



## **Doing more with less: Design and design management challenges for non-profit institutions**

February 25, 2008 - Spotlights

Designing and building or renovating the flagship headquarters or facilities for a non-profit institution requires an especially skilled group of design consultants, legal advisors and qualified builders. With limited capital resources and a propensity to maximize those resources, non-profits have expectations that should be exceeded and managed for the institution to recognize value in their building team and realize best practices.

Most non-profit institutions tend to fall into three categories: educational, cultural and health related. Non-profit construction projects typically include new construction or renovation, phased expansions, and infrastructure modernizations.

While architects take different approaches to design and planning for their clients, two main considerations affect project design decision-making. First, since non-profits are mission driven, their mission needs to be embodied in the architectural design, where the architecture and interiors express the institution's statement and culture. Secondly, the project design must respond to the program of uses that the institution seeks to house.

The institution's primary constituents or community include the board, staff, volunteers, members, audiences, or clients, and donors. Each of these groups has a different set of interests. They must be unpacked during the pre-design phase so that a synthesis can be created from the conflicts that invariably and lawfully exist. It is vital that what emerges from this exploration be discovered early in the design phase. Equally important is that project leadership on the client side be clearly defined and represented by an institution's point person.

The integration of architectural design and the organization's mission, or what might be called the design expression of the institution, is achieved through a synthesis of the project's technical requirements, architectural program, and the institution's stakeholders or community. LEED certification, systems modernization, shell and core, and the building life cycle comprise the technical requirements. The technical requirements need to be considered in the context of spatial programming so that usable occupant space is maximized by a thoughtful integration of systems and design. Conversations with stakeholders reveal the confluence of interests that are then creatively developed and incorporated into the architectural program.

Architectural design must also consider capital and operational costs. It can be the case that organizations raise substantial capital resources for the design and construction but have modest funding for operational expenses. If the project requires substantial resources for its operation and maintenance that are not budgeted, this will invariably undermine the design and user experience.

Distributing per square foot costs tactically is key to building in the appropriate production value for various program uses. By analyzing the matrix of per square foot costs during the design development phase against the mission-based narrative, cost efficiencies can be managed within

the budget. Material selection, construction means and methods, and finish choices will vary. Meeting design intent within the budget and schedule is the architect's mission, doing more with fewer resources.

The design process must also take into consideration the construction management profile. Vacating the space, if an option during the renovation (versus building around occupants), must be weighed against the financial considerations of the cost of lost staff productivity, relocation costs, and costs - financial, programmatic, and perceptual - of being closed. Putting tasks on a critical path and phasing work often seems to be a way to positively impact project costs. While this must be done, field and schedule conditions are less predictable and it is critical to be flexible and facile during construction.

It is true that the final 5% of the construction project is what everyone sees. The management of this final phase of the project is the most challenging in order to maintain schedule and cost. It is at this point that the schedule often slips and costs to the organization escalate when the space is not available for occupancy.

In order to meet the inherent challenge of maximizing the resources of non-profits and producing a great product, a high-level design and design management consultation is needed. By maintaining the integrity of the mission-driven design on which non-profits depend, by way of on-the-ground design management, in the end, is what non-profit organizations require to perform at a high and competitive level.

One of the projects we are working on is for The All Stars Project, Inc. on West 42nd St. Its headquarters is under renovation and integrates the modernization of the heating, cooling and ventilation system with the re-design of its facade and lobby into a performance space.

Douglas Balder is the president of Douglas Balder Design & Planning, New York, N.Y.

New York Real Estate Journal - 17 Accord Park Drive #207, Norwell MA 02061 - (781) 878-4540