

DESIGNERS ILLUSTRATED

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FIRST IMPRESSIONS

LOBBIES HAVE BECOME THE LAST STAND FOR SMALL, INDEPENDENT COMMERCIAL DESIGNERS. BUT CHANGE IS IN THE WIND. THREE TOP DESIGNERS DISCUSS THE ART OF THE ENTRANCE, AND WHAT'S COMING.

The first impression has become the last remaining preserve of the independent commercial designer. Long live the lobby! Everything else, including the genuine interior of an office, is more often designed by someone attached to the company that sells the panel systems or the high end furniture. Or else, the design comes from an architect.

It's all a matter of economy — economy of money, time, and administration, and perhaps the vague conviction that a conference room is a conference room is a conference room. And the same with production areas. So from say, an up-and-coming young Apple's point of view, if you're going to spend money on design, spend the money on an independent interior designer to do just the lobby. Forget everything else. After all, this is the age of images. Appearance is everything. Tone is all. The last impression is the first.

That's nonsense of course, as any designer knows. There are all kinds of opportunities for creativity in work areas, and many client companies have recognized that. Moreover, as the nature of home gradually pervades the nature of work, residential design innovation will no doubt influence even more than it has, commercial design.

Think of the open kitchen. The idea of inviting people, even strangers, into a space in which the process of living reveals itself, is old hat. Whether in California the idea began at Spago's or the other way around, showing how things work has become part of the design. That's an old style in architecture, a design that went away, but will inevitably return. So down the road the lobby may evolve, may open up, and become part of the work area, which in turn will seem ever more like home.

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LEFT: The Rincón Center's atrium by right. Photo courtesy of award-winning commercial and residential design photographer, Steven Whitaker

In the 1980s, the cubicle became one of the great design innovations of the decade. It gave prominence to semi-skilled labor by acknowledging the desire for privacy and the ambiance of home. In the broadest sense, it signified profound change. In Silicon Valley, particularly, it suggested the transition from an industrial-based economy to an information-based economy; from Henry Ford to Stephen Jobs; from factory pits to padded jungle; from large, open work space to a small, confined work space — which suggested the paradox of this new vehicle, the personal computer, which was enormous in concept, insignificant in size, and with an engine no bigger than a speck of dust.

As a definition of space, the cubicle wasn't new, but because panels could now be reassembled so easily, it epitomized a new flexibility of function. The standard cubicle was approximately eight feet by ten feet and 66 inches high. High enough to allow a person sitting down a sense of enclosure, low enough that emergency exit signs were easily visible.

The manufacture of the cubicle became a kind of growth industry, which included commercial designers. In the mid-80s, it was relatively easy for a designer to become a consultant for a developer who needed guidance in 'space planning'. There was a lot of space, and a lot of start-up companies looking to fill it. Based on the developer's master plan, and the number of workers in a ten-

ant company, the designer could devise various scenarios. Pay was ten cents to forty cents a square foot. Of course, the promise of real money came through the possibility that by association with the developer, the lessee would hire the designer to do an entire office. That might eventually mean an entire building.

As an aside, panel systems were made, for the most part, by a handful of companies that dominated the market. They soon fell into a bidding war to win the large contracts. The strategy was to get in the door to a large company like Apple with an outrageously low bid, then make money through the sale of specialized office furniture. But invariably executives sought out high end custom furniture, which eventually knocked the panel system manufacturers on their heels. To survive, and because they were vastly wealthy companies, the panel system makers bought up the major furniture companies, and also went into the business of reconditioning used furniture.

In the process, and as a way to improve their market penetration, they also entered into the world of commercial design. That way they could offer clients a package deal — panels, high-end furniture, and someone to put it all together. Which is one reason that many independent designers found themselves like Cordelias, with the least part of the realm, and not much love besides.

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THREE BY DEBRA WALKER

LEFT: The Golden Gateway Center, located in back of the Embarcadero Center in downtown San Francisco, was started in the 1960s. As part of an extensive renovation plan, the lobbies were redesigned by San Francisco designer Debra Walker. She added indirect lighting, as well as paneling to provide a greater sense of intimacy in what had been a voluminous space with little warmth. She also made the furniture larger to match the scale of the room, and to make the space more inviting.

FACING PAGE: A corner as cool as a dry martini, in the Rincon Center's Aste Restaurant — which is no longer, but certainly suggests the possibilities of fine design. The torchere was designed by Ms. Walker, based on a Phoenix Day Lighting Co. product. She also designed the Art Deco chair, using particle board in the arms to echo details in the wall finishings.

PREVIOUS PAGE: Looking up through the atrium of the Rincon Center, with its signature 200-foot skylight. The much ballyhooed project, which was built on the remnants of the "Old Main" U.S. Post Office in downtown San Francisco, may have cost as much as \$85 million to build. It was developed by Perini Land & Development Company, and designed by architect Scott Johnson. "This was a project that captured all the problems and possibilities of commercial interior design," says Ms. Walker, who was among the consultants that participated in the selection of finishes, moldings, floor patterns, column details, interior plantings, and various furnishings for the atrium. She also did the lobbies for some of the residential areas, and a display in the historic post office lobby.

