

Design Moving Design Forward

🕒 Read 7 minutes



STEELCASE BRINGS TOGETHER A GLOBAL COMMUNITY PRACTICE

Han Paeman's design firm just lost a bid to Marc Bertier's firm. Gloating, Bertier pumps his fist. Yet, they sit together in the same restaurant, enjoying a meal.

Similarly, a table away, Ashley Hall says, "I might ask Ian a question before I would anyone in my own firm," speaking of Ian Burgess, a competitor who happened to be sitting next to her. "Our firms have amazing people doing amazing things, but it wouldn't be the same."

They swap pictures of their kids on their smartphones.

It's a rare occasion for Paeman and Bertier who are based in Paris, Hall who is based in North Carolina and Burgess, based in London to be in the same space at the same time.

These new friends, now exchanging family photos, met each other over the course of a year-long fellowship hosted by Steelcase and the Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD).

How could these interior designers and workplace consultants, from competing firms, be closer than colleagues?

Over the years, Madelyn Hankins, and Jerry Holmes, principals in the Steelcase Design Alliances group, heard too many leaders and designers say that they wanted to do more—they wanted to change the world as they had first set out to do. “I had had countless conversations with designers and their need for a new source of learning, passion and inspiration,” Hankins says. Other fields had immersion residency fellowship programs, she thought. Why couldn’t design?

Hankins and Holmes asked global firms to survey their workers for promising leaders. This resulted in 12 names from the United States, Canada, Mexico, France, the United Kingdom, and Germany. SCAD in Savannah, Georgia, was a natural partner in the endeavor because it offers some of the best design education in the United States and because it has campuses in the Americas, Europe, and Asia that could be tapped as the program grows in the future. The pair worked with William Lee, director of design management at SCAD, and more of their own colleagues to come up with a pressing problem for the inaugural fellows to solve: “How might we prime the brain for focus, creativity, and learning within the built environment?”

When the 12 met for the first time in Savannah in the fall of 2015, they were visibly nervous and reserved. “It’s unique to bring together people that are technically competitors and ask them to check that at the door,” Hankins says. Diverse situations helped them learn to trust their co-fellows. Group meditation and a trip to a funky Creole restaurant—reachable only by boat—certainly helped.

“It’s unique to bring together people that are technically competitors and ask them to check that at the door.”

MADELYN HANKINS | Principal, Steelcase Design Alliances

Jamie Flatt, principal of architecture and engineering firm Page in Houston, said the week felt like a design retreat that came with serious expectations and deliverables. It’s that second piece that made the fellowship more than just an episodic, feel-good get-together. The fellows were split up in three teams to research answers to the 2015 question through three lenses: **focus, creativity, and learning**. A rigorous curriculum alongside, aided by SCAD graduate students, exposed them to the newest learnings in neuroscience, design thinking, memory strategies, research methodology, scenario planning, and business model generation.

Then they returned to their firms for the winter, checked in with their teams once or twice, and came back together one last time in the spring in New York to polish up some tangible answers to the question proffered in the fall. After arriving on planes from three continents in May, the fellows picked up right where they had left off. Group charades, a time of personal updates—Anna Pluskota, a designer at Germany’s Carpus+Partner got married the week before, postponing her honeymoon for the fellowship’s last time together—and research updates were in order.

The groups weren’t near done with their work on day one, but after three days of intense brainstorming, creative conflict, and being pushed by two members of Steelcase’s research team—Melanie Redman, senior researcher for the Workspace Futures Group, and Patricia Kammer, a design researcher for Steelcase—plus SCAD’s Lee, they had each reached an idea:

- **Team Focus** presented an idea for a diagnostic tool that, much like a choose-your-own-adventure, would allow someone to choose best strategies for focus depending on personality and type of work.
- **Team Learning** came up with the idea for a learning app that allows workers to take charge and pride in their learning advancement (it’s “deviously good,” Lee said).
- **Team Creativity** focused on creating a culture of permission for workers.

All ideas were inherently designed to help the A&D community, because the fellows knew that if they didn’t change and grow, their clients wouldn’t either. In June, a handful of fellows presented their conclusions at NeoCon, a commercial design trade show, showing that the takeaways from this experience have broader implications than just the individuals and the firms.

The 2015 fellows already had serious skills and knowledge; their time together simply tapped them. The real win for them, Steelcase, and the industry will be watching as the energy ripples through their offices and professional communities. What will spread is something Flatt’s father quips to his Rice University business school students: “a renewed sense of ‘give a hoot.’” It’s the revived inspiration and hope that designers can work with peers across the globe to make an impact through better, more collaborative, and intentionally researched design solutions. As Hall says, “We’re walking away with friendships and resources.”