

DESIGN 2004

Design Gets Real

HOW IT'S CHANGING THE WAY WE WORK AND LIVE

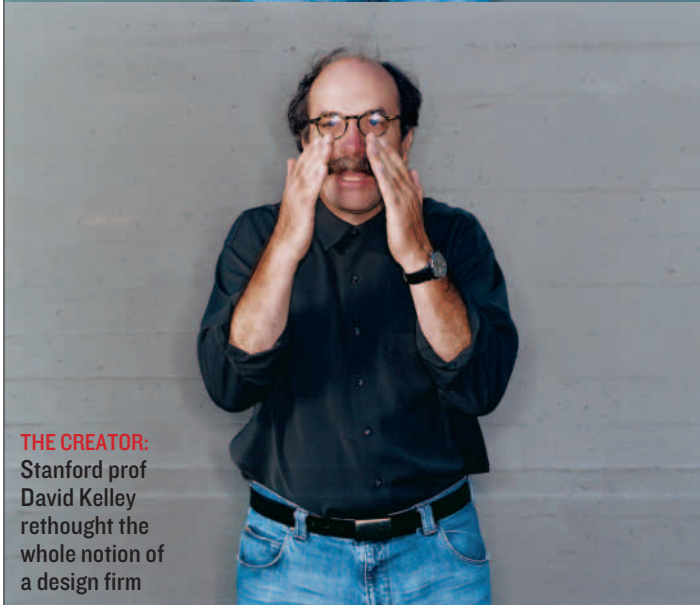
By Dorothy Kalins. Design has never been more accessible (Crate & Barrels sprouting like Starbucks; restaurants and hotels could be design museums) or more emotional (technology so friendly you want to pet it instead of hurling it across the room in frustration; color so buoyant it makes matte black and titanium look so ... dot-com). NEWSWEEK devotes its first design issue ever to the celebration of this fresh life-affirming spirit. Today, the best designers worry as much about the way things feel as the way they look. On the following pages, you'll encounter not just cool new objects but a welcome optimism that's driving both the folks who design the lamp and the folks who switch it on. Everyday tools pack such high good humor, they put the fun back in function. Cars have

shapes you can actually remember. Being new is no longer enough. The best furniture honors its roots—and ours. (What was up with those chairs that were so edgy you could cut yourself on them?) Rooms are illuminated by the inevitable signs of life within. Controlled messiness, we've discovered at last, is far preferable to airless perfection.

Designers these days seem weary of trendiness, less inclined to clobber us with the weight of their own importance. When I was preparing for this issue, I met with David Kelley, chairman of the noted design firm IDEO. He wheeled up to our meeting on his bike, direct from his teaching gig at Stanford, and told me: "I'd much rather sit with a client and paint a vision of a design experience"—like rethinking a hospi-

tal's emergency room—"than design a minimalist black thing to put pencils in." And Michael Van Valkenburgh, the landscape designer renowned for his modernist projects, looked up from his lunch in New York City one day and said: "I am just not interested anymore in imposing patterns on the land. What I care about is how it feels to be there." He went on to describe a stone wall he's designing for Teardrop Park in lower Manhattan. "I want the rocks to weep," he said.

Early one foggy San Francisco morning I was startled by this sign in a Design Within Reach shop: "Design is so important because chaos is so hard." I squinted to see who said that. "Jules Feiffer." Figures. We have seen the future, I thought, and it makes us smile.



THE CREATOR:
Stanford prof
David Kelley
rethought the
whole notion of
a design firm

