



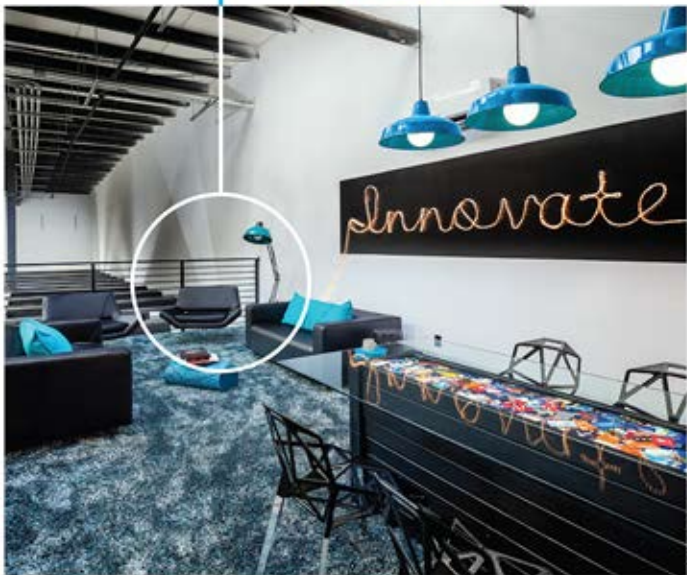
BY VICTORIA DWEK

# BEYOND THE ADDRESS

TODAY, AS LANDLORDS AND BUSINESS OWNERS BEGIN TO UNDERSTAND THE VALUE OF AMBIANCE AND FUNCTION, INTERIOR DESIGNERS ARE AMONG THE KEY PEOPLE HELPING BOTH RESIDENTIAL AND CORPORATE SPACES RETURN A MAXIMUM PROFIT. I SPOKE TO ONE OF THE INDUSTRY'S LEADING DESIGNERS, **SUSAN STRAUSS** OF SUSAN STRAUSS DESIGN, TO LEARN HOW DESIGN INFLUENCES THE FUNCTION OF A SPACE.

PHOTOS BY HUDI GREENBERGER

IN THE EMPLOYEE LOUNGE AREA, THERE'S A SHAG CARPET SO STAFF MEMBERS CAN FEEL COMFORTABLE AND EVEN KICK OFF THEIR SHOES FOR A WHILE.



I first heard of designer Susan Strauss a couple of years ago, when a photographer colleague showed me photos he had taken of her work. Of course, when I see something cool, I try to think of a way to tie it into food so I have an excuse to write about it. Some of those photos included shots of very innovative restaurant spaces.

Restaurant design. Perfect. The topic was unique and very different from the kinds of things I usually write about. It would make a great *White* feature. Ambiance is such a

huge factor in the dining-out experience. What kind of colors or design elements make us hungry? How do you balance the social nature of eating out with the need for some privacy? What about the dramatic elements that make the space interesting or fun to visit? I had the topic on my list for a while but didn't email Susan until a couple of weeks ago.

Once we were in touch, I spoke to Susan about some of the food spaces she had done. Then she mentioned that she had just finished designing the

corporate offices of CardCash. CardCash is an online gift-card exchange where you can buy discounted gift cards or sell the gift cards you don't think you'll use. She showed me some in-progress photos of the large industrial space undergoing a transformation into a hip venue that'll inspire creativity and ultimately, productivity. And then she mentioned the detail that most captured my attention—the work was being done without a contractor.

Then I realized that Susan and I



would be taking a walk from the pages of *Whisk and AmLiving* to our neighbor *Ami*, where I'd learn about commercial design. What motivates employees to want to be successful? What makes customers want to buy? Those are the factors that ultimately bring profit to a space.

### **The Feel-Good Space**

In her first moment as a designer, Susan was 12 years old. She was in a car with her father and her parents' architect, driving around the neighborhoods of Melbourne, Australia. She had a fit when she saw the terra cotta color her mother had chosen for the exterior of the new home they were building.

"We can't do that color," she told them resolutely.

So she picked a new one.

They drove around until Susan saw another home in the color that she liked; it would also work with the style of the home. She pointed it out.

"And that's the color the house still is today," she told me.

But at that point her mother didn't involve her in all the design decisions.

