

# Does your company have a soul?

## How environmental branding can help find and reveal it

By Heather Skyler

Environmental branding has nothing to do with going green, and everything to do with promoting the culture of your business through the design of your building. "Your office space is who you are," explained Mark Schmitz, founder and president of ZD Studios. "People who understand and embrace that have office space that reflects it."

ZD approaches design with the purpose of uncovering the soul or "truth" of a company, as Schmitz likes to call it; then ZD reveals this truth through signage, graphics, sound, smell...well, the entire

environment.

While this may sound new-agey and even irrelevant to the true grinding forth of business, ZD has done environmental branding for such well known organizations as Lambeau Field, the UW Athletic Program, Marshall Erdman, the UW Children's Hospital and Duke University, all with positive results.

ZD has become so well known, particularly for its design of sporting arenas, that the company is currently in talks with the Yankees about doing a portion of the design and branding for its stadium.

"We've found a great niche in sports because it's pure passion—100% emotion, and we're in the passion business," said Schmitz.

### THREE CHARRETTES APIECE

While it's easy for Schmitz to talk about passion and souls, it's not always easy to call forth this sort of talk from company leaders, but Schmitz seems to have found a formula.

"In the first charrette [creative idea session] with a client, I get the people in the organization to tell me who they are and

## INTERVIEWEES



Jeff Raasch  
Flad & Associates

Sarah Reiter  
Brownhouse Designs



Mark Schmitz  
ZD Studios

Laura Serebin  
Flad & Associates



Peter Tan  
Strang, Inc.



The "Legacy Walk"  
designed by ZD Studios at  
Marshall Erdman's new  
office building



why anyone should care. In the next one I ask them to describe the soul of their company. This is very hard for people to do; sometimes I get at this by asking the owner what drives him to go in to work everyday and find the emotional pinpoint in there. In the third session I get them to try and describe what their company's soul looks like."

### MARSHALL ERDMAN MUSEUM?

Schmitz said ZD's work for the new Marshall Erdman building is one of the purest examples of environmental branding he's worked on so far in his career. The interior of the building is like a mini-museum to the company's 50-year history, beginning with a "legacy walk," a curved hallway complete with floor to ceiling graphics, wall text and a touch screen computer where Marshall Erdman CEO Scott Ransom greets visitors and talks about the history of Marshall Erdman.

A larger-than-life-size photo of Marshall Erdman standing beside Frank Lloyd Wright is imprinted on the first section of the wall, with the intriguing quote from Wright: "Baby, I'm going to make you famous."

Every detail of ZD's design is geared toward celebrating the history and people of Marshall Erdman. A tribute to employees is displayed on a main wall in the spacious, well-lit cafeteria. Every employee who has been with the company for 15 years or more has a thumbprint above their signature imprinted on a brightly colored, thick piece of plastic. These ovals cover the wall like shiny pieces of candy and are more unique and interesting visually than a wall of employee photos.

The building also includes three modern-looking, curved steel kiosks that tell the story of Marshall Erdman on screen when touch-activated, and there are 15 themed conference rooms, each depicting a different branch office of the company. For example, the Atlanta office's conference room has a peach tree etched in the glass wall, and the Seattle branch has a glass etching of Mt. Ranier.

### IS EVERYBODY DOING IT?

ZD is the only company in town that describes its core function as environmental branding, but many other local archi-

tectural design firms are working toward the same goals. Sarah Reiter, director of marketing for **Brownhouse Designs**, said one of the tenets of her firm is that design and physical space are strong communicators of a company's brand; she begins talks with clients in a similar way to Schmitz.

"We start the design process with visioning sessions where we ask clients questions like: If your company were a magazine, which one would it be? If your company was a famous person, which person would it be?"

"We use those answers to get to the DNA of a company's culture, and we think we know the secret of translating that into design. We figure out how to get the "it" factor of a space that captures what the client is about."

A recent example of Brownhouse's work is the new office building it designed for Gorman & Company, which relocated its offices to a historic schoolhouse in Oregon, WI. According to Reiter, the old schoolhouse is a perfect fit for Gorman & Company because it does a lot of historic renovations. To this end, Brownhouse worked with Gorman to keep as many original details intact as possible, such as the original trophy case, blackboards and basketball courts. To illustrate the company's sense of whimsy and humor, the lunchroom was designed to look like an old 50's diner, complete with jukebox, booths and wallettes (mini-jukeboxes).

