

practice involves planning and implementing start-up or “incubator” space, for the emerging technology and biotechnology industries.

### **Incubator Spaces**

As defined by Webster, *to incubate* is “to maintain at a favorable temperature and in other conditions promoting development.” Thus, a new type of office and lab space called the “incubator” has been introduced in the business community to attract, develop, and promote start-up companies that meet certain profiles for success. These businesses typically receive subsidized or drastically reduced rents for well-equipped office and lab spaces provided by local governments in the hopes that the start-up will meet tremendous success and remain in the region to grow, hire, contribute to the tax base and become a local leader. Interior designers who want to be introduced to both the incubated companies as well as their supporters have found this “short-term design” opportunity to be an emerging specialty practice.

Griswold, Heckel & Kelly Associates Inc. (GHK) has designed a technology incubator in Howard County, Maryland, called “The Center for Business and Technology Development.” This 20,000-ft<sup>2</sup> facility hosts about 20 office suites, ranging in size from 120 to 1,000 ft<sup>2</sup>, in addition to shared common areas. The Howard County Economic Development Authority (HCEDA) was the champion that secured State of Maryland funding as well as financial backing and support from Howard County government and local private-sector businesses to launch this incubator. Two of the marketing pioneers for HCEDA are Michael Haines and Carol Morrison. Morrison defines incubators as providing “space for a start-up which offers all support services, both physical and educational.” Their center furnishes the office suite, and then offers conference, training, and board rooms at no additional charge. Other common spaces and equipment are provided, such as lobby and receptionist, administrative services, copying facilities, facsimile machines, shredders, postage meters and scales, and binding equipment. “Because we provide these common facilities, our start-up companies do not require large suites with underused square footage, which would be more common if they were to locate their new business elsewhere,” shares Morrison.

The key to successfully designing an incubator is flexibility. Haines describes their incubator as “a large space divided into a number of different work spaces. Companies can expand or contract in this environment. The sharing

of common areas is another example of the importance of flexibility. This incubator is a work in progress.”

When asked what start-up companies look for when locating with an incubator, Haines and Morrison list the three top ingredients:

- *Flexibility of the space*
- *Networking through the incubator’s contacts*
- *Exposure to the media and public relations opportunities*

Once they are in and established, their next priority is money: they are looking for investors and partners.

Both Haines and Morrison have been surprised at the instant success of their high-tech incubator. It is a magnet attracting volunteers, media, visiting countries, legislators, investors, job candidates, and the public. In the first four months of operation, 750 visitors toured the incubator, including 34 from Japan. The suites are 100 percent occupied, and are looking hopefully to Phase II, which will increase their overall square footage by 50 percent.

Haines and Morrison have visited more than seven incubators in the Mid-Atlantic region and feel that their center’s focus on technology and their overall approach is unique in the region. By recognizing that wet laboratories (a type of laboratory facility for wet processes, requiring water and drains) for biotechnology companies can be a limiting factor, the focus of this incubator on technology versus biotechnology has enabled them to remain more flexible in the design of their facility. They also have observed that “there is a trade off between fixed drywall partitions and demountable walls. The demountable partitions may sound attractive, yet they are cost prohibitive and the lack of acoustical privacy is a big issue with start-up companies. Our tenants want privacy.”

Current discussions between Haines and Morrison “are focused on the graduation process. Other incubators haven’t solved what happens when the start-up is launched away from the facility. Strategic planning is needed to assure that there are appropriate options or facilities for these start-ups to go to when they graduate.” Again, for the interior planning consultant, the opportunities are numerous for these companies in need of short-term design solutions with long-term continuous benefits.