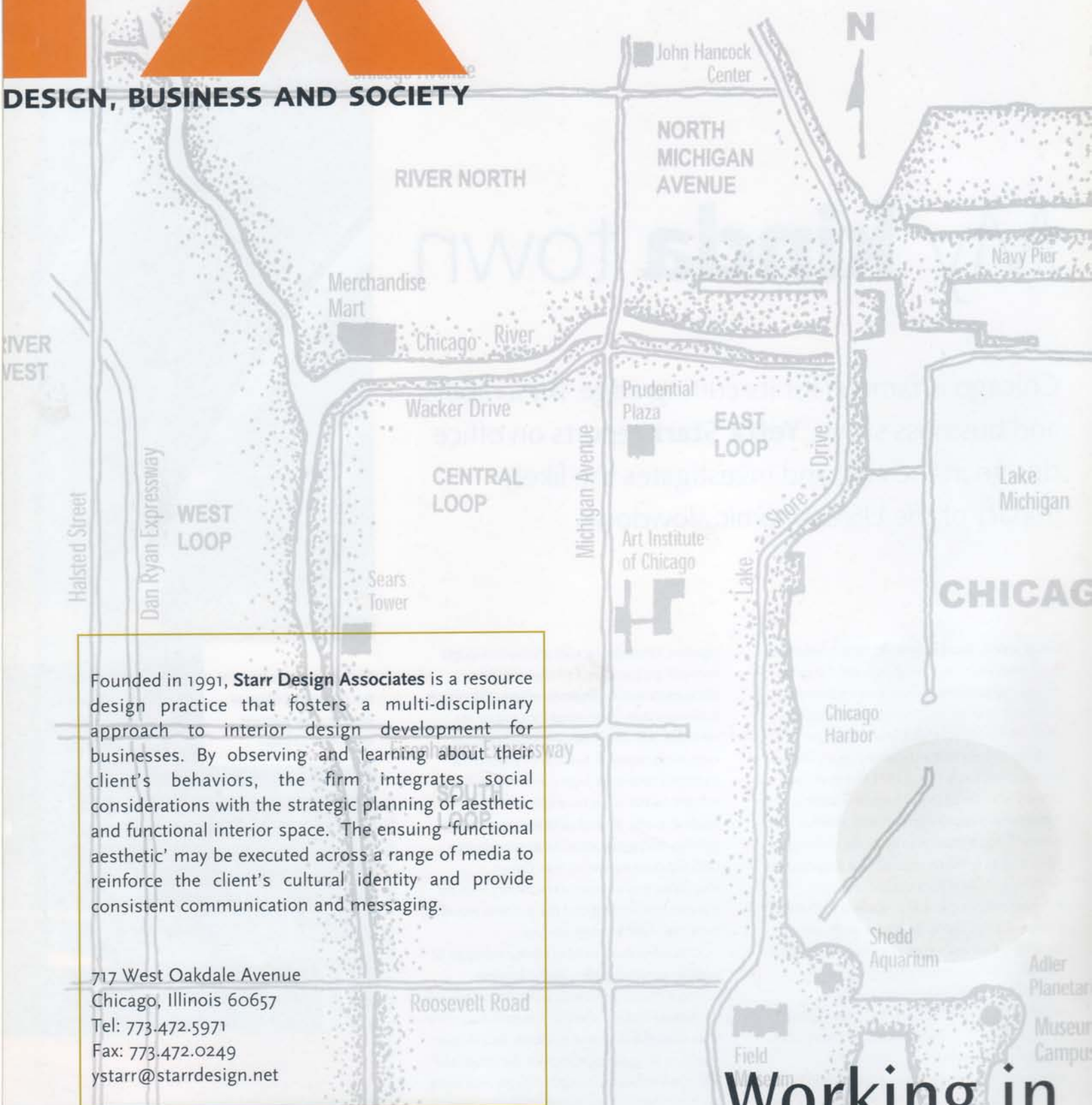


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DESIGN, BUSINESS AND SOCIETY



Founded in 1991, **Starr Design Associates** is a resource design practice that fosters a multi-disciplinary approach to interior design development for businesses. By observing and learning about their client's behaviors, the firm integrates social considerations with the strategic planning of aesthetic and functional interior space. The ensuing 'functional aesthetic' may be executed across a range of media to reinforce the client's cultural identity and provide consistent communication and messaging.

