Conversations with a diverse range of individuals—from clients to interior designers, construction managers to project managers—concluded that there are quantifiable, universal indicators of success that can be measured via anecdotal evidence or formal postoccupancy evaluations. Herewith, an abridged taxonomy.

The Program Needs and the Client Are Satisfied

The essence of interior design is problem solving. A client has a certain set of considerations and directives for a space. A design practitioner is retained to address them. The resultant design is successful only if it solves the problems outlined in the program. No amount of visual pyrotechnics can circumvent this central transaction between client and designer, the dynamic that sets the process in motion.

Program expectations should be not only met, but exceeded. A successful design incorporates all variables the clients thought they needed to achieve their desired outcome, as well as the intangibles they never even considered. A designer's role is to divine what issues remain unspoken after the fundamental program parameters have been outlined, and to pay attention to the needs and expectations that develop as the project progresses. In the end, how closely does the finished project dovetail with the desired outcome? Success primarily concerns suitability and relevance to a particular context and to a client's needs.

Satisfied clients—whether said client is an individual or a collective entity—come in many shapes, sizes, and patterns of behavior. Some are overt in their enthusiasm, others reticent. "To me, a satisfied client is one who I never hear from," laughs consulting engineer Thomas Polise, whose clients contact him only "when something has broken or gone awry." To architect and designer Richard Kronick of Gerner Kronick + Valcarcel, Architects, which executes high-end contract and residential work, a satisfied client is "a returning client," who enlists his firm for more work once the initial venture has been completed. Mark Oller of MOVK, a young practice that specializes in new media and retail projects, agrees on this primary indicator of success, and also credits word-of-mouth referrals as "one of the best ways to generate new business." A successful project inspires the client to campaign on the designer's behalf.

Architect Guillermo Garita, of the firm Datum/0, recalls a client whose office he recently completed and who contacts Garita for approval prior to any adjustment greater than replacing a light bulb—such is their dedication to the integrity of his final design, their faith in his judgment, and their ultimate satisfaction with the results.

In conclusion, Kronick invokes the hackneyed but nonetheless appropriate adage: "You're only as good as your last project."

THE PROJECT REINFORCES THE CLIENT'S IDENTITY

The design should not only address the pragmatic aspects of the program—quotidian concerns such as adequate storage, ample daylight, and technological and acoustical requirements—but reflect and reinforce the client's identity. Whether the client is a huge corporate brand or a small business, interior design is both a means of self-expression and a potential marketing tool—one of the most concrete and lasting reasons for a company to present its values and ideologies to the public. Interior environments can function as a device to attract and retain clients, to generate a positive buzz about the company, and to support employee recruitment and retention efforts. The project should be sensitive to such possibilities of reinforcing corporate messages.

An interior design project may require working within a preestablished aesthetic, in the form of color, furniture, or materials standards (or a more ambiguous sense of corporate culture), to ensure continuity of an existing identity. More often than not, the design process provides an opportunity for clients to reinvent or revitalize their brand. And for less-established organizations, the design process itself can be a first step toward inventing and leveraging an identity.

Residential design projects require channeling the idiosyncrasies of a discrete individual, a couple, or a family. Todd Davis of Brown Davis Interiors considers a design successful if it projects "a beautiful look that may not be for everyone, but that suits the client's needs and reflects their personality." Visitors should recognize and appreciate the home's aesthetic merits, he says, regardless of whether it meshes with their particular taste.