



Inspire – What Great Design Can Do

“Form follows function – that has been misunderstood. Form and function should be one, joined in a spiritual union.”

Frank Lloyd Wright

I’m in the business of inspiration and leadership. In my many years working with leaders and organizations around the globe, I have studied leadership, researched it, written about it, experienced it, and facilitated it.

Designers are also in the business of inspiration and leadership. They are the creators of what I call *soulspaces*—environments that engage the soul, encourage it to sing, and inspire greatness. And they are leaders – which I define this way: Leadership is a *servicing relationship with others that inspires their growth and makes the world a better place*.

Many designers see the importance of physical environment in human performance and potential, and many are called to imagine and create the extraordinary spiritual and creative liberation that flows from sacred places designed for the soul. With soul in mind, designers have transformed airports, department stores, schools, hospitals, and public buildings. The possibility of design is to carefully and lovingly create beautiful ambiance for employees and customers, knowing that establishing a connection with the soul is critical to wellness, inspiration, and organizational excellence.

Joseph M. Hogan is now CEO of ABB Group, but as the CEO of GE Healthcare Technologies he said this about the evolving importance of design: "Today, when we think about designing, say, a new MRI system, we don't just think about designing the product, we think about designing the whole radiology suite. Design in the next 10 years will move beyond the product. It will move beyond workflow. Hospitals in the



future...will have different ways of interacting with the patient. We have to think about setting the course for how design can affect the whole healthcare experience."

When I speak to audiences, I often ask them to imagine that they have been asked to do the most creative work of their lives—an assignment that will be their legacy on this planet. Then I ask what physical location they would choose in which to do this work while accessing their genius and inviting their creative juices to flow. They usually describe places like mountains, forests, deserts, beaches, or islands. Sometimes they will name a place—the Napa Valley, Mount Rainier, the Rockies, Hawaii, the French Riviera, the Swiss Alps or the Grand Canyon. Or they may describe their home or garden, or a retreat center, or a local park. They *never* suggest the office.

If we expect people to do brilliant and inspiring work, why don't we build brilliant and inspiring places in which they can do so?

One of the sources of ugliness in organizational workspaces is shape. Nature has no right angles. Humans are part of nature, and we have no right angles, either. It is natural, therefore, that we find the irregular and the curved more pleasing to our sensations. Indeed, because we are part of nature, the right angle is simply not in our DNA and therefore, it clashes with our cellular memory—it has no connection for our soul. Yet the default design for our work and living spaces is the rectangle—a direct affront to our souls.

Suppose, though, that we rethought the design of our workplaces, designing them with curves—no right angles—with round windows, curved walls, and irregularly shaped doors, rooms, and furniture that are fluid and nonconformist, using natural materials, not plastic; where plants are in abundance; where the curves of water and sound were evident; where we can see the sky and the stars through curvilinear skylights; and where we use our imagination to replace linear environments. If we had the courage to “destroy the box,” as Frank Lloyd Wright suggested, and lessen our rectilinear thinking, creativity would take a cue from this fluid environment, and brilliance would be invited to flourish in our workplaces.

Creative environments romance creative work from people. Soulspaces inspire luminous results and leadership. It is not an accident that Apple's products are so often preferred, at least from a design point of view, to any other manufacturers' pedestrian offerings. Name your favorite item, and it will have curves, not straight lines—and you may have noticed that this also applies to people! “In life, as in art, beauty moves in curves,” said Edward G. Bulwer-Lytton.



By changing the lines of our environments and the artifacts with which we fill the spaces, we can dramatically enhance personal and therefore organizational performance. While I'm not a designer by trade, the work I do with organizations and leaders has helped clients rethink the original designs of their office buildings and influence the structures and decors to achieve remarkable changes in the performance, inspiration, and attitudes of all of the people who enjoy the space. Recruitment and retention of employees is also dramatically enhanced with god design – people love to work in beautiful places that nourish the soul.

For 25 years our own offices were located in a converted log house, perched at the edge of a cliff overlooking a seven-hundred-acre wilderness that unfolded into the valley four hundred feet below. The offices were wrapped in large curved windows that enable colleagues and visitors to connect with the spectacular views, which changed with each magical season and weather pattern. The panorama was breathtaking and the silence extraordinary. Visitors arriving for the first time were astounded by the awe-inspiring views; even regular visitors returned to their favorite spot to stand and gaze for a few moments to enjoy the pristine tranquility before settling into the business that brought them to our soulspace. Hummingbirds fed near all of the office windows during the summer, and songbirds visited the many feeders placed strategically for everyone to enjoy. Deer often crossed the property, pausing to watch us as we watched them. In the native tradition, the deer is the symbol of gentleness, reminding us that we have created a gentle environment, and of our intent to be gentle with each other. Skiing was five minutes away, a swimming pool beckoned outside, and trails through the woods offered opportunities for exercise, reflection, and conversation. Coming to our workplace was an inspiration each day!

What I have learned is that the efficient and economical, yet ugly, design is always the most expensive because it stifles creativity and is a barrier to high performance. A recent client spent \$10 million adding beauty, curves, natural materials, and aesthetic additions to a \$180-million hospital. This is the only hospital in that State that does not have a major recruiting problem. People *want* to work in beautiful places – they will seek you out – and they will want to stay. The result: savings of millions of dollars every year, and a priceless reputation. Somerset Maugham once observed, “The ideal has many names, and beauty is but one of them.” Who says the *old story* way of designing workspaces is efficient and cost-effective? It costs money to be “efficient,” and investing in beauty in our surroundings makes money – the opposite of traditional, utilitarian thinking. Why? Because it nourishes the soul, and when the soul is nourished, the world wins.

In fact, creating beautiful surroundings may pay handsome dividends, even beyond those reaped by the soul. Ford Motor Co. created the world's largest living roof by covering it with ten acres of drought-resistant sedum plant costing \$3.6 million. Though this was double the cost of regular roofing, it will last twice as long, and the company will therefore break even on its investment. But there are additional benefits: It will reduce



polluted storm-water run-off and act as an insulating blanket in warm and cold weather by absorbing and reducing rainfall. The air quality around the plant will be improved because the roof will absorb and trap carbon dioxide, and release oxygen into the environment. And the company will save \$35 million that it will not need to spend on storm sewers and storm-water treatment systems because the roof acts as a natural filtration system, sending excess storm-water to retention ponds before being released into the Rouge River.

The Body Shop is another wonderful example of a company that honors the value of its physical spaces. Its Canadian offices opened in 1980, and by 1992, their home office, production, distribution, and training facilities had grown into four separate buildings. From the start, the vision for the new headquarters was of a soul space. In keeping with the company's commitment to recycling, a decision was made to recycle an entire building. Instead of demolishing an existing building or constructing a new one, the firm purchased and recycled a thirty-five-year-old printing warehouse in an industrial zone of Toronto. Said Margot Franssen, who then was The Body Shop's Canadian president and partner, "We wanted the building to reflect The Body Shop's culture and values, by minimizing its environmental impact...we also wanted to make it an open, fun and functional place to work."

A team of fifteen professionals was assembled to achieve the company's goal of transforming the building into an example of extraordinary innovation in design, renovation, engineering, energy conservation, landscaping, and waste management. Within an environment once referred to as "urban-pavement-with-power-lines," they created a natural habitat with meadows, hedgerows, wooded areas, and a natural wetland.

Every employee has numerous stories that reveal the power of creating and honoring environments that engage the soul, encourage it to sing, and inspire greatness. If we want to meet their needs and encourage their brilliance and potential, we should place them in environments that support these intentions—a *soul space*.