

toward the future while remaining rooted in past tradition). Does the designer adopt one of each? Of course not. How can a designer arrive at a dominant concept then?

You may begin to realize the challenge of working with and selecting “the concept among concepts.” Is there a best approach? Although there is no simple answer to this question, we can say that all projects have salient aspects that become important design drivers. These may be external, such as contextual forces, or internal, driven by function, desired image, or brand characteristics. Many projects have more than one such driving factor, and it is up to the design team to decide which factor or factors will drive the overall design response. The design response will, of course, translate into how the project’s floor plan is organized (most visibly at first through diagrams and loosely drawn floor plans), what architectural forms and elements are adopted (most visibly at first through loosely drawn elevations and three-dimensional sketches), what detailing approach is used (most visibly at first through loose sketches), what materials are chosen (most visible at first through samples or rendered sketches), and what furnishings, accessories, and other appurtenances are incorporated.

In some cases, a particular way of performing the functions that occur in the project will drive the design. One example of this is the way the Swedish furniture company IKEA has chosen to display and sell their products. Their approach is quite different from the approach taken by conventional furniture retailers. At IKEA, the customer selects products from showroom areas on the upper floors, writes down the product information (name and number) on a note pad provided, and, ultimately, picks up the “boxed” products from the rows and rows of shelves on the warehouselike ground floor. One then proceeds, with oversized shopping carts full of boxes, to the checkout areas and pays and finally loads up the goods in the convenient loading areas just outside. To address this unique way of selling furniture, the entire facility is designed to facilitate the flow from one stage to the next.

Sometimes the main concept is driven by style, image, or theme. These tend to occur in highly creative environments such as restaurants, stores, clubs, and hotels. The intentionally minimalist showrooms designed by Claudio Silvestrin for Giorgio Armani are an example of these high-image kinds of projects.

At other times, a series of more pragmatic organizational concerns, such as relationships between departments and clear circulation systems, determines the main concept idea. Design concepts can only be determined on a case-by-case basis when the particularities of a project are known. They are externalized through verbal statements, concept diagrams, and concept sketches.

Design Concept Statements

Written statements are most often used to convey character (image) concepts. They come in many varieties. Upon examination of the many kinds of concept statements ordinarily written by students and practitioners alike, one notices a broad range of approaches with different degrees of clarity. Some designers repeat, sometimes in great detail, the needs and wants of the client; others write detailed play-by-play accounts of the experience, starting with the moment one enters the space; some talk about their intentions to create a productive office or a stimulating restaurant. The list goes on and on. The problem is that many written concept statements never get to the point.

The point of design concept statements is to tell the audience, as efficiently as possible, about the designer’s approach to solve the design problem. Your statement may be as brief as “to create an intimate candlelit environment comprised of multiple zones” or “to place all the important public functions along the perimeter of the space to take advantage of the magnificent views.” The main thing is that the design concept statement needs to address what you will do (or have already done) to solve the design problem.

As straightforward as this may appear, many young designers struggle with written concept statements. Let’s examine four of the most common problems.

Problem 1: Statements that regurgitate the project goals from the program.

For example, someone may repeat “the concept is to create a new office facility for a client that wants to consolidate units” directly from the information given in the program. This information is not a design concept but part of the design problem definition.

Problem 2: Statements that state the obvious.

For example, “the concept is to create a productive and functional office environment” or “the concept is to design a restaurant that will attract customers.” It is obvious that offices need to be productive and restaurants need to attract customers. Those things go without saying. A design concept statement has to go beyond that.

Problem 3: Statements that use many adjectives without really saying much.

For example, “the concept is to design a grand and magnificent space that will be a source of delightful inspiration to all.” This may be an adequate beginning but is still too vague; plus, there are many ways of producing grand and magnificent spaces and no hint is given here about the specific approach to be taken.

Problem 4: Statements that are lengthy descriptions of every single feature of the project.

There is no need to describe every feature of the project in the concept statement; the statement should include only the main aspects that are driving the design.

What then makes a good concept statement? Although there are many approaches to the verbal externalization of concept statements, the best concept statements share the following three attributes:

1. Design concept statements speak more about the design solution than the design problem.
2. Design concept statements are selective.
3. Design concept statements are economical.

Let’s examine these one at a time.

Design concept statements speak about the design solution.

The first attribute requires that the concept state something about the design solution and not the design problem. These are two closely related but different elements that together help to give the project definition. The design

problem, however, precedes the design strategy to be used. Consider the following statement: “The concept was to create a luxury residence for discerning, affluent empty-nesters and semiretired executives seeking a California coastal lifestyle.” Is this a design concept? To test a concept to determine whether it is a design concept, simply ask yourself the following question: Does this statement tell me anything about the approach to the design solution? In the example above, the answer is no. While the statement tells us a great deal about what kind of residence the project will be, it defines the problem without stating the solution. Nevertheless, having a clear project definition is an important step that needs to take place before the design concepts are generated. Clients have to define, with some level of specificity, what type of project it will be, who is it for, whether it will be formal or casual, and so forth.