Reinventing Everyday Life

At this cutting-edge firm, design's not just about widgetry anymore

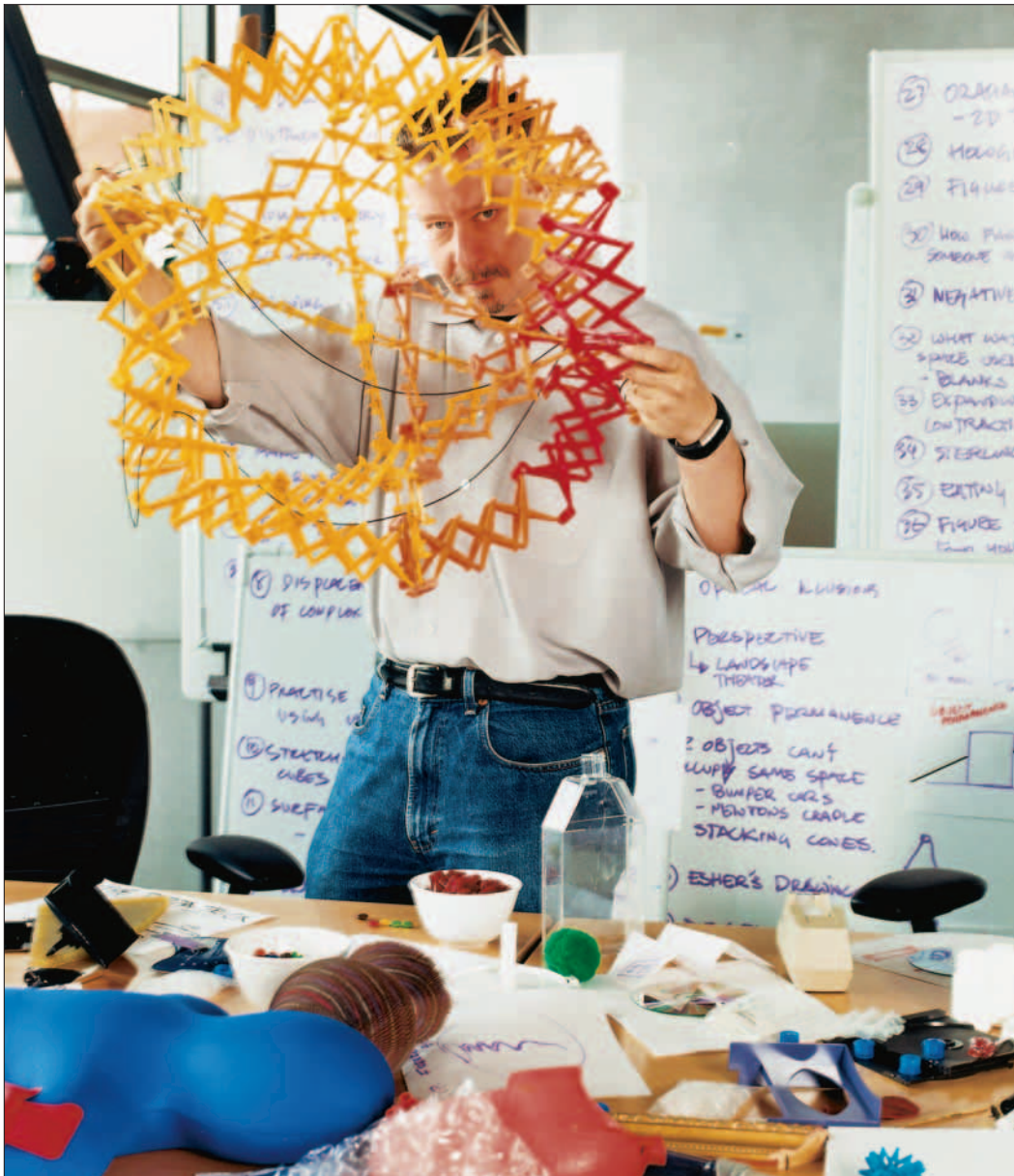
BY BRAD STONE

WHEN THE FIVE-PERSON TEAM from an exotic West Coast design firm called IDEO descended on Memorial Hospital in South Bend, Ind., hospital administrators—as one later put it—“had no idea what we were getting into.” IDEO is the nation’s largest industrial-design firm, the outfit that created Apple’s first mouse, the sleek

Palm V handheld computer, Nike’s wraparound sunglasses and Crest’s stand-up toothpaste tube. Its 350 designers, in eight cities around the world, take on some 500 projects a year. But the IDEO team had more on its mind than spiffing up the medical widgetry and moving the furniture around. In two weeks they turned the hospital upside down: not just taking over the

boardroom to build models of nurses’ stations and cubicles out of foam board and duct tape, but invading rooms to take notes and photographs, analyzing and rethinking how staff interacted with patients and visitors. Didn’t these people have any boundaries?

Well, they hope not. IDEO is at the forefront of a radical shift in the very concept of de-



IDEO MAN: As CEO Brown sees the world, changing people is harder than changing products

IDEO's chairman. The team that worked on Memorial Hospital, for example, included both a high-tech engineer and a widely respected photographer. At IDEO, designers engage in both the usual brainstorming and seat-of-the-pants prototyping—one device used for sinus surgery was mocked up from a marker pen, a film canister and a clothespin—and the sort of field observation Jane Goodall did among the primates of Africa. As CEO Tim Brown puts it, "We think you get nothing from sitting at a computer all day."

