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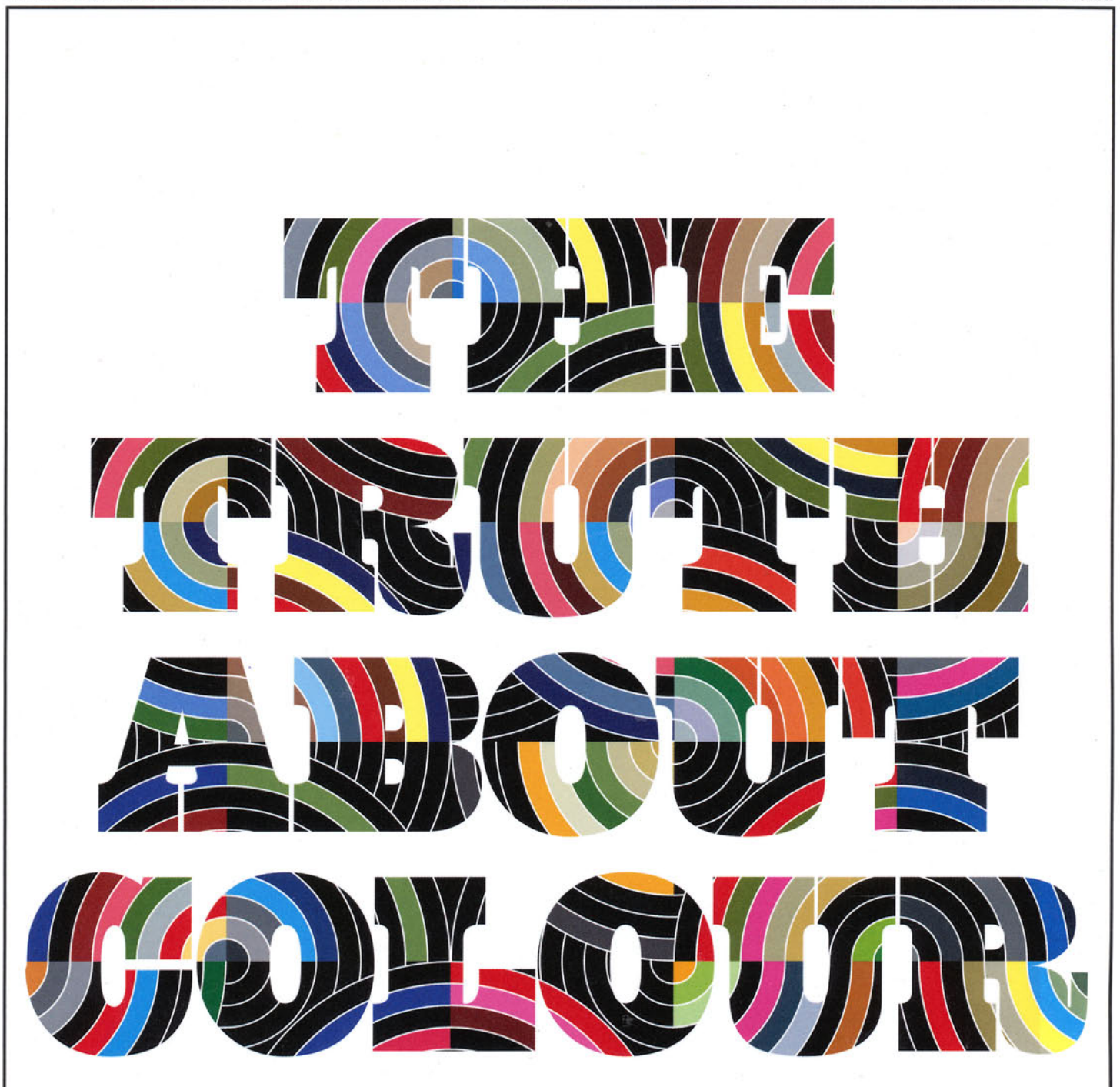

Everyone's an Expert

Offices are one of the shared spaces that can benefit from co-creation, the practice of consulting 'expert' end users before the design process begins, explains pioneer **Liz Sanders**.

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One of the foremost experts in co-creation, or participatory design, Liz Sanders has spent the last five years establishing what is probably the first co-creation department in an architecture office, at the global firm NBBJ. Prior to this she founded the company MakeTools, a co-creation consultancy. MakeTools built on Sanders' pioneering work for design consultancy Fitch, where she established many of the co-creation principles and practices increasingly used by design teams today. Liz's clients have included Apple, IBM, Philips and Xerox.

Lately, co-creation has become something of a buzz word among big companies anxious to anticipate future consumer trends. But isn't it just a fancy word for collaboration?

