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"The Time of Your Life"

Gretchen Addi talks with Jeff Stein AIA

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Kitchen gadgets for Zyliss, designed by IDEO.

# The Time of Your Life

From baby strollers to cars, an international design firm finds that understanding the needs of one generation often leads to good design for all generations **Gretchen Addi talks with Jeff Stein AIA**



**Gretchen Addi** is a senior designer with IDEO in San Francisco, where she founded THRIVE, a research initiative to explore the needs of an aging population. A certified interior designer, she served as chair of the national AIA Interiors Committee in 1997, and teaches at the California College of Art.



**Jeff Stein AIA** is the director of the architecture program at the Boston Architectural Center and is the architecture critic for *Banker & Tradesman*.

**Jeff Stein:** You are a senior designer with IDEO, the largest product design firm in the world. The range of IDEO's work is extraordinary — from industrial and product design to graphics, environments, branding, even business strategy. That range, and the fact that you have offices around the world, puts you in the unusual situation of both observing and to some degree creating trends in the market. What are your perceptions of the way corporations are responding to lifespan issues and especially to the phenomenon of an aging population?

**Gretchen Addi:** Many of our clients have always gone with the flow in terms of targeting youth, and haven't really paid much attention to the aging population, other than its health and wellness needs. Over the past few years, IDEO has been looking closely at the boomer demographic and conducting our own research in order to understand it better, to better inform the work that we do for our clients, and also to get our clients to think about some things that they weren't necessarily thinking about.

**Jeff Stein:** And of course, the aging population actually controls the economy to a large extent.

**Gretchen Addi:** Yes. To reach that market, you have to get past the stereotype; you have to get into the mind set of the demographic.

**Jeff Stein:** Have you seen that change in thinking actually affect specific products?

**Gretchen Addi:** Definitely. I recently worked with a company that is looking at how some health and fitness products can target an older generation other than just gym rats. The focus of the company was on the product. After spending a lot of time with people in the age category it wanted to appeal to, we went back to the company and said, you know, it's really not about the product — the product is fine. It's really about the whole experience, because you're asking people to make a lifestyle change. The product is only part of the package. So we changed the approach. And that was a direct response to the boomer demographic. Boomers don't just need another gadget; they also need an understanding of the path to staying healthy that goes with it.

**Jeff Stein:** How far does IDEO go in terms of looking at the big picture and trying to influence change? For example, have you thought about our relationship to the environment and perhaps imagined ways to solve that dilemma?

**Gretchen Addi:** We have a focus around the whole idea of sustainability. We're thinking beyond the materials that are part of the manufacturing process and are looking at the whole lifecycle of a product. We're also actively trying to help companies that are developing knowledge in areas of sustainability to connect with some of our clients, who can then enable them to reach a larger market.

**Jeff Stein:** Is sustainability a more deeply felt issue in Europe than in the United States?

**Gretchen Addi:** No, I'd say it's just as strong here. And again, I think that's related to the boomer demographic. The boomers are now in a position of power. A lot of ideas about sustainability and ecology had their nascence when the boomers were in their late teens and early 20s and were politically active. Many people — and I'd say I'm one of them — who pushed sustainability for years and years are now in a position to push it into the mainstream. Boomers want the marketplace to respond to them. It's always responded to them. Even though they're older, they still want attention.

**Jeff Stein:** Your professional life started in interior design, and you worked with both architecture and interior design firms. I wonder if you see a connection between designing a space and designing a product. For instance, architecture is sometimes imagined to be a storytelling art. It's not just about shelter, it's about culture. I wonder if the notion that a product tells a story through its design is something that you have encountered.

**Gretchen Addi:** Inherent in all the things we design, buildings or products, is a desire to produce something that is needed or is valuable, in addition to being well-designed. Good design is reflective — of its environment, its culture, its users — and it's also intuitive, so people know how to use it or navigate through it. It shouldn't require signs and labels. People don't come to IDEO and ask us to do what industrial designers call a "skin job" — just make it look good. That's not what we're about. A design is meaningless if it doesn't respond to a strong value proposition. If its only value is beauty, then we haven't really achieved what we need to achieve.



