood—essentially to create a marketing brochure to attract future development.

“We want to see the neighborhood be successful,” he told Whalen, “not by dictating what it has to be but what it can be.” Eighteenth and Vine had already tried the if-you-build-it-they-will-come approach with the jazz museum. What Williams envisioned instead was a set of possibilities rooted in the history of the neighborhood: “A straw man—something to give the community a jumping-off point to really do something else.” He had an idea how to get it.

A few months earlier Williams had visited IDEO—the California-based design consultancy eternally famous for designing the

IDEO’s Smart Space practice identifies both the emotional and functional aspects of the planning process as a way to move forward with development. For 18th and Vine, the design consultancy tried to define the issues at stake in very simple terms.

THE 18TH & VINE OF THE FUTURE SHOULD BE A STORY OF HOPE AND REVITALIZATION AND EMBODY THE CREATIVE AMERICAN ENTREPRENEURIAL SPIRIT.

EVEN THOUGH WE KNOW THERE IS SOME OVERLAP, IT’S IMPORTANT TO KEEP THESE INITIATIVES SEPARATE.

Because, in the end, the story of 18th & Vine is the story of ...



THE INTERSECTION.

mouse and the Palm Pilot—for help restructuring Kauffman’s internal organization. But he was also thinking about 18th and Vine. In 2000 IDEO had begun supplementing its industrial-design work with a growing interest in designing spaces, including hospitals, schools, and hotels. A couple of years ago that scale shifted again, to the point that the work of IDEO’s Smart Space practice, led by architect Fred Dust, now looks a lot like

IDEO’s Smart Space group articulates the spirit of a place but leaves its realization to the clients.

NOW THAT WE'VE LOOKED AT WHAT 18TH & VINE NEEDS FOR RE-ESTABLISHING ITSELF AS A VIABLE NEIGHBORHOOD...

HOW CAN IT DIFFERENTIATE ITSELF FROM OTHER DESTINATIONS TO ATTRACT MORE PEOPLE?

Step 3

DESIGN BRIEF

To help translate ideas into action, IDEO distills the design brief into overarching themes, and then connects the themes to specific and tangible solutions for realizing the ideas in the context of the community.



PRESERVE THE GOODS...
DON'T ALWAYS START FROM SCRATCH
While we understand the need to remove the old fabric of urban sprawl from our neighborhood, we can do so without erasing all the fabric of our history. Remains buildings whenever possible. Preserve the old brick and the old wood. Building communities takes more time than the usual commercial timelines. For buildings that do need to be torn down - reuse the old brick and wood for new structures and shelters. Preserve old buildings' shells that are deemed worthy, such as the House of Arts building.

PRESERVE THE STORY...
MAINTAIN THE MEMORIES
Buildings come and go, but the memories need to remain. There are so many unique parts of our story. Don't erase away the historic Museum square walls. Even if something else gets developed in its place, find a new place to display the walls that have become a part of the district. It may be a "second hand" store, but it will be a story telling the district to the city. Place historical markers throughout the district that relay the memories of 18th & Vine to future generations.

PRESERVE THE SPIRIT...
SUPPORT ICONIC VENUES THAT CARRY THE LEGACY
Promote long standing establishments like the Dulles Club and the Mutual Museum Foundation that run their businesses with passion and reflect the local flavor. Create an environment that nurtures and supports businesses with a unique point of view. Create only those institutions are more visible to the outside world. Make history that celebrates these institutions - The 100th birthday of the Mutual Museum Foundation, a party to commemorate 40 years of community service by the Dulles Club.



The broad principles embodying what's essential to the success of future development are articulated as general guidelines and then broken down into specific services or design ideas.

Step 4

DESIGN PRINCIPLES



IDEO deliberately dodges all the "technical" parts of urban planning. Instead they practice it as a form of branding.

Step 5

TIME

By isolating the time when certain activities regularly take place, IDEO identifies ways of better supporting desired activities.



IMAGINE PLATFORMS OF SPONTANEOUS PERFORMANCE AND PLAY

TRANSFORM THE PASSIVE. IGNITE THE ACTIVE.

Bring the baseball statues out of the museum

Use historic photos as billboards

Show oral history inside local stores

Create satellite exhibition spaces in retail environments

Establish interactive newspaper lobby for "The Call"

Celebrate current heroes

FIRST VISIT



THE FIRST VISIT WOULD SIMPLY FEEL MUCH MORE COMPLETE WITH MORE OPTIONS TO SATISFY CURIOSITY. THINK 'DENSITY AND DIVERSIFY'. ENCOURAGE SAMPLING.

OPPORTUNITIES:



WEEKDAY



GAMEDAY



“Developers are turning to consulting and marketing firms because they’re not getting what they need from traditional planning,” says Neil Kittredge.