### ENGAGING ALL THE SENSES

Reiter and Schmitz both emphasized that, whenever possible, all five senses should be engaged by a building's environment, though Schmitz said sound and smell aren't usually seen as crucial by clients and are often the first to get cut from a budget.

Reiter said that Brownhouse wants to create an experience, and offered its work for RZ & Company as a good example. "We worked on what clients would hear. We wanted to create various zones—a spa area that was cocoon-like and soothing, for example. We didn't put overhead lighting in the shampoo area since clients spend so much time with their heads in sinks looking at the ceiling. We designed towel warmers to add to the experience too. It's really about understanding what a guest in a space goes through, from the moment they drive up to the building."



Architects from Strang and Flad also talked about creating an experience and delving into the culture of a client's company. Jeff Raasch, an architect at Flad & Associates, said "We may not call it branding, but that's where we always start, by figuring out the company's culture and generating ideas that match that." Flad's own culture of creativity is apparent on the walk to the front door where visitors are greeted by a modern, yellow steel sculpture and white, modern building.

Peter Tan, principal designer with Strang, Inc. said he prides himself on being a good listener in the up-front process that he called the "programming phase," and said Strang's process is a far cry from the image of Frank Lloyd Wright, who Tan said had more of the attitude of "I'm the big architect, just be quiet and I'll design the building."

Tan pointed out that since 80% of communication is non-verbal, it's important he sit down with someone from every department and talk face to face about ideas when he's starting a new project. "By the time I'm done with programming, they say I know more about the whole organization than any of them!" Tan laughed.

### WORKFLOW COUNTS TOO!

Both Strang and Flad also put an emphasis on function and workflow design as integral parts of environmentally branding a space. Raasch and fellow Flad architect Laura Serebin explained that the design of their own company's office reflects the egalitarian culture of Flad, since even the CEO, Bill Bula, has a cube rather than a corner office.

Serebin and Raasch explained the building has often been redesigned or rearranged to reflect the changing needs of the company. About once a year, employees move floors and desk locations to join the team for their current project, and as technology has changed, alterations have been made to the building as well. The once book-packed library has become a central meeting space and soon-to-be coffee lounge, since now most research is done via Google rather than books.

Tan designed the office building for Electronic Theater Controls (ETC) with its Times-Square style entrance, complete with movie marquee, clocktower and painted skyscrapers to reflect the com-

pany's core work of theater-lighting design. Tan emphasized, however, that even the smallest details of the building reflect ETC's culture, and that spaces are designed to reflect the function of the occupants as opposed to their rank or position.

The research and development department, for example, is occupied by engineers who need, according to Tan, "a heads-down station where they can retreat and be creative, and they also need a space for collaborative work." Tan designed stations to provide both, hence creating an environment that reveals the needs of the team, which in turn illustrates the culture of this part of the company.

The finance department has more traditional enclosed offices, and another area called Systems houses people who work in teams all the time, so is designed in more of a bullpen format where employees can just turn around and be in a collaborative circle.

### SPACES FOR SERENDIPITY

Serebin [Flad] said many of her projects are for ideas companies that tend to be very collaborative, and she keeps this in mind when designing every aspect of a building.

Raasch said, "It's all about creating places for serendipity to happen." When designing the headquarters for the college testing company, ACT, Serebin widened the staircase, a simple solution that enable people to stop and talk between floors. She also created spaces between buildings where people could interact and exchange ideas.

Schmitz said, "Think of the workplace as a theater. It's critical you look at designing your office space as theater design, everything from the entrance sequence to the meeting rooms can be looked at as a staged event."

In the U.S., the workplace is, essentially, our primary theater. It's where our main ideas are played out and implemented, it's where our identities are created and maintained, and so it's important that our buildings reflect this.

Schmitz [ZD] explained it this way: "We work harder and faster than any other culture in the world. We're not living in France with three-hour lunches. We spend our world in our work environment and our environment needs to reflect and celebrate our culture."