The point of co-creation is not that everyone is a designer, but that everyone is an expert on their own experience as a user. Co-creation means researching people's needs at the start of a project, in order to generate the ideas to make products and buildings that work in an optimal way, while avoiding expensive mistakes. A lot of what we're seeing today is product customization, where the end user gets to choose certain features such as colour and apply them to a pre-designed product. This kind of customization is great as far as it goes, and it's certainly proving very profitable, but it's not co-creation. There's also consumer-generated content – for example, those ads which are created by customers for incentives like prizes in products and money – but that's more a kind of appropriation. Companies like IDEO talk a lot about co-creation, but that's with the client, not the users. That's very important too, but it's less about good or useful ideas, and more about keeping the client happy. It's quite different from my area of interest, which is using co-creation to generate real ideas, so you don't end up with useless products or places. Whether or not it's real co-creation depends on the big question: who is it that are you co-creating with? If it's not the end user, and it's not happening at the start of the process, then it's collaboration, not co-creation.

You trained as a psychologist and anthropologist. How did you come to be involved in design?

In 1981 I was hired, as 'an experiment', by Richardson Smith [later Fitch]. I was one of the first social scientists to be hired by a design company, and the boss, Dave Smith, told me quite frankly at the interview, 'We have no idea what you're going to do here.' So when I first started, I didn't talk; I just listened and learned. I sat in on meetings with designers, and I made observations. It took me a while to learn the design language. They used to throw around terms like 'negative space', which it took me a long while to get. And then they talked endlessly about different types of grey, and it was ages before I could see the difference myself. One of our first interdisciplinary products was a photocopier for Xerox. They proudly showed me this mock-up of the copier – it was a very sleek, German-influenced design. They asked me, 'What do you think?' I thought it looked great, but I could not understand how it worked, couldn't even see how to open the door. When I pointed this out, they were really annoyed at first. But then they took my comments on board and modified the design.

So initially you took the role of the user.

Yes, that was the function I filled – to ask questions from a non-designer's point of view. From there it was a logical step to start bringing in real users to challenge the design from a functional point of view. When we did this, I was a sort of interpreter at first, explaining the user's point of view to the designers. Then I saw that it would be more efficient for me not to translate and act as intermediary between designer and user, but to create toolkits for people so that designers could make sense of the data. This is also a big part of what I've been doing at NBBJ.

What kind of tools are we talking about?

Well, in the case of architecture, only architects understand architectural drawings – even the clients don't get them. The idea of scale is especially hard for non-architects to grasp from the drawings. So for clients, architects use renderings, also known as money shots. But these are sales tools, of course. For the co-creation agenda, we've developed a range of toolkits. For example, we use a 3D kit of the room elements, kind of like a doll's house – with model beds, chairs, walls and so on. On one of our hospital projects, we used this kit to get three nurses to work on an ideal patient room; they could build the room and arrange it using all the elements we provided. They made all the decisions in just eight minutes, based on their experience of patient needs. Another tool we make use of is a model of a full-scale room. Doing these, we have fo und that what architects consider minor details – the position of a sink, for example – can be of crucial importance to nurses. We use the same toolkit with other eventual hospital users – the patients and their visitors, and the cleaners too. So you end up with results you can compare.

Are hospitals the main area for architectural co-creation?

With the financial crisis, they do tend to be the only projects not being cancelled or delayed. We've also worked on offices, retail and residential complexes, >>>


WE HAVE
TOO MUCH
OF
EVERYTHING

educational institutions, and so on. But in the case of hospitals, there is enormous pressure on them to develop and evolve – healthcare is becoming a very competitive world, and the new emphasis is on wellbeing and prevention, not just on 'fix it when it's broken'. There are 'minute clinics' in Walmart now in the US, and people can fly to India or Brazil for surgery. So it's all changing, and hospitals realize that they have to bring the end user in – they're easy to convince.

Can you give us a sample architectural co-creation insight?

Wayfinding is often done really late in the process of designing. One thing to emerge clearly from our research is that people would really much rather way*follow* than way*find* – suggesting that wayfollowing should be integrated much earlier in the process.

What would be a co-creation business benefit – say, in an office design?

Shared ownership. Working processes will go smoother if people feel they have ownership of the space. And now offices are all about creativity and how you can enhance that for users, to the benefit of the business.

Having started off in products, did you find it difficult to adapt co-creation to architecture?

Yes, it was a big challenge initially. Just the size of the projects is daunting – you might have meetings of 50 people, and co-creation has just one seat at the table. So getting the findings registered and acted on isn't that simple. In one project we're doing, a hospital for war veterans, we've found that the co-creation findings are beginning to be integrated by the interior-design teams, but that they have not had much impact on the exterior spaces. There's far less openness to having discussions about the exterior of buildings. Obviously, some of this has to do with the refresh rate – products and interiors have a shortish lifespan, so it's easy to try out new ideas; there's more freedom. With architecture that's harder.

What is the biggest mistake designers can make from the user's point of view?

The worst design is about making something no one needs or wants, then spending all kinds of money to sell it. When user groups result in indentifying a gap, that's different. Finding a gap is better than creating a need.

And the best example of co-creation?

