

AN OPEN EXCHANGE

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By Dick Dahl

HEN DESIGNER ELIZABETH SWARTZ TOOK ON A MAJOR PROJECT for the noted Boston firm of Grantham, Mayo, Van Otterloo & Co., she was informed that teamwork would be an important component of her design. But as Swartz, of ERS Design Ltd., of Brookline, Mass., soon learned, teamwork meant more than simply conferring with the investment firm's design committee. Her client considers teamwork an active corporate policy and method of operation to which it attributes its success.

According to partner Doris Dwyer Chu, the firm divides its 100-or-so employees into teams of eight to ten, in a structure that is non-hierarchical.

Thus, in 1993, when Grantham, Mayo had grown to the point at which it needed to expand its offices at 40 Rowe's Wharf, the firm's design committee sought, in Chu's words, to "open things up." The new floor would bring together, in one space, the international and domestic quantitative divisions, which together comprise the firm's fastest growing segment. The committee sought a design that would follow the quantitative divisions' shared function.

During a series of meetings with Swartz, the committee considered a wide range of options. Perhaps predictably, their first inclination was to look at something traditional. "The group started out wanting wingback chairs and Oriental rugs," Chu says. The conventional approach didn't last long, however, because the committee quickly came to see that setting its highly computerized operation within a traditional, rich mahogany motif would be a bit of an incongruity.

The committee quickly moved on to a slick, high-tech look, which they lingered over thoughtfully. And troublingly. "We tried to consider it seriously," Chu says. "But we found that it was very cold, and we didn't think it would be a very pleasant environment to work in, long term.

We wanted something warmer."

Swartz put together a book of different room styles, and found that her clients were drawn to white walls and light wood. "We explored a lot of different looks and settled on what's called architectural space," she says, meaning open space and glass walls. One reason for them, of course, is that seeing and talking to one another is a big part of getting work done at Grantham, Mayo. But there's also the harbor view. Consistent with the firm's egalitarian style, the committee felt that everyone should be privy to the tableau.

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of Grantham, Mayo's new space is the presence of two large, open work spaces

known, Chu says, as the "playrooms." Those spaces, combining the soft furniture of a lounge with the conference table and white boards of a meeting room, were seen as central to the design, and were appropriately located. According to Chu, they resulted from the firm's experience on the fourth floor, where space requirements prompted the move of several couches into a spare room, thus creating a space where people loved to hold meetings.

Since Chu and her colleagues have moved in, she says that the new design has had a definite impact on their work. For one thing, the partners decided that any meeting of more than two persons should occur in the "playrooms." Often, she says, people walking by on their way to the kitchen will overhear a discussion and find that they have something to contribute.

"It's a very open atmosphere," she says. "Both literally and figuratively." ♦