EXPERIMENT WITH SPACE...
PROVIDE A PLACE AND SPACE TO CREATE
 The meaning of form is not merely to contain people and activities. Providing space to create not only includes a local scene, but generates unique, repeat traffic. **REHEARSAL STUDIOS:** Convert the vacant Fletcher Hotel into an artists’ studio, which offers rehearsal and practice space for artists and musicians to bring together **A SCHOOL,** whether it is a fully accredited institution operating out of Missouri, or a small storefront offering music lessons, painting, and art classes. Success is a clear way to foster an identity and an appreciation of the arts. From redefining the road.

EXPERIMENT WITH DIFFERENCE...
TAILOR THE ENTERTAINMENT
 Sometimes the things we start like of the things unfamiliar to us are the things that allow our identity to grow. **OFFER UNIQUE JAZZ EXPERIENCES:** From blues clubs to live jazz sessions to street performances to weekly rehearsal halls. **Host a live jazz jam session every Saturday night.** **Live jazz jam sessions:** **EMBRACE OTHER FORMS OF MUSIC:** In many forms of music share the spirit of jazz. From blues to rock, to hip-hop, to other great, innovative music. Host jazz shows from live shows, albums and even recording digital recordings.

EXPERIMENT WITH PEOPLE...
TAKE A CHANCE ON ME
 Our neighborhood identity will never grow beyond the point if we are afraid of failure. That is, and we are a natural part of an organic creative ecosystem. **CREATE AN “EXPERIMENT MARKET” ZONE:** On the side streets where the opportunities for getting on stage are limited, create an open air market place where merchants and artists can sell their goods to residents and visitors to the district. Take a chance on entrepreneurs who may have things like a business plan, but have been very cautious about.



PROMOTE THE COMMUNITY...
HOST LARGE AND SMALL EVENTS
 Draw people in from afar with annual pub crawl events like Rhythm & Ribs that encompass all things 18th & Vine. Celebrate locals with First Saturdays, No Cars! days to foster pedestrian thoroughfares and casual strolling. Let people see 18th & Vine from all angles. **Host one day festivals that require less planning, but keep the crowds flowing.** One month, the north side of the street hosts a one day music/food festival – the next month it's hosted by the south side.

PROMOTE THE TALENT...
SHOWCASE HOMEGROWN TALENT
 Promote art and music created and produced in 18th & Vine. Share it with the public. **Utilize neighborhood clubs.** Sell at neighborhood stores or at an 18th&Vine.com website. Broadcast from 18th & Vine Radio.

PROMOTE IT YOURSELF...
DIY: DO-IT-YOURSELF
 When it comes to your product and your image, produce it yourself. **NEIGHBORHOOD GRAPHIC DESIGN:** Use graphic, multimedia, and video production houses that not only produce the work of 18th & Vine artists, but also offer services to the Kansas City area and beyond. **18TH & VINE RECORDS:** A record label and recording studio to produce and release the work of 18th & Vine artists. Create a fan base that gets to “know the vibe at 18th & Vine” through its label from outside Kansas City. Get fans to act as a street team to promote music and community on the internet and to friends.



urban planning—but not in any conventional sense. Instead of doing massing studies or land-use plans, laying out infrastructure, writing zoning codes, or proposing blockbuster museums, IDEO’s Smart Space group articulates the spirit of a place but leaves its realization to the clients: developers, park conservancies, hospitality companies, and—Williams soon determined—the JDRC, with the Kauffman Foundation footing the bill.

Roshi Givechi, a frequent collaborator in the Smart Space practice, first came to Kansas City in April 2005. Soon after, she and her team, including IDEO designer Joe Graceffa, immersed themselves in “the Vine,” applying the multidisciplinary method they bring to nearly all their projects, whether bathroom cleaners or hotel rooms. They hosted “whine and dines” (focus-group dinners), walked the streets, ate in the restaurants, did historical research, took photographs, and interviewed dozens of people about the neighborhood, sometimes on videotape. Part anthropology (with IDEO’s trained anthropologists), part site exploration (with IDEO’s trained architects), part documentary filmmaking (with IDEO’s trained media artists), their approach is to seek the qualitative essence of the community from the perspective of the community.

Givechi likes to tell the story of the Saturday night in Kansas City when she took a little disco nap and then headed out alone to watch an all-night jazz jam session. She clearly relishes the

experience—its combination of soaking up the atmosphere and blending into the background, toeing the line of the outside observer. “It’s like serving as a mirror,” Givechi says. “We were speaking to the people in the community, but we didn’t have a lot of investment in what exactly happened because we’re not going to profit in any given way.”

