



HILDESHEIM KOREA ENTRANCE

Environetics Comes Full Circle

by Peter Carey

In the ever-changing world of corporate interior design, gauging an accurate history of a temporal working practice is difficult: a ten-year lease is a lifetime; going back 30 or 40 years is so many design generations that few survivors exist to tell an accurate story; further than that is ancient history.

I was surprised to find out that **Environetics** was founded in New York way back in 1946. It began as a trailblazing firm with a then-new concept of focusing on corporate interior design. Collaborating with NASA in the 1960's, Environetics pioneered the use of computer-generated design in its projects. The Sears Tower commission in Chicago, designed from 1969-1974, became a landmark for the firm when the entire 4.4 million sq. ft. of interior space was designed with an Environetics computer drafting system. As with many of its clients throughout the same span of de-

acades, Environetics has gone through innumerable changes in names, office locations and philosophies. Its most recent change was reclaiming the original name of the firm after its partnership with **Cubellis** ended in 2009 when Cubellis closed its doors.

"After the relationship with Cubellis ended and Environetics was reborn," said **David Rush**, Managing Principal of the New York office. "Core people like **Jay Cohen**, **Annie Lee** and **Adam Snyder** wanted to continue, and we were motivated to do it on our own again. I never believed the firm was a one-man band; this business has always been about collaborating. If people want to take a risk and put some skin in the game, they need to be recognized." Appointing both Ms. Lee and Mr. Snyder as principals to join with Mr. Cohen as principals in the latest incarnation of



DAVID RUSH



JAY COHEN



ANNIE LEE



ADAM SNYDER

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Environetics, Mr. Rush said, “When you start to think of the firm as an organism, a living breathing thing, if you are not one of the people taking care of that organism, you don’t really care about its success.”

“We take great pride in our history,” said Ms. Lee. “There was a debate whether we were the first interior

design firm in the US; there may be one other candidate. At one point, Environetics had offices

in twenty-six countries.” Forsaking a traditional top-down organizational system for Environetics’s new incarnation, Ms. Lee said, “We have a pyramid of working relationships; people have to work a certain number of years to move ahead.”

Today’s challenging times require a more egalitarian approach. “The Cubellis experience gave us some really valuable lessons in a good way,” said Mr. Rush. “We learned about being a part of a large organization where everyone had to report to someone; it was very organized, but it took a very

long time even to create a job number for a new project.” Accountability throughout the restructured firm was an agenda that inspired the group forward. “Individual responsibility is what makes a firm successful,” he said.

Recognizing that good ideas result from expecting the staff to empathize with each client and care about what

The bitterness of poor quality remains long after the sweetness of low price is forgotten.

that client wants to accomplish, Mr. Rush said, “Seeing things that aren’t yet there excites us. If

we can’t inspire each other, we are not going to be able to inspire a client. At the end of the day, what we want is an opportunity to distinguish ourselves by delivering a service that is not a commodity.” Speaking of a recent client interview, the firm presented a space study diagram during a site visit, Mr. Rush said, “We just got a job because that initiative engaged the client. That additional effort we might not have done before. We continually have to ask ourselves, ‘How can we distinguish ourselves?’ It’s not the necktie you wear.”

With offices currently in New York, New Jersey, Philadelphia and Los Angeles, Ms. Lee is in the process of opening up a new office for Environetics in Seoul, Korea. “A year ago, I was going to Korea for a family event,” she said. “I was working on a 3D model on my laptop during the flight. Suddenly, I felt a tap on my shoulder. It turned out to be a woman, the CEO of a big development company in Korea. She was finishing a big country clubhouse there, but the main interior of the lobby was not fully designed. I ended up spending my ten-day vacation in meetings with the company, and I came back with a signed contract and a retainer.” Demand for Environetics design services in Korea has increased since then.

Each Environetics office is individually owned, yet built upon the collaborative synergy among them. “We recently completed the **Brown Place Project** up in the Bronx,” said Mr. Rush. “Our office did the interiors, the Englewood Cliffs, NJ Environetics office did the core and shell, and the Philadelphia Environetics office did the engineering. That was the way the firm was envisioned.”

The Brown Place Project is The New York Foundling’s newest community expansion project. The building has eight floors that house community spaces, the **Mott Haven Academy Charter School**, and spaces for clinical programs and outreach counselors; last month it won an AIA NJ Design Award. The project is on the higher end of the spectrum of projects being completed these days; much of the work now happening in contract design consists of small projects.

By educating each client on its own terms, Environetics has gained tremendous amount of design insight over a large range of smaller projects in a short amount of time. “There are some clients that we have to invite into the kitchen,” said Mr. Rush. “They want to



HILDESHEIM KOREA LOBBY



BROWN PLACE CAFETERIA



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be a part of the design process; throw the flour on the marble with us and we all roll the creative dough together. By doing that, our projects are generally more successful because they are engaged in the process. We just have to be smart as we guide them and remain mindful of each other's time. As we work together through the big ideas of a project, we often find there is something really great there."

