



# Designing for uncertainty

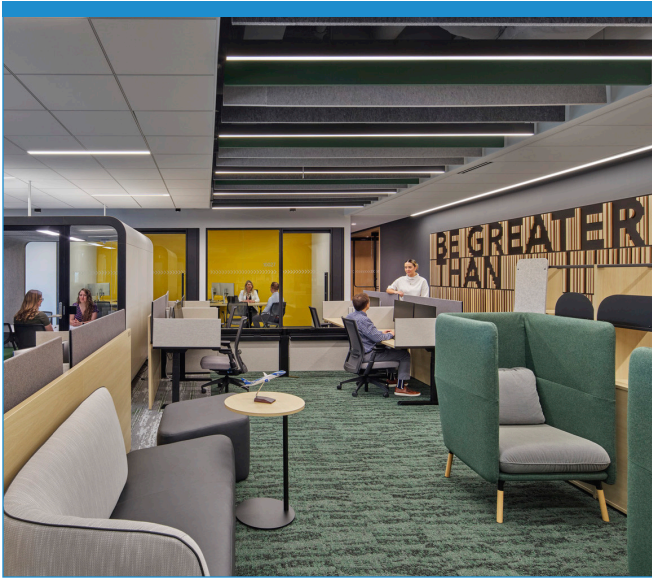
BY LAURA VIERLING | JANUARY 2024

In 1969, a former Tuskegee Airman and three U.S. Defense Department analysts established the Inner City Fund (ICF) to finance minority-owned businesses in Washington, D.C. Under the name ICF Incorporated, the firm transitioned its focus to professional services in the early 1970s. Today, with offices throughout North America as well as Europe, Asia, and Africa, ICF is a global consulting and technology-services provider working in industries such as energy, the environment, public health, economic development, and much more.

For years, the ICF headquarters was located in Fairfax, Virginia, at a relatively isolated site with few nearby amenities. But that would change with the move to eight floors (208,999 rentable square feet; 19,417

rentable sq. m.) in a building developed in combination with Reston Station, a new stop on the Metro service expansion to Dulles International Airport. In 2018, when IA Interior Architects partnered with ICF to design the interiors of the new headquarters, the inclusion of amenities was a top priority. The convenience and services of the Metro complex would be an additional convenience, as would a few restaurants within walking distance.

The program and design of the interiors were completed just before the COVID-19 pandemic's impact began to affect office environments. Aware that work patterns were significantly changing, IA paused the project in October 2020 to consider new options



All photos by Halkon Mason Photography.

in response to evolving and envisioned workplace processes and requirements.

Since planning for uncertainty had been a key factor of IA's design strategy from project inception, the task was adroitly accomplished. All amenities remained, but work areas were reimagined and revised. A supple hybrid-model workplace was designed that increases the area for collaboration and provides a variety of settings and space types with almost universal unassigned seating. Only a few core functions retain designated seating.

### A mid-project pivot

The contrast between the original and the revised space allocations on a typical work floor is revealing. The assignment of pre-COVID footage compared to

post-COVID footage illustrates the shift to sharing and interaction as opposed to individual assigned workstations. The original provision of 44 percent for individual space was reduced to 28 percent; collaboration space increased from 28 to 31 percent; flex space increased from 3 to 12 percent; and shared support space increased from 25 to 29 percent.

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The intention to develop sophisticated customer-facing areas that showcase the firm's expertise and services was maintained as well as the mandate to meaningfully recount ICF's history and story. The amenity floor features a customer-engagement center, an auditorium, a cafe, training rooms, and a genius bar collocated with the IT department. Working directly with ICF's marketing and branding staff, IA's experiential design team created multiple analog and digital format installations throughout the facility that celebrate the firm's history of innovation, people, and mission.

The comprehensive scheme, informed by decisions based on IA's analysis of space-utilization data and information gathered through surveys, interviews, and focus groups, reduced ICF's real estate usage by 35 percent, from 322,000 RSF (29,915 RSM) to 208,999 RSF (19,417 RSM). The new hybrid-work approach provides 970 (87 percent open, 13 percent closed) individual work seats to support a headcount of 1,142 employees for a sharing ratio of 1:1.3. In addition, bolstered by IA's innovative design concepts and workplace solutions, the scheme improves efficiency and productivity, streamlines operations, reduces operating costs, and embeds strategies for future flexibility and long-term adaptability.



Overall, the design relies on the integration of innovation, technology, and sustainability. Flexibility and zoning aligned with employee needs and required privacy levels support an array of choices, including two terraces with full network capabilities that enable face-to-face and remote collaboration. Meeting rooms and private settings are infused into neighborhoods; departments are assigned to neighborhoods and customized for preferences and work styles.

In terms of sustainability, ICF is one of the largest science-based consultancies in the world, with over 2,000 experts in energy, climate, and environment to help organizations more efficiently use their resources. Not surprisingly, building a sustainable future is an ICF core value, and the new workplace supports that goal in concert with employee well-being. The design solution aligns the workplace transformation with the objectives of environmental stewardship and employee care. Features like redesigned furniture and the variety of choices provided by hybrid-model activity zones plus work settings and the amenities establish an engaging, more intuitive, and comfortable scenario for work-life balance. In addition, environmental graphics tell stories aimed at inspiring sensitivity and care for the environment. The decrease in square footage, of course, reduces the firm's carbon footprint, and the Reston Metro stop location benefits commuters. Taking into account these and other factors, the project earned LEED Gold certification.

The new headquarters is a unified experience, engaging for employees and visitors alike, devoted to ICF's mission, people, clients, and values with the



same passion and care that inspired its founding in 1969. Planning for uncertainty, a fundamental of IA's design strategy, allowed for a mid-project pivot to optimally accommodate challenging circumstances unimaginable when the project was begun. Designing for a projected though, in fact, theoretical future will always benefit from a design scheme and options intrinsically able to flex in new directions, especially if the future unfolds in unforeseen ways with imperatives requiring significant change.



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