Williams puts it another way: “They don’t have a dog in the fight.” Unlike most urban planners (a term IDEO resists), not only does IDEO avoid the appearance of parachuting in with a vision, but their success—and billings—isn’t measured by the place that’s eventually built, or even if anything ever gets built at all. The firm deliberately dodges all the “technical” parts of urban planning: arranging infrastructure, determining financing, and navigating the public process. Instead it practices urban planning as branding: define the



IDEO tries to reflect the textures and tones of a given neighborhood in a way that’s true to the space, and to design around behavior by understanding who lives there. A collage of buildings in IDEO’s study for Uptown Oakland (above) references Oakland’s defining traits to understand who might choose to live in the area.

For a breakdown of the Uptown Oakland project, see this month’s online exclusive at www.metropolis mag.com.



By focusing on Sunday morning, the team discovered a large group of people attending services who were not supported by local amenities.

There's another level to IDEO's approach. "We design for time instead of designing for space," Dust explains.

spirit of a place and then let others articulate that spirit—whether in bricks, mortar, tax breaks, or billboards. IDEO claims accountability only for its ideas.

It's not clear that works, mostly because it's too early to tell—but also because the team at IDEO is messing with the DNA of the planning process. They're changing it from a concrete process of infrastructure and building to an imagined one of narrative and identity; they're exchanging the idea of a place for place itself. In an urban realm already threatened by privatization—not just by developers but by a broader trend toward place-making as marketing—IDEO's approach could be seen to further erode the idea of city-building as a democratic process (if it ever was) because of the way it applies the shiny language of marketing to the gritty mixed-up world of the city. As IDEO emphasizes, its communication skills have been honed in the corporate world, and its "user centered" approach is often cast as a particularly empathetic version of market research.

IDEO's approach could be seen as a desperately needed fix to the broken instrument of urban planning, a way to energize a public process that too often skews places to the low-common denominator. Some leading planners are willing to give it a shot. "Developers are turning to consulting and marketing firms because they're not getting what they need from the traditional planning process," says Neil Kittredge, partner in charge of planning and urban design at Beyer Blinder Belle. Dennis Pieprz, president of Sasaki Associates, the large Boston-based urban-planning and design practice, believes that "it's critical that the poetry of cities and the potential for urban life be taken well beyond problem solving and issues of engineering." And Phil Enquist, a partner in Skidmore, Owings & Merrill's urban-design practice, finds IDEO's approach "refreshing in a way, because by not running that deep, by staying on the surface, it gets people excited about taking on the very complex challenge of rebuilding or redefining a neighborhood or district."

But they also stress that it's only half the battle, if even that much. "You may attract an investor, but you may not have the necessary infrastructural support to make sure that investment is going to work," Enquist says. Alexander Garvin, Yale planning professor and former lead planner of the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, offers a more direct assessment: "Planning is not just about an image, it is about a place to live." But Garvin is also quick to point out that planning has *always* been about image—whether New Urbanism's picket fences, Le Corbusier's towers in the park, or Daniel Libeskind's glimpse of the Statue of Liberty as he arrived in New York Harbor as an immigrant (the narrative that won him the commission for the master plan of Ground Zero). Like political propaganda, each image transcended the pros and cons of the plan itself—not that the line between the two can ever be clear. As Marshall Berman puts it, "The city is a symbolic expression of modernity." We are the places we make. But what is clear is that the deftness of IDEO's communication illuminates how inadequately urban planners typically convey their ideas.

IDEO's visions may not always be profound, but they're certainly alluring. The eight-inch-square bound book they produced for the 18th and Vine community is, by most any standard, a beautiful thing—well designed and elegantly written. Its voice is equal parts travel guide, self-help book, and manifesto—as if Oprah took a semester at the Bauhaus. Unlike an annual report or a university's "view book," it is self-conscious enough about the challenges the neighborhood faces to feel sincere and authentic; unlike many planning documents, it ducks dogma of any stripe. The specific design suggestions may come straight from urban planning's current toolbox, but IDEO synthesizes them into snappier slogans: *Create borders to create bonds. Communicate community. Densify and diversify. Unpack the museum.*

But there's another level to IDEO's approach, which Dust often cites as the thing that makes it unique as architecture rather than just presentation. "We design for time instead of designing for space," he explains. At 18th and Vine, the Smart Space team imagined different encounters with the neighborhood—a first-time visit, going out on Saturday night, going to church on Sunday morning, a regular weekday—and only then considered what places would support those "moments." They then presented the ideas with written vignettes, imagined stores and restaurants, and unusually clear axonometric diagrams, like the kind you'd find in an illustrated guidebook. One vision was to create a set of after-church activities: a bookstore, florist ("Petals"), and brunch spot. *By populating the area with relevant eateries and shops, we can serve more than their soul.*

For many firms all this blue-sky thinking would be embraced as a means to drive business to the back of the house, where the construction documents could be cranked out. But IDEO—which long ago gained a reputation for being expensive—rejects the idea. "I could have thirty interns in the back hacking out drawings," Dust says, "but that would be fundamentally disruptive to the entire way we work as a culture. It's not just finances, because we could do it. And there've been moments where we've said, 'What if we bought a such and such.' But it would start to set up a tier system. We're accountable to the people who work here to make sure their work is interesting."

