



EXECUTIVE PRIMER/**INTERIOR DESIGN**

Probably the best starting point is to address a misimpression many have about **Interior Design** and more specifically, what the profession is not.

There is considerable confusion between Interior Design and Interior Decoration. They sound similar but in practical terms, they are worlds apart. While the former, Interior Design, does include an element of the latter, aesthetics appointment, the look of a space is only the most obvious, and arguably the least significant component of the space planning criteria.

The premises must be visually appealing, of course. Stimulating environments promote pride and engagement. But the primary function of interior design is the optimal allocation of space to achieve operational efficiency. That is the true measure of accomplishment. In many ways good looks are simply a by-product of a rigorous organizational process.

*“new space
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When the decision is made to move to new premises, an opening presents itself to completely reevaluate and reinterpret the tenets of the operational footprint. Challenging assumptions, even entrenched ones, drives change. Over time, many things become redundant but physical constraints often make them hard to see and all but impossible to address. New space provides an organizational 'reset' that allows for new thinking and the elimination of outmoded approaches. It is a pivotal opportunity that should not be missed.

One can debate the merits of an almost endless array of furniture, fixtures and equipment (*FF&E*) but the prime requirement of any space is satisfying the needs of people. Some functions flourish in open plan concepts; others require private space for thought or confidentiality. Most facilities have a range of both. How space manifests itself in physical terms typically depends on the culture of the organization. But whatever choices are made, poor ones have an impact on productivity and often retention.

Through training and experience, a good Interior Designer provides the client with a broad range of planning options, yielding operational enhancements that streamline day to day activities. Seeking expert advice is not unusual. Management routinely seeks the input of outside specialists for all sorts of things, legal, accounting, recruiting, strategy and so on. Though a considerably less frequent need, Interior Designers expertly catalyze productivity and efficiency in a premises, while providing the people working therein with an environment that is intuitive, visually stimulating and brand-focused.

ART OF THE START

As with many complex activities, several starting points exist. There are two distinct segments involved when moving to new premises; first, finding the right space and second, building-out the facility to accommodate the enterprise.

“*know the facts before you commit*”

For many the process starts with finding a real estate broker. That makes sense. There are many choices of brokers from large multi-national to small independents. Some boast access to huge portfolios across many buildings while others focus on individual buildings (*landmark, specialty, etc.*) and/or a particular area of town. The best choice depends on both the organization and the kind of space you are seeking. The big names are not always the right fit for many, for a variety of reasons, and small real estate brokers might be inappropriate for the needs of very large clients. Regardless of the choice, trust is an essential component for any relationship.

How much space do you require? That is central to any discussion you have with a real estate broker. To answer that accurately, we're going to suggest a completely different starting point. First, select an Interior Design firm. There is bias, of course, but the logic here is unassailable. Quantifying one's space requirements accurately is, in effect, defining current and future use.

Once you select a new space, it will then be sub-divided to accommodate the functional requirements. To do so, a designer will tally the number of people, calculate appropriate space allocation for each job function, define adjacencies and suggest shared amenities, as well as factoring in allowances for future differentials. Does it not make more sense to know these requirements in advance; to include specific needs as part of the search criteria? Maybe new work styles and technologies will allow you to use less space than you currently occupy or perhaps robust growth projections require bit more. Regardless, it's better to know the facts before you commit to any property.

THE RIGHT DESIGNER

Through training and experience, Interior Designers are uniquely qualified to delineate interiors. But space planning services can come from many sources, albeit with varying degrees of skill and focus. Interior Design practices are the primary source but many architectural firms also offer interior design as a service option. Furniture dealers too sometimes provide space planning services, or more correctly furniture plans, as part of a purchase. Real estate brokers and developers occasionally include space planning as a 'sweetener' for a lease agreement.

Again, there is an obvious bias toward design firms but in reality, there are good and not so good results to be found from all sources. Perhaps the most salient factor rests in focus. When the primary planning motivation is driven by a secondary consideration, key priorities can get skewed. For example, if a developer includes the space plan services, it's hard to imagine that any prospective tenant would not fit perfectly into the space. That is only natural. On paper, anything is possible. But the physical plane is less accommodating.

Good space planning has a very significant effect on operational efficiency, even job satisfaction, and is something probably best not left to someone with other interests and motivations. You are going to be in the space for years. During that time, little inconveniences can become major irritants and small inefficiencies can quietly cost thousands of dollars.

Ultimately, the 'right' Designer is the person or firm with whom you have the greatest comfort level; someone who can explain clearly what needs to happen and when, in order to keep the project moving along on schedule. That designer should share your values, understand your needs and zealously defend your interests. Building-out commercial space is complicated, intense and sometimes adversarial.

Designer
Designer
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Designer

“ the move
date is
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stone

There are huge design firms and small ones, however, big is not necessarily better nor is smaller an indicator of lesser skills. High-volume spaces require more people to plan and detail than small ones. More space means more specification and CAD work. That said, most large spaces tend to be fractal in nature (*repeating clusters*), while smaller footprints are typically unique configurations. Size does count in certain circumstances, but not in the way most think. Real innovation is often the domain of small, specialty firms.

Ask to see some projects of similar size and scope. Meet the individual or team actually doing the work. Everyone may be energized by the business development people but once they land the project, they move on to the next opportunity. Make sure you are comfortable with those delivering the service. It has little bearing on performance but any task is more pleasant when the meetings are at least collegial.

WHO'S IN CHARGE?

Ultimately, the project is your responsibility. But in most cases the task of creating new premises is extracurricular and regular duties rarely take a holiday. Building-out commercial space is like a complete home renovation on steroids; and there is no option to delay occupancy. Come hell or high water, the move date is carved in stone. One must then carefully coordinate planning, engineering, regulatory approvals, trades, FF&E lead times and site conditions, all to create the equivalent of *'just in time'* delivery.

Assuming space planning did not fall to the furniture supplier or landlord, there is no one who knows the details of the project better than the Interior Designer, your proxy on the construction team. The designer is thoroughly aware of every (*cubic*) inch of the space, what will go where and how it all fits together. They are therefore the most logical choice to manage the build-out, hands down. You make the big decisions, the designer manages the minutia. Any other option introduces redundancy and confusion into the process.

You may have a supplier in mind for this or that component but tender as much as you can. Tendering keeps costs and delivery under control. Every product has advantages and disadvantages. The lowest price is not necessarily the best price. The selection criteria could well be price but it could just as easily be performance or style. Tender everything, then choose the suppliers that best reflect your needs.

CONCLUSION

If you have read this far, you are most likely contemplating a change of premises. Congratulations! Building-out space is an assignment very few have the opportunity to experience during the course of their career. The task is complicated yet exhilarating, frustrating yet very rewarding, and in some cases a test of endurance. In the end there is a real sense of pride and accomplishment, something often missing from other activities.

MDA can help. The firm offers a full scope of Interior Design services; space planning through move management. Knowledgeable and friendly, the **MDA** team provides the in-depth project support you need to achieve truly amazing results - on time and on budget.



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