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Starr
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Working in The Windy City

My **kinda** town

Chicago is famous for its cutting edge skyscrapers and business savvy. **Yetta Starr** reports on office design in the city, and investigates the likely impact of the US economic slowdown

Local spirit, local talent. Its impact is felt in all great cities where an intelligent burst of creative energy maintains the delicate balance between tradition and progress. Chicago is no exception, and continues to set trends in office design.

It has a celebrated architectural legacy thanks, in part, to the Great Fire of 1871 that destroyed virtually all of the city's buildings. It became a hotbed of architectural growth with an influx of architects and artisans who faced the challenge of rebuilding an entire community. The stage was set for Chicago to become a world-class city, internationally renowned for reaching pinnacles of design in the 19th and 20th centuries and creating household names of architects like Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright.

While the work of Mies van der Rohe influenced a generation of office building design in to the late 1970s, many tenants and developers began opting for planning concepts that addressed bespoke corporate culture. Specialists began responding to an increasingly sophisticated corporate client.

Skip ahead to present-day Chicago: the city is a glittering and vast array of innovative structures, both traditional and modern. Carved plaster

figurines, terracotta facades and hand-wrought ironwork are juxtaposed to steel and glass skyscrapers and travertine monoliths. The central business district, nicknamed the Loop for the circuitous path of the elevated commuter rail lines, is expanding its boundaries beyond the traditional downtown high-rise buildings. Former industrial warehouses have become trendy residential lofts, alternative offices, restaurants, galleries, and showrooms. As an example, the USG Solutions Center, by Starr Design Associates, is in a former screw factory, with the elevated train snaking past the windows providing inspiration for the design concept.

Chicago appears to be in constant struggle of tradition versus progress, always juggling preservation and innovation while at the mercy of the global economic climate. The downturn in the stock market and general economic deceleration may have far-reaching effects for the design and real estate industries. Craig McKesson, marketing manager with Chicago-based corporate property services firm JF McKinney & Associates, says of the slow-down in new work: 'Firms are concentrating on fundamentals and are analysing their real estate needs carefully.' While that may



The vast Regent's Room at the American College of Surgeons has stunning views over Chicago



PHOTO CHRISTOPHER BARRETT/MARCO LORENZETTI/HEDRICH BLESSING



PHOTO ANTHONY MAY

Above, at USG Solutions Center, the 'base building' allows for different product installations. The lobby, below, also acts as a product showcase



PHOTO BARBARA KARANT

seem to be an indicator of gloom and doom, McKesson says that the previous level of work may have included a significant number of unstable 'new economy' businesses, like e-commerce and technology. The property industry is now focusing on established businesses which are familiar with fluctuating market conditions.

The recent wave of corporate mergers, such as First Chicago Bank and Bank One, Amoco and British Petroleum, Pepsi and Quaker Oats, has also had its effect, with design firms having to be flexible to their clients' changing business goals. Changes occur while projects are under construction, often creating havoc in the traditional project delivery process. After the building boom of the late Nineties, the property and design industries are feeling the fall-out effects of current corporate restructuring. Fred Schmidt, managing principal of The Environments Group, a Chicago-based firm specialising in

workplace design, concurs with McKesson: 'We remain challenged and very busy. It appears that our whole economy has bucked up and I hope that we'll get down to a real muscular economy.'

Market forces affect US business plans and translate into property and facility needs. At the Applications Services' project for Cap Gemini Ernst & Young, The Environments Group utilised existing, live, interior trees, a skylight feature and views of Chicago's lakefront to create a 'natural' concept. Changes are occurring in workplace territory, the use of space through time, and employment definitions. As clients have streamlined and refocused business objectives, designers have developed new vocabularies for problem solving. One of the results is the emergence of multi-purpose areas.

