

Designers fill in the blanks at new housing projects

Blankblank works with designers to find market for ideas and creations

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Sacramento design firm Blankblank upends the standard approach to marketing new furnishings and light fixtures.

It gives its designers free reign to come up with new products instead of handing them a sheet of specifications. And rather than market products through retailers, it sells directly to architects and interior designers. Blankblank even has become an interior design firm itself and creates products to fill its own needs.

And in a contracting economy, Blankblank tries to put more money in its designers' pockets.

"A typical arrangement would be a royalty based on wholesale price, ranging anywhere from 1 to 3 percent, and usually a sliding scale going down in volume," said Blankblank co-owner Jon Dennis. "Every dealer is a little bit different, but we try to work with more of a 10 percent royalty as a guideline."

The business has been successful enough that Blankblank is getting ready to open showrooms both in Sacramento and New York City, and thus far has financed everything from cash flow.

BASIC DESIGNS

Dennis was working in a marketing post for retailer Fleet Feet in Sacramento when he first worked with freelance designer Rob Zinn. The two of them launched Blankblank in January 2004.



Robb Zinn, left and Jon Dennis, right, own Blankblank, a design firm. Curtis Popp, center, joined the company to help with its interiors business. Blankblank designed the interiors at Sutter Brownstones, an infill housing project in midtown Sacramento.

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The basic idea was to bring the designer closer to the final customer by eliminating middlemen. Blankblank would collaborate on designs and figure out how to manufacture them.

Typically, the industry gives a designer a set of specifications for, say, an office chair that must retail for a certain price and draw on a fixed list of materials, Dennis said. Blankblank, instead, asks designers what they are working on, and then

tries to find a market for the products.

The company name, in fact, stands as a kind of placeholder for the first and last names of the designers themselves.

"The model is challenging on a number of levels," Dennis said. The collection has remained small. So have production runs, typically no more than five copies of an item at a time.

Blankblank has almost all its manufacturing done locally, allowing it to keep a

close watch on quality. But that makes its products expensive.

"Our pieces are put up next to pieces that are maybe a quarter of the price because they are being fabricated overseas," Dennis said. "There are only a few companies like ours in the United States that are making their products in the U.S."

But that's also a selling point, which

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the company credits with attracting attention from such publications as International Architecture & Design magazine, Architectural Record and the Los Angeles Times. For sales, the firm has one person dedicated to setting up appointments for presentations to studios.

Being based in Sacramento means relatively low overhead compared to larger cities with reputations as hotbeds of art and design, but it also required more effort to establish a reputation.

"Whenever we go to a trade show or exhibit, people are always, 'What are you guys doing in Sacramento?' It gets a little old after a while," Dennis said.

But location has been less of a challenge as Blankblank's reputation grows.

INSIDE JOB

One way Blankblank has been getting exposure around Sacramento is by creating the interior designs for new housing. Because the original focus was on individual pieces, Blankblank didn't have much interior design talent to draw on at first. That's when it brought interior designer Curtis Popp on board.

"We basically decided to collaborate on a project and see how it went," Dennis said.

The first project was Good, a development of 35 single-family homes in West Sacramento.

"We wanted a different approach. We didn't want typical suburban tract homes," said Levi Benkert, a principal at builder LJ Urban. While hiring a design firm is nothing new for high-end construction, it's fairly unusual for more modest projects such as Good because of the expense, Benkert said. "At the same time, they were very good at value engineering all that they did. They really kept the cost down," he said.

Simplicity was one key concept, such as designing an open cabinet for the bathrooms, saving the cost of a door.

LJ Urban also is using Blankblank interiors in its upcoming Newton Booth project at 27th and V streets in Sacramento.

Benkert characterized the style as "comfortable modern."

"It's a type of modern that doesn't necessarily have a starchy, cold feel to it. It's more warm and inviting, and gets you thinking," he said.

That approach also was key to the look of Sutter Brownstones, a project by Loftworks. Popp worked alongside the architect in selecting all the interior finishes such as tile, countertops, flooring, appliances and plumbing and light fixtures.

"Most homebuilders don't do that. They have someone like me, who does not have a design background, select the standard appliances and countertops," said Mollie Nelson, director of sales and marketing for Loftworks.

Loftworks wanted Blankblank to bridge the gap between the 19th century brownstone tradition and contemporary living.

"We had to take that concept and give it a modern twist. Blankblank really gets it," she said.

One bow to tradition was a wall-mounted kitchen faucet, like one found in a grandmother's laundry room. Loftworks balked at the idea initially. Popp called it a nod

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Mollie Nelson
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to the past, and prevailed. People who tour the brownstones often notice the faucet and comment favorably, Nelson said.

"There's a cleverness about it. I've never been a part of a project where the design has been so well received," she said. "Obviously, it's an extra cost,

and looking back, it was totally worth it. It gives us an edge."

Even in the weak housing market, Loftworks has sold 17 of the 28 brownstones since April, listing in a range from \$385,000 to \$625,000.

Interior design is now about 50 percent of Blankblank's business. It's a good balance, because the product side requires a lot of expense to get a design prototyped and into production. Interior design has fewer hard costs, and provides a way to get products into the field.

HIGHER VISIBILITY

Now that Blankblank has products, manufacturers and some brand recognition, its next step is to open showrooms. One is under construction in Sacramento. Another is on tap for New York City.

New York is crucial, as the city has thousands of potential clients in the form of interior designers and architects.

"We have an opportunity in New York to take a space that is unique and affordable. This is a baby step," Dennis said. "Probably we can pull off the New York showroom from cash flow, but to do it right would require additional money," Dennis said.

How much, and where they plan to seek it, is still under discussion.

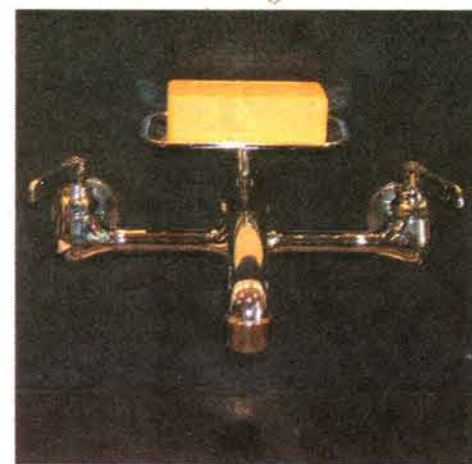


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Loftworks initially balked at the idea of this wall-mounted faucet, but prospective buyers have commented on the clever touch.