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Designed by Kahler Slater, Inc. Photo by Peter McCullough

The Bradley Corp.



Courtesy of Genesis Architecture. © Ken Dalim

Educators Credit Union



Courtesy of RS + K Strategic Creative

RS + K



Courtesy of Genesis Architecture. © Ken Dalim

Educators Credit Union



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GE Energy

# BUILDING BUSINESS

GOOD BUILDING DESIGN CAN HELP THE BOTTOM LINE

By Whitney Gould

Jim Hooper, vice president of facilities for Educators Credit Union, remembers the bad old days. And he never wants to go back there.

"We were stuffed into a cruddy little space the size of a closet," he says of ECU's former offices on the east side of Milwaukee, which were hidden away in the old Columbia Hospital. "No one wanted to do their banking there. We were teetering on the brink of failure."

Today Hooper's enterprise is thriving. The east side branch, which represents mostly hospital employees, has jumped from 1,100 to 5,000 members in just three years, a nearly fivefold increase.

A big reason, he says, is ECU's inviting new building on busy North Prospect Avenue. The striking, three-story icon, which opened in 2009 and won an American Institute of Architects award the following year from AIA Wisconsin, is a prime example of how good design can be good for business. Studies show that thoughtfully designed buildings can make for happier, more productive workforces, improve recruitment and retention, and strengthen corporate identity.

Designed by Genesis Architecture of Racine and inserted into a tight urban space, the red-brick building has big, tall windows, a light-filled atrium, a rooftop garden and gathering space, and a vine-covered screen that absorbs pollution and noise.

"You feel like you're outside even when you're inside," Hooper says. People like

coming to work — "the building gives them a sense of pride" — and customers like doing business there: Transactions have soared from 4,500 a month in the old space to more than 13,000 today.

## Part of your identity

For another AIA award winner, inventive architecture sends just the right message to clients. "It's a reflection of who we are," says Stan Reed, one of the principals at RS + K Strategic Creative, a Madison advertising firm.

Nine years ago, after many years in renovated spaces, Reed's company hired KEE Architecture Inc. to design a new building in a west side office park. RS + K occupies the second floor of the 30,000-square-foot structure, with tenants on the first floor and parking hidden underground.

Outside, three huge elk sculptures in a grove of aspens help give the naturally landscaped site a strong sense of place. "No one knows our address, but they all know how to locate it from the elks," jokes Jim Sendেকে, another principal.

With a south-facing glass wall and a band of clerestory windows lining the upper level, the building is flooded with natural light, allowing employees to work with the lights off on most days. The flexible interior is elegantly detailed with wooden beams and contemporary art.



RS + K Strategic Creative occupies the second floor of this 30,000-square-foot building located in a grove of aspens, complete with three huge elk sculptures.

Courtesy of RS + K Strategic Creative

### Reinventing space

The Bradley Corp., a plumbing manufacturer in Menomonee Falls, has seen a similar payoff from its own investment in better design.

Its old building, which had several additions, failed to reflect the company's brand and was a turnoff for visitors and employees alike, company officials say. The lobby was messy and uninviting; the "lunchroom" was a cramped little space with vending machines; manufacturing employees and administrators were in separate, disconnected parts of the building.

Its reinvented space, designed by Milwaukee's Kahler Slater firm, uncluttered and brightened the lobby; created a lively new commons area where people can eat, meet and watch a Packers game on a big-screen TV; and creatively joined the separate parts of the building with a flowing hallway whose focal point is a stunning white wall sculpture made from wash bowls and other plumbing parts.

And the ceilings are high, ranging from 12 to 16 feet. Studies at the University of Minnesota have shown that loft-like spaces are especially congenial for people in creative professions, encouraging them to see connections among disparate subjects.

Reed and Sendেকে say the investment in good design has paid off on multiple levels: Absenteeism and turnover in the 17-member firm are very low; clients, some from as far away as Los Angeles and Boston, love coming there; and tenants have renewed their leases multiple times.

### Works with existing spaces

But companies don't have to build completely new spaces from the ground up to realize the benefits of sensitive design. Sometimes reimagining an existing space works just fine.