IDEO's sense of empowerment, its holistic world-changing ambition, is a key part of its character—and precisely the thing that makes people wonder how it gets away with it all. The answer lies partly in the Smart Space practice's origins in the ashes of the dot-com boom. It was the same moment that IDEO began working extensively with hospitals, rethinking patients' entire progress through the health-care system. "We realized we didn't have enough experience to actually go in and design the space," Dust recalls, "so what we decided to do was tell a story about what the space could be that would help guide everyone else to do it." This was no small insight: if IDEO was going to make spaces it had to act like IDEO, which inherently meant not

acting like architects. “Up until then we had just acted like our own thing, doing space like space has always been done,” Dust continues. “But then we said, ‘If we’re going to be a space practice at IDEO, we’re going to act more like the rest of IDEO. We’re going to do the in-depth research, tell really compelling stories, find really remarkable moments; we’re going to prototype.’”

The name for Smart Space emerged from a related ambition: to tap IDEO’s clients’ often generous marketing budgets instead of their often strapped facility allowances. Dust explains by drawing two circles on a sheet of paper, one labeled “smarts” and the other “space.” “The whole point,” Dust says, “was connecting the smarts of an organization to the space part”: management to facilities, strategic thinking to design. That should sound familiar; it’s the insight that has defined the design profession’s move toward the mainstream over the last ten years, and it’s easy to give IDEO a chunk of the credit. In corporate America today you may hire an architect to design a building or an industrial designer to design a product, but you go to IDEO to *innovate*.

Greg Vilkin, president of Forest City Residential West, became interested in IDEO after reading a *Business Week* cover story about the firm. (The company’s New York wing, Forest City Ratner, is currently roiling Brooklyn with its Frank Gehry–designed plan for Atlantic Yards.) Soon after, Vilkin pitched Dust the idea of applying IDEO’s customer-research methodology to multi-family real estate development, a business that he felt had not evolved with the times.

“We didn’t go to IDEO and say, ‘Draw the building,’ ” Vilkin says. “We let them do what they do better than anyone in the country that we’ve found, which is conceptualize who the customer is and what is going to drive them.” In practice that meant IDEO began with its customary research, pounding the pavement and sucking it all in, then synthesizing their observations in two ways: defining “mind-sets” (as opposed to demographics) of potential renters, and suggesting ways the Forest City built spaces could support those mind-sets. IDEO was setting the stage for development, except in this case the developer was already in place.

IDEO’s approach was startlingly fresh, if only for its honesty. “Once you sign them up they forget about you, and they’re just out there. They don’t give a damn about you,” says Adam Siegal, vice president of strategic marketing for Forest City’s residential developments.

The firm’s research in Oakland, California, conducted to aid Forest City in the planning of a 665-unit housing development, is remarkable for how well it captures the grit of the place. The combination of talking heads, facts, and photographs—all expressed in a snappy book with a strong graphic voice—has a humanity and emotion unheard of in a planning analysis, much less one sponsored by a developer. IDEO makes no apologies for that. “At IDEO I always consider myself a social worker for the consumer,” says Amy Leventhal, who worked with Forest City but has since left IDEO to pursue a career as a vegan chef. “I just really wanted to make sure we were respecting the communities we were

moving into, respecting the people who may move in, and respecting the client and helping them to understand.”

Siegal loved it. “They’re an amazing interpreter of the voice of the people,” he says, raising his voice in excitement. “You can yell about the fact that they’re not urban planners and they haven’t studied the separation of transportation nodes. But by the same token, the extent to which they misfire in their recommendations because of that, they make up for in freedom of thought.” But is it urban planning? Not really. Is it about making places? Certainly. But does that freedom of thought translate into new kinds of place-making or a new process for urban planning?

At the end of a long day talking in IDEO’s San Francisco office, I rode the BART train to Oakland with Givechi and Andy Williams, an IDEO de-signer. We peered at the size 11 platform shoes in the window of a store that serves the local transvestite community and had coffee at Mama Buzz, a café where the team conducted interviews. At the building site bulldozers were busily scraping the land flat for the foundations. A billboard advertised the project. Its watercolor rendering showed an utterly conventional-looking apartment complex—the kind of unornamented, decently proportioned colored-stucco housing block rising all over Northern California. It was hard not to be disappointed. For all the nuance of IDEO’s sense of Oakland and all its success at communicating that to Forest City, the project looked like any other project. Its reality was still just an idea. www.metropolismag.com