At Gary Lee Partners' design for the American College of Surgeons, the multi-use idea is clearly expressed in the majestic setting of the two storey

This picture, a fabric canopy at Cap Gemini Ernst & Young produces indirect light. Right, the reception is dominated by a slate mass terminating in a waterfall



PHOTOS STEVE HALL/HEDRICH BLESSING

Regent's Room, designed for diverse conferences, meetings, receptions, dinners and other special events. Furniture is portable, stackable and demountable to facilitate change of function. 'We're seeing an interest in alternative uses for spaces, especially when clients are considering dedicating a large amount of space to one event that may only happen a couple of times a year,' says Gary Lee. At ACS, the entire top floor was designed to anticipate external group use, with separate smaller conference areas and provision for additional dining.

Chicago designers are witnessing other client objectives driving the design process. The Environment's Group's Fred Schmidt says client demands are for designs that accommodate team working and ad hoc meetings. His firm's solution for the Center for Business Innovation, in Cambridge, Massachusetts (another project for Cap Gemini Ernst & Young), is an example of an entire facility designed around a business process

– the collaboration between business leaders and researchers. Designers are also increasingly being asked to communicate a client's brand in the workplace, even incorporating products into the design. For a lobby renovation, by Starr Design Associates, the building owner was interested in retaining existing tenants and ceiling specialist USG, occupier of one of the floors, was interested in product exposure. The result was a lobby featuring USG product samples as an integral part of the design.

A new focus on human resources has resulted in more change. In Chicago's business community, recruiting and retaining skilled professionals has been challenging: the global economy has created a free agent market and employers have had to become canny at attracting talent. Gina Berndt, founding principal of The Environments Group, says: 'Employers are seeing facilities as a tool to help keep good people on board.' Her firm's strategic consulting group

has prepared studies for companies that want to learn about what individuals look for in a work environment. The Environments Group itself has schemes to foster team and management communication – it uses an employee satisfaction reporting system and has instituted a learning sabbatical programme.

As the new economy has produced a different kind of employer and employee, the workplace design aesthetic has evolved to keep pace. 'We see much more untethering of the worker,' says Schmidt. In addition to mobile technology, workplace design is becoming rich in common areas: collaborative areas, brainstorming lounges, cafes and other alternative spaces to help nurture creative thinking and employee well-being.

For its design of software development company SAP Campbell, The Environments Group developed a kit-of-parts for the demonstration area to accommodate group presentations. Equipped with custom

At SAP Campbell's offices, flexible spaces can accommodate different-sized groups. Below, semi-private areas at The Center for Business Innovation



PHOTOS STEVE HALL/HEDRICH BLESSING

Chicago is a city that appears to be in the constant struggle of tradition versus progress, while at the mercy of the global economic climate

markable/projectable screens, the space can be converted in to three small or one larger group area. Whiteboard partitions integrated into the workplace areas facilitate collaboration and team working, though translucent sliding doors are available in some areas for extra visual and acoustic privacy. Other common areas include private retreats, focus rooms, collaboration zones and a dining area where free lunches are eaten.

While Chicago has its share of branch offices of national interior design and architectural firms, and an equally impressive list of internationally known native gurus, the city also boasts a core of hands-on local interiors firms that have evolved from a uniquely Chicago spirit. There is also a welcome international exchange of ideas and talent. UK-based artist Anish Kapoor's beautiful, polished stainless steel elliptical sculpture will soon grace the city's lakefront Millennium Park

and Norman Foster is designing a 111,500 sq m office tower in the west Loop area.

In the global economy, regional boundaries may become blurred, but Chicago embodies a spirit of pride, progress and ingenuity. There is consensus among design firms that the Chicago business and civic communities support design and the arts, and the mid-continent location is ideal for access to both coasts. The centralised business hub attracts sophisticated clients and projects. Funny though, no one mentions the weather or the famous hotdogs and pizza! **FX** Yetta Starr is founder and creative director of Starr Design Associates

