

WHILE YOU WERE OUT

The Delicate Art of Design Project Management

By Lisa Iannucci

JANUARY 2006

Mel Garskof is thrilled about the lobby makeover that will happen in the coming year at the Kips Bay area cooperative building where he lives. The public halls will be renovated, including new wallpaper and carpet, doors will be repainted, new molding will be applied and the spacious lobby will be reconfigured to include mailboxes and additional security measures.

Garskof, the board president, says that it has been a project that has taken months of planning and execution, meetings and decisions that have involved shareholders, board members and the building manager. Garskof believes that this team process is what will make the project a rousing success.

A Winning Combination

"We are all a team trying to get this project done," says Garskof. "First, we formed a design committee consisting of several board members and shareholders and, since our building has a co-op renter, we wanted her on the committee too since she had good taste."

The committee also includes the building manager, who plays a pivotal role in the Kips Bay design process. "We worked with her on past projects and we use her expertise about how the process should work," says Garskof. "She gives us a sense of what is fair practice and initial pricing and how much time something should take."

Although this design committee depends on the building manager for her knowledge, support and assistance with various aspects of the project, the exact role of the manager will really depend on how each individual building operates.

"Each board has their own personality," says Barbara Berrisford, account executive at Charles H. Greenthal Management in Manhattan. "Some boards may want a lot of building manager involvement; some do not want any."

A Project Manager, Perhaps?

Some building boards, according to John D. Foley, vice president of Cooper Square Project Management, may employ a project manager instead of a building manager.

"A property manager, no matter how experienced, may not have the necessary background to provide an adequate service to the building," says Foley. And lacking that experience, in order to complete a successful project from A to Z, the board should employ a qualified project manager from the start of the project. The project manager has a vital role as an advisor and

liaison between the design committee, board, contractors and designers. A qualified owner representative will provide sound advice and will be able to secure the proper professionals to suit the building's needs.

Foley explains that a project manager should have extensive relationships with designers, architects, engineers and all varieties of contractors from waterproofing to windows throughout the five boroughs and New Jersey. "This enables them to ensure that not only does the building receive a quality service, but someone who will best fit that board's vision and building needs," says Foley.

Berrisford, who has been on many design committees as a project manager, often makes designer recommendations, chooses the right designer and determines the financial aspects of the project.

"The manager can be the go-between to also make sure that the design that is ultimately selected meets all the basic requirements of building codes and is compatible with the population of the building," she says. "The manager is also responsible to make sure that all contractual obligations are met and the building is protected. They also make sure everyone gets paid appropriately." However, the final decorating decisions are up to the board and the managers do not hold any veto power. "Design projects are really the time for boards to shine and have control of what the building is going to look like," says Michael Crespo, president of Citadel Property Management.

"The design committee or board members should work closely with the managers and take their advice. For example, they should allow the managers to do any legwork to figure out the best materials or tell the committee what is best for the building long-term, but ultimately the final decision is still with the board and design committee. They want to see the results and take pride in their work."

Garskof agrees. "The manager doesn't have power to veto our choices. She works for us and we make the decisions and are accountable for the outcome. However, if we were doing something unwise and she presented her reasons to veto, we might go along with it."

Not all boards develop formal design committees, but they should depend on a few go-to board members to act as an informal committee, advises Foley.

"It is also important that the shareholders, whether a committee or board members, are actively involved in the design and decision making for their building. The building is their home, and the building's individuality should be expressed in the design."

Pick Your Professional

After the design committee is developed, the next step in the process is choosing a designer. "There should be substantial involvement of the manager from the beginning to the end of this selection," says Foley. "The manager assists the board in locating suitable designers or contractors that can perform the job for the right price, structuring bid packages in a way that will best suit the building's needs and separating jobs to benefit the building."

"For example," continues Foley, "if a proposed scope of work involves plumbing, it is sometimes better to separate the plumbing portion and ensure that plumbers familiar with the building's systems bid this portion of the job."

Of course, this involves more coordination from the manager, but you'd be surprised how much the building can save by using this approach."

Working Together

Once a decision on the designer has been made, the design committee will meet with the firm or individual. The Kips Bay area cooperative has already selected their designer and has begun to move forward. They are meeting with the chosen designer to review the various creative design options.

"Initially, there is a lot of activity during this process," explains Berrisford.

"There are often frequent meetings with the designer to select materials, fabrics and a design scheme. The creative decisions should reflect who lives in the building, a cross-section of the people that live there. Unfortunately, this is the most controversial part of the project because it's impossible to please everyone. There is always somebody who is going to think it's hideous or a waste of money. This is why having a cross-section of people on the design committee is very important."

In Or Out?

The design committee, or board members, will narrow down the design choices. "Our next step in the process is to present our shareholders with various designs that we felt were worthy and appeal to our building's aesthetics," says Garskof. "Then the shareholders will vote and narrow down our choices even further." We will decide on the final choice."

Garskof's project has gone quite smoothly since its inception, but not all design projects will go off without a hitch. When obstacles get in the way, the design committee should be able to turn to the building or project manager for any support needed.

"Any problems or inconveniences that occur, the managers are responsible to support," says Berrisford. "Again, it will depend on the board's personality. Few projects are as potentially delicate as an interior design change. Even in the smallest, most tight-knit building communities, taste is a subjective thing and whenever aesthetic calls are being made, it can be a challenge to come up with something feasible that everybody can live with. However, by forming a design committee and listening to the input of an experienced building manager, the process can go much more smoothly with end results that will satisfy all residents.

Lisa Iannucci is a freelance writer living in Poughkeepsie, New York.