**Jeff Stein:** Could you describe one product that represents that point of view?

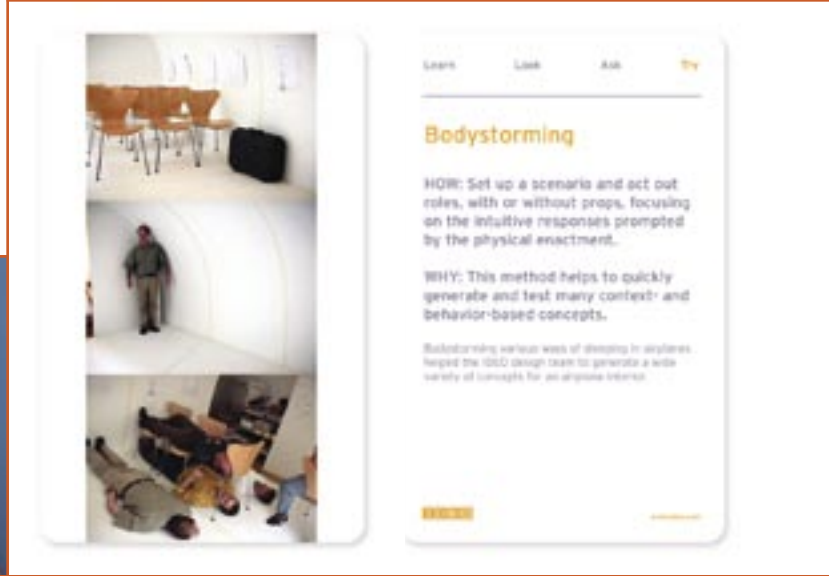
**Gretchen Addi:** We have been working very closely with Zyliss, a company that makes a whole series of kitchen tools. They wanted to design a new line of kitchen products, everything from utensils to salad spinners. We encouraged them to think across generations — products that both older and younger members of a family could use, because we understood that quite often children enjoy helping in the kitchen and parents welcome and encourage their participation.

At the other end of the spectrum were older people with limited ranges of motion and issues such as difficulty with holding the tools properly. So the human-factors people on the team went out and talked to a full range of people, from families with young children, to older people, to people of all ages with limitations in the use of their hands. Because my father, who lives with me, has some severe problems with his hands, a member of the team came to our house to learn how he had adapted his own tools. We often find that we get more information and inspiration by looking at the extremes. This gives the design team a lot of ideas about things that will work for everyone — what is sometimes called universal design.

**Jeff Stein:** So what's a Zyliss tool that you have in your kitchen now?

**Gretchen Addi:** We have the pizza cutter, a salad spinner, a potato peeler —

**Jeff Stein:** I have that potato peeler. Do you bring people into



your office for this sort of research? Maybe set up a test kitchen or laboratory?

**Gretchen Addi:** No. For us, it's most important to be in context with the person we're talking to. In the early stages, we go out and talk to people in their homes, at their work, wherever the context for the product, service, or experience is. We find that if we bring people to a focus group, they might not remember a lot of the things that are actually quite important to them. And if you aren't able to observe them doing things in context, you won't ask the right questions. What people say and what people do are quite often two different things. If you can get them to really reflect on what they're doing, you'll learn what they're really thinking, versus what they think you want to hear.

There is one exception. Further on in a project, we sometimes invite people in for what we call an "unfocus" group. It's a technique that started with a project for a shoe company. We brought in what you might call extreme users of shoes, from people who wear extremely high heels to a foot fetishist. We invited about 10 people to come to our office one evening, and asked them to talk about a couple of pairs of their favorite shoes that we'd asked them to bring along. And then we asked them to create shoes themselves—we provided all sorts of supplies and materials and use of the shop and whatever they needed—and then we talked about the shoes they designed. It was an evening of talking and designing and creating, and the client observed it all and participated in the discussion. The session produced 10 or 12 shoe designs, none of which were necessarily going to end up as an actual design. But it confirmed a lot of what we had already discovered in our research and observations, and it was a great spark at the beginning of the design process.

**Clockwise from opposite page:** Insight stroller for Evenflo. Playaway preloaded MP3 audiobook player. Health Buddy patient/doctor communication device. IDEO design process Method Cards. Humalog/Humulin disposable prefilled insulin injector pen.

