In Their Words...

What designers and owners really think about the relationship

**By Nicole Caruno**

Collaboration is key when it comes to any relationship and the owner/designer association is no different. Here, several owners and designers candidly discuss some of the biggest challenges and issues that come up, and what they look for in a partner.

The relationship takes a great trust and a great transparency.

Roger Hill
chairman/CEO, The Gettys Group

These are things you earn over time. We try really hard in the interview process to make sure the people we're working with—as much as they're interviewing us—we want to interview them and make sure we understand their goals, objectives and how they measure success. We're in the business of building beautiful profit centers and not monuments to ourselves. Some people get caught up in thinking what will be best for their portfolio vs. what's in the best interest for the brand and owner and, ultimately, the guest.

You need a commitment to an owner that you're going to be there for them as a project goes on. A project is a lot like the Dow Jones Industrial Average. Over time, it's going to go up, but there are going to be times when there are going to be challenges. That's where that trust is incredibly important.

It's really important early on—ideally, even in the interview process—for a budget to be shared. Someone saying, 'I'm not going to share a budget with you because it's going to hamper your creativity,' is just not efficient for anybody. Whether we're working in luxury or upper-upscale, we spend a dollar and make it look like two, but to not really understand budget from the onset can be counterproductive to accomplishing the ultimate goals and objectives. Sometimes, a mistake that occurs is someone thinks, 'Gosh, if I give you that budget, you're going to want to spend even more.'

but if you're dealing with real professionals, that's not how we'll operate. And, we can say, based on our experience, what you want to spend per room, that's really realistic; and based on the schedule, that's really realistic.

For us, what's most helpful is we have a workflow that we've created, and it's important for us to have an owner that appreciates the process that we've created. A truly successful ownership group works collaboratively through the entire process.

In the digital world we live in, because of the speed at which we can work, people sometimes view the job as not that difficult but, in reality, it is difficult. Being sensitive to the fact that we can work quickly and efficiently, and create great design in a period of time you wouldn't even have dreamt about a decade ago, sometimes people take that for granted.

With any project, there is a dimension of trust and confidence.

— Nunzio DeSantis
EVP, director, HKS Hospitality Group

It's essential to creating a dialogue and a mutual vision for a project with an owner. Any good relationship begins on really listening to the owner's aspirations and distilling what you hear, extracting the words, and creating the essence of what you're trying to accomplish—then coming back to the owner and making sure you're on the same playing field.

Each owner brings talents and experiences that are important. The thing that's most challenging is when you have an owner that is very inclusive, so inclusive that the last person he or she spoke to or the last property he or she visited influences the next week's generation of work.

So often, we're early in a large project and I'll tell the owner to try not to select everything on the interiors yet. Wait. Your building will take three years to open. In two or three years, the attitude of style has shifted. We're always a few years behind style. You're not designing a hotel for today; you're designing it for year five, when it has been open two to three years and hitting its stride. Forecasting trends are important, and to get an owner to buy into that is, oftentimes, a challenge. Many can't leapfrog—they get things by seeing, visiting, exploring. It comes back to trust and confidence. Be right there with the owner, as invested and passionate in the process and project as he or she is.

The greatest challenge with clients is making sure our budget and the program are well aligned early on. So many projects start off in trouble because there's too much scope against budget, and it's hard to catch up and subtract away. Make sure the framework is defined enough that you're not in the game to create paper architecture.

We generally have two clients we're serving; the client that hired us and directs us along the way, and the operator. In many cases, we're pitted between an owner and an operator. An owner sometimes

Schedule has become a driving force behind design.

—Christine Shanahan
director of design, HVS Design

A tight schedule limits the designers' ability to explore all avenues and be as inventive as possible. Good design is now about a hotel that has a personal stamp on it, one that feels like a well-cured home or a B&B, as opposed to a cookie-cutter experience. Shorter time frames make this collaborative process hard to accomplish.

We love working with an ownership group that has passion for the project and is involved. We find that this leads to a very successful project. While aesthetics can often drive the business in many hotels, it's the insight into the market, the guest and the community that helps to lead to a successful project. Each and every hotel has the possibility to be a unique destination and experience. Allowing the local property staff to bring value can lead to a hotel that is well-designed for that region with ties back to the community and local culture.
looks at an operator as someone he or she needs but doesn’t necessarily want to listen to. An operator needs things an owner sometimes doesn’t want to spend money on. The architect has to be the soft cushion between these two entities.

I like owners who are comfortable enough to get out of the comfort zone. Hospitality is an extraordinarily wonderful space today. It’s OK to be different, to get away from the traditional models of guest layout, lobbies, what restaurants and pools are like.

Good design and your portfolio is great; that gets you in the game, assuming you’re a good designer.

