

## Forward Fellowship

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***A new design fellowship from Steelcase and the Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD) brings together an elite group of design thought leaders to solve problems in the workplace that extend beyond their own firm's walls.***

Increasingly, over the last several years designers have been faced with an ever-faster pace of work and an ever-more competitive business environment, leaving them little time to think or seek out solutions for clients in new ways. It was troubling, to say the least. "The design challenges they're now faced with are much more complex," says Steelcase Design Alliance Principal Madelyn Hankins. "And when you are moving from deadline to deadline, it can be challenging to look up, let alone keep pace with the rate of change."

My Linh Elliott, senior interior designer at Stantec, agrees: "In our field of work, we're charged with coming up with the latest and greatest and thought-provoking ways of addressing any type of environment. You're trying to keep pace with deadlines and also find time to learn new technology and new information. It takes time to read up on new things, to go to seminars, workshops, manufacturer demos. I find it extremely challenging to find the time to always be on top of the new advancements and ideas that our industry produces."

It was countless conversations like this one, where designers expressed their need for "a new source of learning, passion and inspiration," as Hankins puts it, that led to a partnership with with SCAD's Design Management School and Collaborative Learning Center for a solution.

**No one person or firm could solve the problems facing the industry, they knew, so why not bring a group together in an immersion residency fellowship program?**

That idea for a residency became the first-ever Forward Fellowship, hosted by Steelcase and SCAD, a leader in design education in the United States with campuses in the Americas, Europe and Asia. "We wanted to bring amazing people together with different perspectives to try to solve a challenge in the industry," says Jerry Holmes, Steelcase Design Alliance principal. "And we knew it was critical for these people to take time away from the office to learn new design thinking skills that could better equip them to move the industry forward."

As a result of a global search, Steelcase and SCAD selected 11 forward-thinking firms with a global reach from the United States, Canada, Mexico, France, Germany and the United Kingdom. Each firm used an internal selection process to identify their candidate. Holmes explains, "We wanted to provide an outlet to bring a diverse group of designers to teach them new skills that they will then apply to the complex design challenges they face."

“There’s a lot of power in global teamwork,” adds William A. Lee, chair of design management, SCAD. “You get to leverage a diverse set of team players, cultures, attitudes, perspectives, points of view.”

Initially, the fellows came together in Savannah, Georgia, on the SCAD campus for an intensive week to work in teams to explore a central question: “How might we prime the brain for focus, creativity, and learning within the built environment?” The question addressed burgeoning research from the neuroscientific community that can affect physical space—but more important, it was a design-thinking exercise designed to help the fellows grow and develop new skills together. Skills and activities included: design thinking, creating value propositions, storytelling to communicate design intent, using frameworks for problem solving and the use of scenario planning to test divergent thinking. The fellows were coached and challenged by researchers, educators and other experts from Steelcase and SCAD to articulate their findings and discoveries, again and again, refining and sharpening their thinking over time.

A few months later they reunited in New York City to complete their work. They also met in teams virtually between these two sessions, a nascent start to a global community practice. Over time, the fellows became more and more excited about the relationships and bonds they were forming with each other, and felt themselves transformed, with new ways to work and think, new ways to make more-meaningful projects for their clients going forward.

“The industry realizes it has a problem,” says Melanie Redman, senior researcher for Steelcase’s Workspace Futures Group and a Forward Fellowship mentor. “The fellows’ firms recognized the value of the fellowship enough to send their people, and now they are fired up to make changes at their own firms—but more than that, they have a desire to work across firms and continue cross-collaboration.”

Jamie Flatt, a fellow from architectural firm Page described it like this: “We see a need to fundamentally change the conversation in workplace design—the questions we ask as we approach a new project or client, and the specific tools the workplace designer can employ to support focus across the different kinds of knowledge work pursued.”

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