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Square Feet

Going Off the Beaten Path For New Design Ideas

By LISA CHAMBERLAIN

WHEN most other design firms were still using the same old focus-group techniques, IDEO invented the unfocus group, in which side conversations among participants are also recorded — to hear what they were really thinking. Finding out not just what people really think, but also how they really live, is the lifeblood of IDEO's innovative design work.

The firm made its name in designing products, including the Palm V hand-held organizer, but it has been turning its attention to spaces, or environment design. IDEO, founded in San Francisco in 1991, is delving into the psychology of space and coming up with unusual approaches for companies like **Marriott International** and **Forest City Enterprises**, two of the largest real estate businesses in the country.

Although IDEO has grown to 400 employees, it has retained its research techniques and small-firm attitude.

No one has a formal title, including Fred Dust, who might be described as the team leader of Smart Space, the company's real estate division. With a bachelor's degree in art history from Reed College in Oregon and a master's in architecture from the University of California, Berkeley, Mr. Dust is much like the firm itself: studied yet unpretentious, casually hip, optimistic by nature — and very hard-working.

Smart Space takes on 45 projects a year. They range from designing a better office cubicle to a project to redevelop commercial ventures within an African-American neighborhood in Kansas City. "We design for activity as much for space," Mr. Dust said.

To achieve this, the team starts with a "deep dive," during which Smart Space designers, anthropologists and researchers spend days — sometimes weeks — shadowing people to observe how they live: when and where they eat, what time they go to bed, what their hobbies are, how they spend their money. The results of this research are often quite different from the conventional wisdom.



Jessica Brandi Lifland for The New York Times, above left; Sean Ferry/IDEO, above right; IDEO, below



Dana Cho, Fred Dust and Roshi Givechi of IDEO, the design firm, above left. For the TownePlace Suites unit of Marriott International, IDEO created a prototype of a flexible modular wall unit, above, which can be used as both a workspace and a dining table. Marriott employees, left, tested the sample suite.

An example is a project that Smart Space recently completed for a Marriott's extended-stay hotel chain, TownePlace Suites. The prevailing wisdom about travelers who need extended-stay accommodations is that they want all their needs to be met by the hotel itself. IDEO researchers found this assumption to be incorrect after spending weeks talking with TownePlace guests.

What they found was that people on extended stays do not talk about "staying" in the hotel but "living" in the city. They want to get to know the community around them, and they do not want to spend a lot of time hanging around the hotel. And because they have fewer chores — like mowing the lawn or walking the dog — they also want to use their spare time on such things as learning a new language or taking piano lessons.

IDEO translated those results into a design concept. In the new lobby, instead of the traditional couch, coffee table and

television set that nobody is watching, there are "10-minute perches" — benches, stools and places to stand and lean — where a guest can flip through a magazine while finishing a cup of coffee.

More significantly, the Smart Space team designed a map wall: a huge rendering of the immediate area, with notations about local shopping, restaurants, parks and recreation areas. But it is more than just a map. It can be annotated by guests who find their own hidden treasures in the community, and it serves as a conversation starter.

The team also found that because guests often need the equivalent of a home office, they may turn their bedrooms into work spaces. So it came up with a highly flexible modular wall unit where there had previously been a only large dining table; guests can adapt the elements to use them as an office as well as a place to eat.

The client, of course, has to buy into a design concept. So the Smart Space team

built a life-size lobby and suite out of white foam core and invited Marriott executives, hotel managers and even guests to interact with the new design and to make suggestions.

"We've never gone through anything like this," said Laura Bates, senior vice president for extended-stay brands at Marriott. "We have built sample rooms, but it's more of a décor approach. This was fundamentally changing the space layout and the architecture. Not only did we get a strategy based on the anthropology of the guest, but we got very quickly to tangible design."

Marriott hired an architecture firm to carry out the redesign, which will be rolled out at all 122 TownePlace Suites sites starting in April.

One of IDEO's biggest clients is Forest City Enterprises, the real estate development company based in Cleveland.

For most residential projects, "the typical developer programs the number of one-, two- and three-bedroom units based on some kind of research of the area, and then hires an architect," said Gregory Vilkin, president of Forest City Residential West. "That's not very sophisticated," he added. "We wanted to really understand — what is urban housing and who lives there? They conducted extensive research and came up with five different prototypes of the urban dweller, and we tested that against our clients, and it was remarkably accurate."

For example, Smart Space researchers identified one group as "explorers" — curious and investigative people who like to explore the neighborhood and are attracted to old commercial buildings converted into housing and other creative living spaces. Another group is "modern romantics," who tend to be highly educated, want comfort and seek to live in traditional apartment buildings.

Using anthropology to understand what people want from a room.

Because of the researchers' work, the Smart Space team recommended scrapping the old-fashioned leasing office and replacing it with a "welcoming center." One will open soon at University Park Living, a four-building development in Cambridge, Mass.

Rather than just selling units, the welcoming center will also showcase the surrounding area with a "Five, Five, Five" map that shows neighborhood amenities

within five minutes, five blocks and five miles. Potential residents are also offered a selection of postcards that include facts about the development and the neighborhood; one card, for example, might have a picture of a dog with information about nearby veterinary clinics. People take the cards that interest them and essentially create their own brochures, instead of being handed general ones by sales agents.

An interactive area will have computers where people can take a tongue-in-cheek personality test to find out which of the four Forest City buildings — all very different in design — will best suit them.

"It's a whole different way to experience leasing," said Adam Siegal, vice president for strategic marketing at the Forest City Enterprises residential group.

Though Forest City Enterprises and IDEO have worked together for only a little more than a year, the company expects the relationship to have a significant impact on how developments are ultimately designed, not just marketed. Forest City Enterprises has signed an exclusive contract with IDEO, which now has a team that works solely on Forest City projects, focusing on its high-end urban rental housing.

"When you're building a new space, the client has to own it," Mr. Dust said. "So we are at our best when we're teaching our clients how to be their own design advocates."