— Bashar Wali
principal & president, Provenance Hotels

For us, what creates the best outcome is chemistry. People underestimate chemistry; you have to be able to work with the person, have disagreements, exchange ideas. We don’t like ‘yes’ men and women who just do what we say. Being easy to work with and willing to collaborate—all those are probably the most important things.

Budget and the schedule are always important factors, as is listening. Many times, designers don’t listen because they think they know what we want. Slow down, listen and try to understand, and ask a lot of questions. Listening is a lost art.

I say I’m in the theater business: You stay in a hotel, and, unless you go home with a memory, what have I done? Nothing. We create memories by telling stories that are meaningful; I don’t want to use the over-used words of local, authentic, artisanal and all of that junk but, ultimately, creating a story that allows you to create memories. Interior design is the set. If the design doesn’t complement the story, there’s going to be a big disconnect. The room has to be aesthetically pleasing, so good design matters—it gets you in the game—but cohesive design that helps you tell a story and create memories is what wins you the game.

Ultimately, the mistake we owners make is we try to design for ourselves. It doesn’t mean what I want and like. Who is my audience, and what does it like? A designer who understands that audience is going to be far more effective. This is not an age question; it’s a relevancy question—finding someone who is the right fit for the right project opposed to someone who might have a big portfolio but not in that particular field. It’s become very micro, not based purely on experience, but a very specific experience for a specific segment. As an owner, don’t do it for me because I’m not your customer. If I’m a Ritz-Carlton guy, I’m not going to go stay at a citizenM. If I happen to be the citizenM’s owner, the designer should not take my personal biases because they’re based on my taste; a designer who understands that makes the process far simpler.

The communal space is so important. Good design in the room goes without saying, but someone who understands the relationship between the public spaces, someone who has had that experience, has become so valuable.

In addition, branding is at the core of everything we do. I want someone to believe in it as much as I do, so I have to look at his or her own branding. If they don’t understand the value of how to differentiate themselves among the sea of designers out there, how are they going to understand my goals?

The best way to work together is to ensure that owners don’t believe they’re designers and designers don’t believe they’re owners.

— Andres Szita
cofounder/chairman, Laurus Corporation

The goal for an owner is to perform the renovation on time and on budget, creating the most desirable guest experience. The goal for a designer is to do something unique and special while satisfying the PIP and stretching the budget as far as possible.

Designers are typically in a tough spot. Our budget is never enough, and I believe there is a true desire from the designer to excel and upgrade the facilities throughout. Yet, you cannot do everything, you need to control the scope. What makes sense for a designer from a design perspective may be different from what make sense to an owner from a ROI perspective, yet the guest experience is one that interacts with several components of the hotel.

For me, personally, not all designers are equal—one can be great for luxury assets, others understand the business hotel model better, and some do better designing limited-service. Designers have a particular ‘hand’ or DNA; it is the role of an owner to match the project with the right designer. Taste is key. It costs the same to do an ugly renovation as it does a beautiful one. Taste will make the difference between a lasting, successful project, and one that could fail.

Once the designer understands what you, the market and the asset need, the relationship just flows, and the next project becomes so much easier to handle.

It’s important to have a clear understanding of the project scope and goals; this is assisted with relationships.

— W. Guy Lindsey, SVP design & construction, Sunstone Hotel Investors

We are very fortunate in that we have some long-term, very good relationships with designers. This allows for the communication to flow easier and faster. We have certain preferences on styles, color palettes and operational efficiencies that our designers have figured out over the years. While, obviously, our designers like to push the parameters occasionally—and we let them—they understand the basis of our design directions. Not to be disregarded, it is important for our designers to understand and be up to date on the various brands’ latest design strategies. Getting the design close on the first few presentations is highly preferred by us.

As long as there is proper flow of communication, we can avoid many issues. The trap we try to avoid is loving a design and, then, being able to afford it. This primarily applies to public-area design. We never want to get too far down the design road without verifying some costs for construction and FF&E. We try to avoid failing in love with a design that is just cost apprehensive.

The traits we look for in design firms are actually quite simple: the ability to meet schedules, understand and relate budgets to design elements, creativity, brand knowledge, practicality and the general desire to work together. We greatly respect and appreciate the relationships we have with our designers. We value their abilities and talents to design, coordinate, provide accurate documentation and be part of our team. If everyone can remember these few things, the projects are well done and fun to work on.

The time it takes to get a design done is significantly shorter as the learning curve is reduced. This allows my department to have time to appropriately price out the project, offer any suggestions and, most importantly, properly prepare and coordinate the entire project. A few years ago, we purchased a full-service, upscale hotel that we converted to another brand. As a result of a design process that met or exceeded our design window, we were able to complete the entire renovation of all public areas, guestrooms, guest baths and corridors in 13 months. While this certainly is not a standard we attempt to achieve on all projects, it does indicate what can be accomplished with the right team.