"My mother had an interior designer select the vanities that would go in the bathroom. I remember coming upstairs the day that they were installed. When I saw them for the first time, I thought, 'This is horrible!' And they're still horrible until this day."

In a recent moment as a designer, Susan was not fazed when a corporate client told her that one of his employees, Eli Newman, would be acting as the contractor...and that it was his first contracting

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ONE OF THE FEEL-GOOD ASPECTS OF WALKING THROUGH THE SPACE ARE THE MOTIVATIONAL SAYINGS ON THE WALL BY PERSONALITIES SUCH AS ABRAHAM LINCOLN AND HELEN KELLER.

and express themselves.

"We researched any idea I had that fit the goal of the project to find out how to make it work, with "work" meaning it had to be budget-friendly. The space was very large; the expense of installing flooring would have been exorbitant. Instead, we coated the concrete floor with a clear coating to give it a modern, finished look. This would also be practical as it wouldn't get dusty. We used paint to creatively accented the floor to create different geometric, interesting spaces."

One of the feel-good aspects of the CardCash space are the motivational sayings on the wall by personalities such as Abraham Lincoln and Helen Keller. Even a single word on a wall has the ability to create an aura that inspires and drives people. In the employee lounge area (where there's a shag carpet so they can feel comfortable and even kick off their shoes for a while), there's a rope light sign with a single word: "Innovate." The reminder that each one of us has the ability to create something new, to be an innovator, is the message they take back with them to their desks. (The desks are also griffited with motivational sayings and fitted with small cubbies to hold the gift cards employees need to access while they work.)

One of the details I found most interesting about the CardCash project was the form of payment Susan had to use to make most of her purchases: gift cards. The tiles for the bathrooms came from Home Depot and Lowe's. Canvas and paint came from Jo-Ann and other supplies from Michael's. Creating modern artwork on a budget involved shooting paint at a canvas with a water gun and letting the paint splatter beyond the canvas. The overall look was modern and progressive.

"The original offices, where the lobby is located, are traditional and elegant. But most of the employees are young; this is the kind of space they feel good in. A modern space also sends a message to investors

project.

The goal? To turn a huge warehouse that was connected to their current offices into an efficient office space that would inspire over 100 employees to want to come to work and do well. It would be a friendly environment, a place where it would be fun to work. Through the space, the employees would know that the boss cared for them and wanted them to succeed.

That's what good corporate design should do.

"In his official role, Eli Newman

does the front end of the website. He's super-creative, which is why he was the perfect fit. To me, it was more important that he understood creativity and design. He was very receptive to ideas that were very innovative... A veteran contractor might think I'm crazy if I want to hang 9,000 feet of yarn across the ceiling. So it was a positive."

In the CardCash cafeteria is an entire wall covered in whiteboard. While eating lunch, the employees should have the opportunity to be creative



THE PROJECT NEEDED TO INCORPORATE A STRONG TRADEMARK DESIGN ELEMENT WITHOUT CREATING ANY CLUTTER, SO THEY PUT IT ON THE CEILING: 10,500 FEET OF FISHING CHAIN.

who visit that this is a forward-thinking company. It communicates that you're thinking about innovation and the future."

#### **Design for Every Function**

Although Susan Strass Design has

completed projects all over the country and the world and now has design associates based out of Brooklyn, New York, besides—for her home-based team in New Jersey (in addition to designers, her staff now includes creative people devoted to marketing

and accenting spaces), her stamp is strongly felt in Lakewood, where her career launched.

"I got married when I was 18 and didn't know anyone except for my husband's family when I moved here. I wanted to get a job right away so I



could meet and get to know people, and that job had to be in the design field. I was hired by a tile store even though they knew I'd only be here initially for eight weeks. I'd have to return to Australia to get my green card so I wouldn't overstay my visa.

"During that time, I advised clients and helped them design their kitchens and bathrooms. While I was in Australia, my employer called me and begged me to come back. I only had to be in Australia for three months. The day I returned, she gave me a raise. While in the store, clients

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# GOODBYE, CUBICLE

When we decorate our homes or pick a hotel for our vacation, we put thought into choosing an atmosphere in which we'll enjoy spending time. It's beneficial for employers to put that same kind of thought into their office spaces, which have the power to make employees happy to come to work and inspire productivity and creativity. What design elements can maximize the productivity that happens in your space?