Consider now the following statement for a restaurant: The idea is to deliver “excellent food and service at a reasonable cost in a casual but intriguing environment,” attracting “a wide range of customers—from formally dressed theater-goers to casually dressed diners.”² Here again, the statement is helping to define the kind of restaurant it will be but, so far, is not saying anything about the designer’s idea of how to accomplish this. The statement is part of the design problem statement, which speaks to the owner’s goals and vision.

If the preceding statements are about design problem definition, the design concept has to be a response to these kinds of statements. So, the designer studies the situation, and after some consideration decides on a design approach to take. After all, many design solutions could reasonably produce the luxury residence and the casual and intriguing restaurant prescribed above. Let’s examine a design concept statement written by a student to address an office project: “The concept behind my design . . . is openness and visual stimulation. All spaces are designed to pull you from one to the next smoothly. The angular rooms and shapes are intended to create an energetic feel in the workplace.” Notice that the statement is talking about the designer’s response to the design problem. Notice too that the statement mentions both the student’s intentions (openness, stimulation, creating an energetic feel) and some specific ideas about how to achieve these (spaces that pull you, angular rooms and shapes). Now, consider another stu-

dent's design concept statement for the same project: "The goal of this design is to create an innovative and dynamic environment that is attractive to Identity Consortium's image-conscious clients and employees. This is achieved through an open and flowing configuration of space and the use of modern classic pieces paired with an exposed and slightly industrial contemporary setting." Once again, notice the presence of both design intentions and more specific strategies for accomplishing them.

While the designer's initial design concept statement might be somewhat vague and broad, as the design progresses the means for achieving it become progressively more defined. Consider the following example, a Levi's Dockers Shop by Bergmeyer Associates, Inc. One can imagine how the designer (perhaps with help from the owner) may have come up with the main idea and how over time the more specific strategies (and other discarded ones) may have evolved.

What? (design idea): Design a store that "recalls soothing images of days on holiday."

How? (design strategy): Use "a nautical theme and vacation vignettes."

But how? (more specific design strategies):
"Merchandise backdrops of wicker furniture and sailing, plus V-grooved panels stenciled with the Dockers logo, cherry soffits, and backlit art glass and props."³

Design concept statements are selective.

The second attribute of good design concept statements is selectivity. One cannot possibly hope to address every single issue of the project in the design concept. The process requires the designer to assess the design problem and exercise proper judgment in selecting the concept's driving forces. When we examine the design concept statement for an office project stated earlier ("The concept behind my design . . . is openness and visual stimulation. All spaces are designed to pull you from one to the next smoothly. The angular rooms and shapes are intended to create an energetic feel in the workplace.") we notice that the designer chose to focus on just two things: openness and visual stimulation. Surely there were many other important factors of that project but, for this designer,

openness and visual stimulation drove the main design direction. Here is another example: "The main concept behind my design is energy. By using an organic plan and strong color I hope to energize people and draw them through the entire space." A single idea—energy—was selected to lead the design approach.

Design concept statements are economical.

The third attribute of good design concept statements is economy. Consider the following succinct concept statement for a Los Angeles restaurant "featuring space-age dining for the jet set": "Use high-tech lighting and a lunar-look interior to invoke a futuristic fantasy that reflects the building's flying saucer architecture."⁴ Beyond selectivity, this statement also exercises a great deal of economy by packing a lot of information into a rather brief statement. Even when one has more to say, it is possible to slim down the concept statement through selectivity and proper editing. In the concept statement for the Identity Consortium office project introduced earlier, the designer's main goal and three strategies to achieve it are packed into a 48-word statement. That's economical.

Design Concept Drivers

In the process of conceiving a design concept for a project, the designer will look at the realities of the project and decide how to express the main concept. This will depend on many factors, including the project type, inherent challenges of the site, the twist given to the project, personal intuition, and so on. Design concepts will range from the pragmatic to the symbolic and emotional. Next are some examples showing a variety of concepts driven by different aspects of the project.

The first example is driven by existing physical constraints on the project site. An Italian restaurant in Philadelphia occupied a space that was left over following the construction of a mezzanine office space. As a result, the ceiling over most of the restaurant was low, presenting a difficult design challenge. The design concept involved finding an inventive solution to this problem. The designer's response? "Create a vaulted ceiling in the high space along the window dining section to achieve volume. Use floating abstract planes in the low-ceilinged areas to provide relief and achieve an attractive sculptural effect."⁵