**Jeff Stein:** It sounds as if it might also have helped to convince the client of ideas you were beginning to work with already.

**Gretchen Addi:** They were hearing it from the horse's mouth, so to speak, but even more, they were also hearing from real people what their inspirations and expectations were. We've done a number of these groups. I did one about the design of cars for older people, for empty-nesters, where again we brought in some extremes. We asked the participants to bring in their favorite car and had them talk about it. We had them break into teams and come up with design ideas and ways to market the vehicles based on personas that we provided. The clients were there, and they were amazed at the differences between what they thought was important to people based on their market and data reports, and what they actually heard.

**Jeff Stein:** It's fascinating that car companies, who invest so much capital in the manufacture of a new car, sometimes get things so wrong. Such as the Honda Element. Honda thought it had developed a car that would appeal to young buyers. But young people have generally ignored it, while their parents and grandparents have flocked to it.

**Gretchen Addi:** We actually pointed to the Element story as an example of a company missing its target market because it wasn't getting the right information. The project we were working on,



Clockwise from top left: First production mouse for Apple Computer (1980). Polaroid I-Zone instant camera for children and teens. Swifter CarpetFlick carpet sweeper. Stanford Center for Innovations in Learning, Stanford University. Hewlett-Packard Masher portable DJ console.

which is now a concept car, was intended for the empty-nest generation. Our clients kept thinking that it should be an SUV. We kept saying no, no, no, you're all wrong here. You have to listen to these people and hear what they're saying. The market data had been telling our clients that people were buying SUVs. And that was true, but they were buying them, not because they wanted SUVs, but because the car that they really wanted wasn't out there.

**Jeff Stein:** I imagine that some products require understanding and addressing needs that might vary wildly. For example, IDEO worked on a baby stroller at one point. A stroller would require considering the needs of both the baby and the person who's pushing it, packing it, and caring for the baby.

**Gretchen Addi:** One of the first questions that our observations prompted was why are strollers so low to the ground? Why is the child staring at everyone's knees and why does the mother need to bend over a thousand times a week just to get her child in and out of the stroller?

**Jeff Stein:** That is a fascinating question. Why was it?

**Gretchen Addi:** It may have come from the designs for small, collapsible strollers and the perception of safety by having a low center of gravity. I don't know if there was a compelling reason — other than they had always been that way. The original prams were all up much higher. One of the first things our designers did was to lift it up, which also allowed for storage space underneath. That was a huge revelation, even though afterward, it seemed obvious. But a design that matches its use and human ergonomics well often does seem obvious. This was a case of understanding the range of activities one does with a stroller as well as human ergonomics.

**Jeff Stein:** And of course, it allows the baby to see more and relate to people's faces, as babies do.

**Gretchen Addi:** And it allows the mother to communicate with the baby directly instead of having to bend over all the time.

**Jeff Stein:** You are heading up an initiative within IDEO called THRIVE, which is looking at design and the aging population.

**Gretchen Addi:** Yes. It's an initiative that came from the notion that we could internally fund areas of study that were potentially important to us and to our clients. It also came from the fact that we can't talk about much of our work because we're under



non-disclosure agreements with our clients; we are not at liberty to share a lot of the things that we do. However, if we fund an initiative ourselves, it is ours to share. THRIVE was our first attempt at that. We have also helped to fund other people doing some sort of research or exploration of interest to us. One example is a group of young women based in London, who call themselves Design Heroine, who wanted to explore the impact of the aging workforce and in particular the needs of the multigenerational knowledge worker.

**Jeff Stein:** Do you have a comparable initiative targeting younger generations?

**Gretchen Addi:** We actually have a practice called Zero20, which used to be the toy group within IDEO. It's now expanded into designing not just products but also environments and experiences specifically for zero to 20-year-olds. So, although it still does toys, it's an evolving point of view on youth and families.

**Jeff Stein:** How did you arrive at zero to 20, instead of zero to nine or 11 to 17?

**Gretchen Addi:** For me, Zero20 represents the idea, in demographic terms, that the first 20 years of your life defines your generation. Our toy group realized that many of our clients

were expressing interest in products, environments, and experiences that went well beyond toys.

