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MAINTAINS THAT INTERIORS MUST BE TREATED AS SPACES, NO MERELY AS SURFACES

Habjan of Swanke Hayden Connell Architects: An interior designer with an architectural approach

NEW YORK, NY Agatha Habjan brings an architectural approach to the design of interior spaces. As an associate principal and the director of interior design at Swanke Hayden Connell Architects (SHCA), she maintains that interiors must be treated as spaces, not merely as surfaces to which finishes are applied.

"As interior designers, we create a sequence of spaces and spatial experiences," Habjan said. "If we were to depend purely on applied finishes and furniture, we are risking all to a value engineering process. However, if we create an architectural space within the building envelope, then, even if the finishes were stripped away, the space



Agatha Habjan

would stand on its own merits."

Habjan joined SHCA nine years ago as a technical architect, on the

team responsible for the interiors of Sotheby's 400,000 s/f headquarters on York Ave. She distinguished herself as a designer and has since worked on a range of projects for clients in diverse fields, including financial services, communications, government, retail, health care and law. These projects include 220,000 s/f of office space for the Human Resources Administration and a 690,000 s/f re-stack and office fit-out for Federated Department Stores.

Her approach to interior design has resulted in professional recognition, including two Society of American Registered Architects (SARA) design awards, one for the 450,000 s/f Brown Brothers Harriman & Co. headquarters and



Interior of Sotheby's Headquarters, New York Ave.

another for the 700,000 s/f Reuters headquarters in Times Sq.

Trained as an architect at the Pratt Institute, Habjan believes that

a successful interior design begins with an understanding of the context of the base building itself. For example, when Brown Brothers Harriman moved from its traditional Wall St. headquarters to a landmark modern building at 140 Broadway, Habjan created an interior that acknowledged the building's classic international style.

"We never lost sight of the building we were working within," she said. "The result is a classic modern interior that balances the client's sense of tradition with its forward-thinking approach. In fact, the client's antiques fit perfectly in the new space."

At the same time, Habjan wants a building interior to challenge people's perceptions. "People often make assumptions about the interior of a building from its exterior appearance; for example, if the windows are small, they expect a dark interior," she explained. "But I want people to discover the unexpected, something different and compelling."

The windowless third floor of the Reuters headquarters serves as an example. "We located a training center on that floor because of the advantages of a windowless space to control lighting order when using audio-visual equipment," she said. "But it is also a 'people' space, and you don't want employees to spend a lot of time in a very dark space. So we created a break-out space surrounded by illuminated translucent panels, which creates the sense of natural light."

With such a wide range of clients, each has a unique vision, needs and expectations. "There is no single 'formula,'" Habjan said. "We approach every project the same way: we get to know the client. We listen to gain an understanding of their vision, and then translate it into a different vocabulary, the three-dimensional space, yet we interpret their vision in a way they have not yet considered. That's the added value we as designers bring to the table."

Habjan said it is always a process of give and take. "And at the end of the day, we usually meet halfway to everyone's satisfaction."

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