GE Energy's gas engine facility in Waukesha is a good example. For more than 50 years the former Waukesha Engine was housed in a building so dark and dingy that the company didn't even like to bring job prospects there, according to President Brian White.

"It was pretty miserable," he says. "You could probably spend all day not seeing anybody. The offices were so closed in."

The 100-person company, which was acquired by GE in 2011, hired HGA of Milwaukee for a makeover. The architects gutted the 22,000-square-foot building and produced a sunny, engaging space, which opened earlier this year. Large windows with retractable screens now bring natural light deep into the colorful interior; artificial lighting dims automatically when it is not needed. High-tech mechanical systems allow employees to regulate temperature and air exchanges in their own spaces. The open interior fosters collaboration, yet also allows privacy. The walls and conference rooms are lined with art that nods to the history of gas engines.

Morale, productivity and retention are up, says Lynn Palmer, vice president of engineering, who championed the overhaul. "And it has helped a lot in recruitment, too," he says. "People are super-impressed when they come here. And we have shown that we are serious about growing in Waukesha."

"It has really fostered a sense of community," Kris Alderson, Bradley's senior marketing manager, says of the makeover. "You see so much more interaction now, and when you build these closer ties that helps retain employees."

Barbara Armstrong, a Kahler Slater architect and workplace strategist, says the key for any space-challenged company is "finding how your walls can talk for you."

Armstrong, who writes for *Forbes* magazine about the business implications of good design, says part of her job is getting corporations to think in a more integrated way about people and design.

"You may not need a totally new space; you might not even need to expand. You just need to create a place where employees are living the brand and feeling proud of their association with the company. Employees who feel that way, who can find places to talk with each other without feeling as if they are goofing off, will work harder and harder for you." 🍷

*Whitney Gould is the former architecture critic at the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. She studied architecture and urban history at Columbia University and Harvard.*

# WHY GOOD DESIGN MATTERS



A stunning sculpture made from wash bowls and other plumbing graces a hallway in the headquarters of The Bradley Corp. in Menomonee Falls.

Designed by Kahler Slater, Inc. Photo by Peter McCullough

Is good design a frill? In these financially stressed times, corporations might be pardoned for thinking so.

But a number of studies in recent years have concluded that good design can be good for the bottom line. One of the most comprehensive surveys of that link comes from Britain's Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment. Compiling research from around the world, including the United States, the commission found both tangible and intangible benefits from good urban design. For corporations, those benefits include:

Higher land values; higher sale values; higher rental returns; reduced operating costs; reduced energy expenditures; happier, more productive workforces, leading to improved retention and recruiting.

So what exactly is "good design"? There are probably as many definitions as there are people. For some, the answer is simply: "I know it when I see it."

But among architects and planners and other design experts, some of the most common ingredients are:

**Proportion and scale:** A building should be neither too large nor too small for its site, with a pleasing balance between solids (walls) and voids (windows and doors and other openings).

**High quality, energy-efficient materials:** Cheap construction may save money in the short run, but it's penny-wise, pound-foolish if surfaces have to be replaced in a few years. Green building — using locally sourced materials, recycled content and resource-saving mechanical systems — can produce long-term savings in operational costs.

**Spatial coherence:** A good building lets users find their way from here to there with subtle visual cues, discreet signage and logical traffic flow. A well-defined entrance can help.

**Site sensitivity:** The best buildings are not objects in space. They grow out of

their settings rather than imposing themselves on it. That means preserving natural features wherever possible; orienting windows to take advantage of sunlight; and acknowledging, but not imitating, neighboring buildings, and finding ways to connect them.

**Accessibility:** Buildings should be accessible to people of all ages and physical ability, not only to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act but also to invite the widest possible participation by potential users.

**Pedestrian friendliness:** Which would you rather visit or work in: a closed-off, windowless box or a light-filled building that is welcoming to the street? Case closed.

**Sense of place:** Memorable buildings have a distinctive character that reinforces and even elevates the quality of their surroundings. High-quality public art, attractive pathways and plazas, natural landscaping and water features such as fountains can help. — *Whitney Gould*