My own best outcome was being able to prevent a useless thing being created – a sports theme-park leisure complex in Florida. The developers were planning this complex next to a major sports stadium, and the design team had already been engaged. We came in and did the co-creation studies – and people didn't want it. They just wanted to go to a game and then go home. So the project was stopped. The design team was upset with the outcome, as it was a very large contract.

Does co-creation influence the aesthetics of a project?

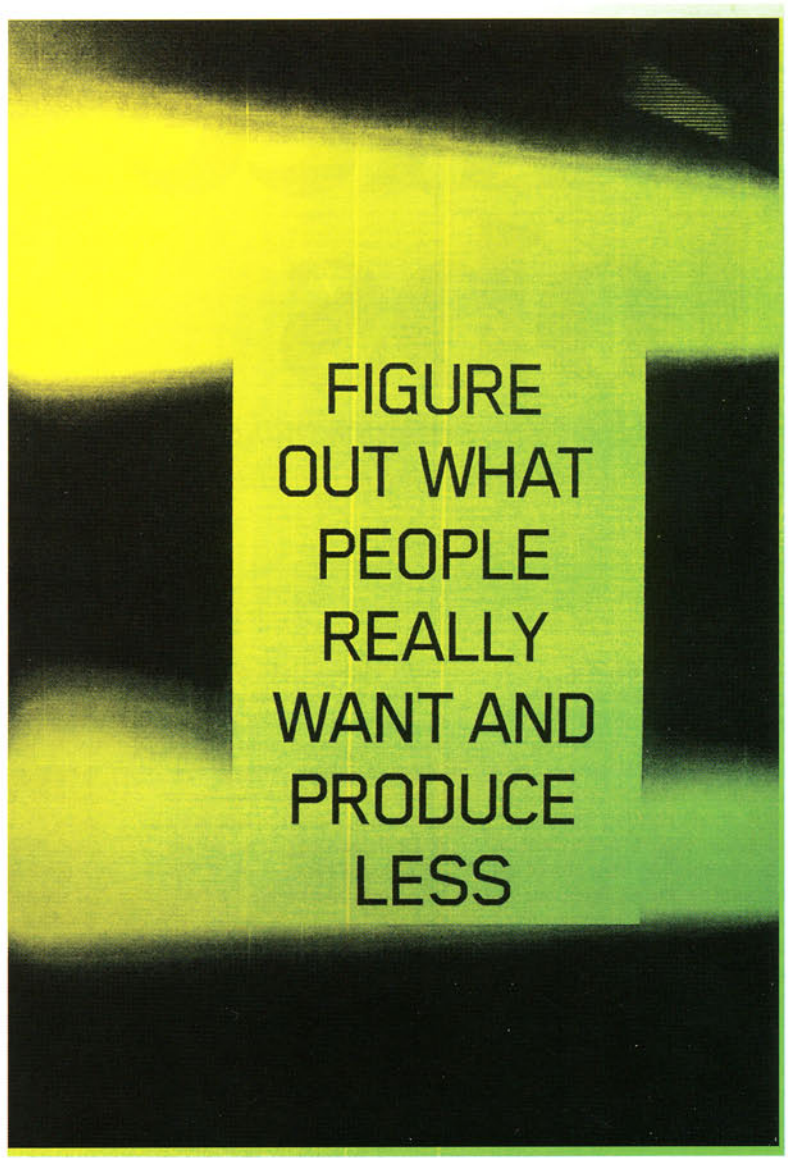
Aesthetically, people have a wide range of what's acceptable. What is really important to them is comfort and practicality – whether a chair is the right height to sit in, whether a wheelchair can fit into a bathroom. An appropriate visual style is also important, but if the functionality doesn't work, it really doesn't matter how it looks.

Do clients override you sometimes?

Sometimes they do. When I was at Fitch, one client – a kitchen-equipment design company – asked us to leave because we were presenting things they didn't want to hear. They basically threw us out. A year later, though, they called to say they had made a mistake, and we ended up building quite a good relationship and doing a lot of projects together.

Is it sometimes hard to get co-creation accepted by designers and architects?

I've noticed with industrial designers that the very good senior ones want to do it. The mid- and lower-level ones sometimes feel threatened. This is a way of working with an alternative pattern. I do observe that there's a gender pattern. Women get it, but to lots of men it doesn't seem to come so naturally. Some architects are 'converted' and actually become participatory architects – Peter Frost of Sweco is a good example. The best way to sell the idea is to make the effort to teach, which pays back tenfold. As this is still a new discipline, many findings are not being shared yet, but that will change. We've still got a long way to go, but we've got a seat at the table now. That's huge progress.



How would you argue the importance of co-creation to an unconvinced designer?

Buildings shape people's lives for better or worse. The environment you live in influences your health and welfare. Co-creation ensures our buildings and products are as compatible with wellbeing as possible. But co-creation is also an important means of achieving sustainability. In the USA, at least, we've reached the peak of consumerism. The recession is helping to reveal that enough is enough. We now see that we have too much of everything. The more we can figure out what people really want, the less we have to produce. Co-creation is a way of ensuring that we make only what people need.