## BEYOND ONE PERSON = ONE DESK

At Krave in New York, flexible workspaces encourage employees to interact and collaborate. The decor includes lots of chalkboards so creativity can be captured no matter where and when it hits. At New York ad agency TBWA, desks aren't assigned; employees can choose where they want to sit each day. How do you know if this kind of space would work for your team? Watch them. Are the couches always busy? Do people sometimes take their laptops to the conference room or out to the coffee shop? For a change of scenery? Then maybe you also need flexible workspaces. Laptops, Wi-Fi, and mobile technology make it possible.

## FEEL AT HOME

Don't feel as comfy at your office desk as you do at home? At Bicom Communications in Canada, each work area is defined by a house-like pod. Whether you feel like working in an office setting or a living-room setting, there's an atmosphere available that will suit your mood so you can get to work.

## BRING THE OUTDOORS IN

Selgas Cano Architecture in Madrid, Spain, takes bringing the outdoors in to an extreme; the setting is in the middle of the woods, and half the work space is under a glass canopy. For a developer looking to woo companies into an office space, the lesson is to put in lots of windows to help the tenants feel connected to nature. In an urban zone? Add plants and greenery to bring a fresh feeling to the space. Natural materials and natural light are both proven to boost creativity.

## QUIET TIME OR SOCIAL BUZZ

Create quiet and social zones. Sometimes work requires interaction, but sometimes it requires complete quiet and solitude. Make sure your space allows that choice. There need to be spaces where people can concentrate for two or three hours with no interruption, but also spaces where meetings can take place without disturbing others.



begin asking me to design the other rooms in their homes, not only those that needed tile. So I did more design work on the side, until I couldn't juggle both."

Susan was only 21 years old but she was an in-demand designer for both residential and commercial spaces. "Designing a residential space is a little easier," she says. "I only need to understand the taste and needs of one couple."

And most homes have the same function. But every business has a different function. The design of a company's office or retail location also has to work with the overall branding. Often, the company wants to coordinate its look with a new logo, marketing...or the design of the pizza boxes.

"Royal Family Shoes which was designed in con-





Clockwise from above: Shoelaces under glass at the checkout counter serve as a memorable design element; women shopping with their children can see through the wall that there are also products for them; the adult section of the store provides a separate boutique experience; little domes were custom designed for a unique display atop mushroom stands; a custom wall unit is situated a couple inches off the wall for a dynamic shadow effect; two stores in one.



**Trust gives Susan Strauss the ability to express creativity without barriers and see a vision through to completion. Not everyone has the imaginative capability to envision the aesthetics and design without actually seeing it.**

junction with Martin Shapiro of Okemos Group] had a unique need. They wanted children to enjoy their time in the store and not feel the pressure they usually do when shopping with parents. They also wanted the female shoppers in the adult section to feel like they were in a high-end boutique, not a children's store. It was a hard combination for one store with one entrance."

To accomplish the first goal, tablets were installed to entertain the little customers. They are recessed into the wall and keep the atmosphere quieter and neater than it would be if toys were provided. There are circular windows in the children's section of the store, so women who walk in can see the adult section from the entrance and know that they have their own space.

At another retail location, Fish on River, located in Todd Plaza in Lakewood, Susan wanted to create a space that felt fresh and clean.

"Is there a certain type of flooring that's usually used in fish stores?" I asked Susan.

The answer was no. Susan researched to discover what would be most practical. The solution was a poured resin floor (usually installed in garages) that could be power-washed so that it glistens at all times.

To maintain that clean aura, she needed to incorporate a strong trademark design element without creating any clutter. So she put that element on the ceiling: 10,500 feet of custom colored chain.

"I had to research different chains to find what would work. Small chains wouldn't give the effect I wanted. Heavier chains couldn't be supported. I needed just the right gauge and had to figure out how to hang it consistently. Once we found the right size chain, we custom-painted it. With that design element, the lighting couldn't go on the ceiling too, so I had to figure out how to effectively put it on the wall."

Most of Susan's ideas are completely different from what I've seen elsewhere, which makes me realize that there's another important element in a successful design: trust.

Trust, Susan tells me, gives her the ability to express creativity without barriers and see a vision through to completion. Not everyone has the imaginative capability to envision the aesthetics and design without actually seeing it.

"Once you gain that trust, the outcome is so much better."

That's a lesson for all property and business owners. ●

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