
2005 Lloy Hack Memorial Fund
IIDA Foundation
2005 Mentoring Essay Competition

Charlotte R. Bell

“Don’t sweat the small stuff.” I’ve heard this plenty of times. But in my IIDA Mentoring Week visit on January 25, 2005 with Hartman Design Group of Rockville, Maryland, a 20-person commercial interior design firm, I learned that there are times when it *is* important to sweat the small stuff, and that the “small stuff” is not always so small. Whether it is drawing, creating schedules, selecting materials, perfecting a CAD drawing, updating plans, or running a budget, it is the details that make the difference between a good-enough result and a project that elicits a “Wow” and it is the small stuff that differentiates a plain-vanilla job from a deeply satisfying and rewarding career.

During my well-organized and practical day with Hartman Design Group, I spent time with the owner of the firm, senior designers, junior designers, and the CAD manager getting to know them and the everyday work they do. All of these busy people cheerfully took the time to explain their projects and the design process, answer my questions, and actually involve me in their work. My mentor, who had arranged my varied schedule, gave me a thorough tour of the office, introduced me to everyone we met, and showed me a thick portfolio of the firm’s projects.

Then I got down to work. I helped redline drawings, learned how to create a furniture budget, listened in on a negotiation between designers and a manufacturer’s representative, helped organize a document set, explored textiles and finishes as a designer gathered materials for a client presentation, learned useful presentation board tips, followed along as a designer prepared a list of revisions to a set of drawings, and received a mini-lesson on 3D

computer rendering. I was treated as an equal and involved in the everyday life of the firm – and I came away with a real sense of what it would be like to work at a firm of this size.

But more than this, I left at the end of the day with a broader appreciation for the job of interior designer and for the incredible depth and dedication that this work requires. Not only did these designers have extensive knowledge of the materials and systems that comprise an interior design project, but they showed enormous commitment to quality and accuracy in their work, assiduously ensuring that even the smallest details were done correctly. It was this attention to detail – and these designers’ willingness to advance my education by sharing it with me – that impressed me most during this mentoring day. I am often accused of being “picky” and this mentoring day taught me to nourish rather than to downplay that trait.

Attention to detail carries a message beyond the confines of the design studio or the client’s office. In this era of disposable electronics and cheaply-made buildings, a design project in which every detail has been carefully tended provides not only good value for the client but an inspiration for the community at large. This mentoring experience taught me that through design I can do more than simply collect a paycheck, but can have a positive influence on the world around me.

As I was saying my goodbyes, I commented to my mentor on how impressed I was by the meticulousness of the work I had seen. She replied, “Yes, it is a lot of work, but it is worth

it.” The greatest lesson that I took from this day was that attention to details is not just small stuff. It is the big picture.