Guiding me through a typical process of designing a new Environet-ics space, Ms. Lee said, "We start a project in a way similar to how someone starts dating. We learn about that person, as that person learns about us. Most of the time, whether they realize it or not, the client wants to get to the point in the project where they trust us and can confide in us. We are hired to help them, not just to be in the back-ground. We are hired to show them what their space can be, how their space can be related to them, and how they can function within it. But the client must choose whether and how to achieve a project's potential."

An example of how a client relationship can produce results is the recently completed New York headquarters for **The Segal Company**. After reducing the 70-year old actuarial and consulting firm's footprint for optimum efficiency, Environet-ics met the client's requirements by updating the project's finishes to convey quality without extravagance and added details that enabled the space to perform in ways the company needed without tedium.

Discovering how Environet-ics can reach its potential as a design firm, Ms. Lee explained the firm's idea for "the project room." The concept, still in its development stages, eliminates for most employees a dedicated work-space. Utilizing a touch-down benching system inside the office, the bulk of the design firm's space will consist of private offices dedicated to design projects, rather than staff. "Designers

can leave everything that belongs to a project inside the room," she said. Samples, drawings, models; anything that pertains to the project is contained in a single space. "The project lives in that space and people go to the project space, not the other way around." Staff and client meetings are intended to happen organically. "For clients," she said, "it's like being back in the kitchen. Giving that experience to them is important because they engaged in the project design, becoming part of the

energy and the solution."

Environetics has plans to implement the project-room concept in the New York office and hopefully introduce it to other offices if it is successful. "It's a computer structure if you think about it," said Mr. Rush. "The model is intriguing because it works how the staff is programmed to function. There is a certain type of program for each project. We get information from a network folder, in this case the *project room*, but the room keeps everything

local." Referring to the traditional pyramid hierarchy of most firms, Ms. Lee noted, "The project room is a physical manifestation of what David said earlier. It isn't about a pyramid; it's a flat line. In the old days, you began with a napkin sketch from someone, and it went on to the next stage of a drawing on tracing paper. Eventually the paper drawing became a model, and so on. That is a pyramid of sorts, with a linear path. But now, three of us collaborate and design, each contributing their ideas in a single workstation using Sketch Up. Talking and drawing together, we feel an immediate energy go from the screen back to us."

Environetics's uncommon attitude about the industry's design fees is just as individual as the firm's management style and design process. "When a former partner retired," said Mr. Rush, "he showed me an old Environetics proposal from the 1970s. It looked fairly boilerplate, but in reading through it, it described our fee structure at the time. The only thing different from today was the hourly rates of the staff. Due to technological advances improving worker efficiency, design fees/sq.ft. have not really changed. In the end, you get what the client will give you based upon its estimate of your worth."



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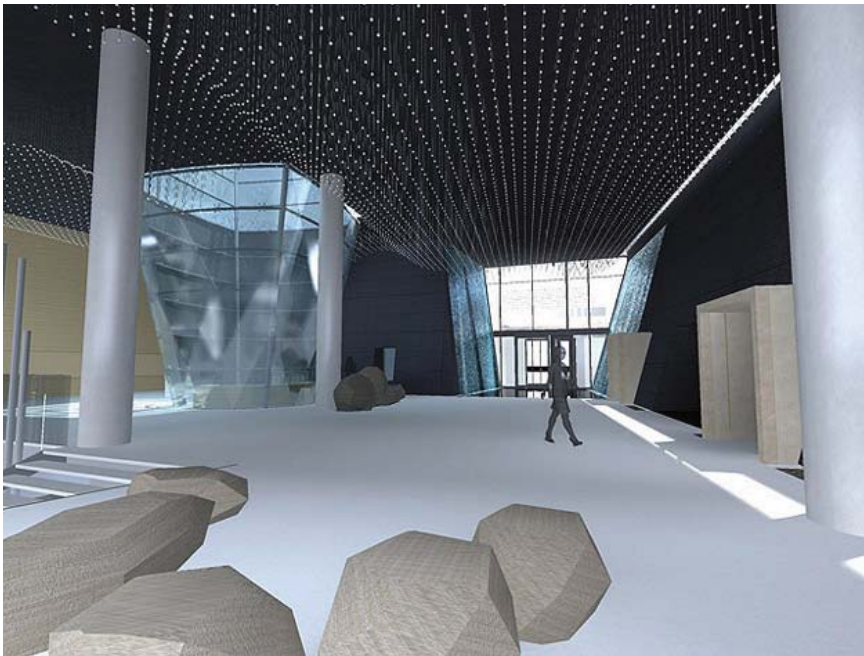
Because we are so lean and mean now, we can be competitive, but we can't be stupid." Citing the famous quote from **Benjamin Franklin**, Mr. Rush noted, "The bitterness of poor quality remains long after the sweetness of low price is forgotten." Indeed, if a client chooses design services

solely on price, they are doing themselves a great disservice. "If everyone in the city doesn't feel some sort of camaraderie with their competition now," he said, "they never will; there is no room for negativity in this business. For us, design is a lifestyle. We realize it's important for the firm to feel uni-

fied; that gives us a reason to come in every morning."

As for the future, Mr. Rush is optimistic: "We are going to get into some product and furniture design. It's part of what we need to be in the firm's creative DNA. As designers, we respond to different needs," said Ms. Lee. "If that means opening an office in Seoul or doing some product design to fit a certain building, we will do it." ■

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