**Jeff Stein:** What sorts of things have they worked on?

**Gretchen Addi:** The baby stroller was designed before the focus was expanded, but they have looked more broadly at that segment of the population, not so much for marketing, but in order to understand it better in terms of needs and attitudes. It's very much like what we are doing with THRIVE, and that can translate and cross over to specific projects. For example, Zero20 has had input into projects looking at medications and medical products that children need, but that aren't directly designed for them.

**Jeff Stein:** Such as containers?

**Gretchen Addi:** Yes, and we've also done work with medications and injections for diabetics, trying to understand how something that must work for an adult can also be made to work for a child.

**Jeff Stein:** I'm worried about child-proof caps. At some point, I'm not going to be able to open my own medications.

**Gretchen Addi:** My father has the simplest design work-around—he just gets somebody to open them once and then he leaves them open. But that's one example of many things that warrant another look in terms of what people really need. And sometimes circumstances force you to look at things a bit differently. I have a friend, from the boomer generation, who was recently diagnosed with a brain tumor. One of the results of her surgery was that she has partial paralysis for a period of time. She absolutely refuses to have anything to do with the medical products that are offered to her, like a walker or a cane. She says that they're so ghastly she can't even imagine herself using them. But she needs them to walk. We need a good Crate and Barrel or Martha Stewart approach to designing and merchandising some of these objects.

**Jeff Stein:** One part of IDEO's work is your Transformation practice, which works with businesses strategically to help them effect transformation within organizations. How do you see generation issues influencing the way business is conducted?

**Gretchen Addi:** One enormous challenge is that there is a whole generation of people who are thinking about retirement, and there's a lot of knowledge that's going to retire with them. And the group replacing them is much smaller in size.

**Jeff Stein:** There's a similar issue affecting the architecture profession. Many more people are retiring from the profession than are joining it. Do you find that this is a cultural trend, not just for the architecture profession, but for professions in general?

**Gretchen Addi:** I think part of it is a question of generational attitudes, but a lot is a question of pure demographics. We have an aging culture here, just like Europe and just like Japan. An

aging culture means that a larger percentage of our population is 50-plus. And each of the generations that have followed has been smaller in terms of size. So we have a shrinking labor pool at the same time that we are going to need a lot more labor to take care of a larger aging population.

**Jeff Stein:** And at the same time, we're seeing in some places a phenomenon that exacerbates the problem. I'm thinking of the acronym "NEET," which was developed in the United Kingdom, but now is mostly used in Japan — Not in Education, Employment, or Training. It describes Japanese between the ages of 15 and 34, who have essentially either dropped out of the workforce or failed to enter at all. It's so endemic that there's an acronym for it.

**Gretchen Addi:** One of the things that I don't think we acknowledge is that the boomers are a very large generation of overachievers. Willing to work as hard as they humanly can — and overspending to go along with it. I think we have to acknowledge that their children have looked at them and decided that they're not going to do that, that there has to be a different way. Boomers think that they're passing on these amazing values, and they're not. Maybe it's because they aren't so amazing. But this older generation has a lot of knowledge to share, and they are great elders and mentors and models. Unfortunately, our society isn't set up to foster those kinds of relationships, because we've told all these people they have to retire like their parents. We haven't acknowledged that our thinking is out of date and found alternative ways to keep them in the workforce where they're really needed and valued.

**Jeff Stein:** Instead, we've invented places like Sun City that segregate them. We've invested so much into them, but then we put them in a position where we can't get it back.

**Gretchen Addi:** I talk to my daughter about the things my grandmother used to teach me — basic skills, remedies, commonsense solutions. And I feel guilty because I haven't taken the time to pass those on to her. She's going to have to learn all that stuff the hard way. That's a whole reason that magazines like *Real Simple* exist. It's because we haven't passed on that basic, good, simple information. The media have to do it for us, because we don't have the time, or haven't taken the time, to do it ourselves.

**Jeff Stein:** Is there a role for designers in this?

**Gretchen Addi:** Yes. We've still got a lot of work to do, in my opinion. We need a general acknowledgment that what's good for this older generation will be good for other generations, too, if we do it the right way — there's a universal quality about it. It isn't really about age. It's about understanding and respecting people's interests and needs and then designing in a way that makes our work valuable to all of them. ■

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