This shift from products to process—or, in IDEO-speak, "verbs, not nouns"—comes partly from sheer necessity. With traditional manufacturing migrating overseas and Silicon Valley in a slump, the gizmo market has shrunk, so a product IDEO now sells is its prized method for unleashing creativity, applying it both to physical spaces and to human behavior. It offers "innovation services" to such companies as Amtrak, which hired the firm to design the interior of its new high-speed Acela Express train. Focusing on the experience of riding a train, and not the train itself, IDEO and partners surveyed 24,000 travelers and Amtrak employees. Out of this came such recommendations as swiveling oversize seats so passengers can face each other, conference tables in each car for onboard meetings—no more treks to an overcrowded dining car—and every traveler's favorite amenity, spacious bathrooms.

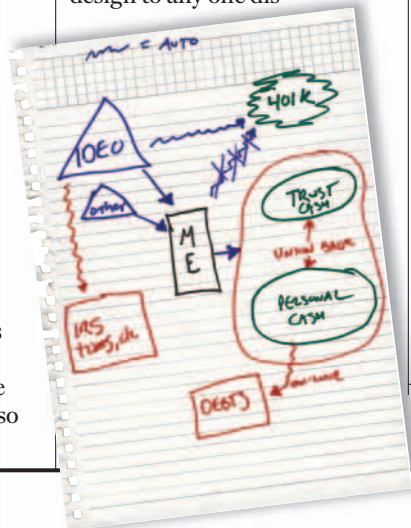
At Memorial Hospital, IDEO's method of observation and innovation yielded more dramatic results. The design team noted that the nurses' stations looked too much like information desks; nurses were interrupted dozens of times a day, usually just by visitors who were lost in the subterranean hallways and needed direc-

sign, moving from inventing objects to analyzing and reshaping the way environments and customs mold our experiences. The Palo Alto, Calif.-based firm now applies the open-eyed, open-ended process it uses for coming up with new products to rethink the placement of signs in a store, the positioning of seats in an airplane, even the way a company treats customers and suppliers; it's obliterating traditional distinctions among designers, architects and business-strategy consultants. "IDEO's advantage is they have their fingers in so many different industries,"

says Stanford engineering professor Bob Sutton, who has studied the firm. "They're not experts in applying industrial design to any one dis-

cipline, but they're really good at bringing them together, remembering and recombining them to do new stuff."

IDEO's innovation engine was conceived in 1978 by David Kelley, then a Stanford engineering grad student, who believed that a design firm should incorporate not just mechanical engineering but social science, computer science and marketing. "I fell in love with the idea of design as a discipline that puts things together and innovates in any subject," says Kelley, who now directs Stanford's product-design program and is



FLOW CHART: Sketches help a bank help its customers

tions. Designers modeled new workstations with more privacy and simplified signs to help disoriented visitors. In the drab waiting rooms they found nervous, loitering families, sometimes bivouacked on the floor, sometimes sitting side by side as if they were waiting for a bus. So IDEO asked hospital staffers to bring in photos of how their own families interacted; most brought pictures of the dinner table. In the new wing, opening in 2005, the waiting room will have tables, private family rooms, a large bistro and designated family space in the larger and more accommodating patient rooms. And,

borrowing an idea from the world of retail, IDEO recommended transparent entrance doors to departments, to create welcoming “storefronts” that give visitors permission to enter, instead of making them feel trapped in a confusing, alienating maze.

Getting IDEO-ized doesn't always work out so happily. Boston's Brigham and Women's Hospital hired the firm last year. IDEO came up with clearer wall signs and better traffic flow, but the hospital couldn't afford to replace its outmoded call-light system in patient rooms, and the employee union understandably went ballistic when

IDEO suggested new language for the hospital's “philosophy of care” statement: that its mission was to “surprise and delight” patients and families. As CEO Brown puts it, “The notion that you can make changes happen quickly is not true.” Still, IDEO's vision of more intelligent and humane engineering of everyday life persists after its design teams depart—often leaving behind IDEO-style in-house committees to carry on the process of observation, brainstorming, prototyping and reinvention. They're learning that good design isn't easy; IDEO only makes it look that way. ■