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Form Follows Function

The offices of designer William Caligari offer contemporary style in an historic structure

WRITTEN BY LESLEY ANN BECK
PHOTOGRAPHY BY KIT LATHAM

There is something venerable about an old mill building, infused by the daily labor of generations of workers now long gone. An historic structure, weathered and worn, fits into the landscape after years of settling and accommodating the land beneath; this can be especially true of a former factory built on a riverbank. The timbers and the floorboards—the good bones of an aged space—acquire a warm patina impossible to replicate in new construction. Across the Berkshires, fine old factories and mills have been repurposed into homes and museums and offices, making contemporary use of the best of our past.

The offices of William Caligari Interior Design are in just such a building, on the busy Main Street in Great Barrington, Massachusetts. The façade of the two-story building, the siding a dark brown and the trim painted black, is quite plain; the

first floor is occupied by Out Of Hand, a home-goods retailer, and Caligari's business fills the second story.

The entrance to the second-floor business is marked by two modest signs. A step into the small vestibule, however, reveals rich red walls; at the top of the stairs is an inviting seating area with deep wine-colored walls, handsome old hardwood floors, and an open ceiling of original dark wooden beams. A classic, comfortable burgundy sofa is flanked by a pair of contemporary chairs covered in emerald-green velvet. Eighteen black and white ink drawings of Baroque musicians, in matching black frames, are organized over the sofa, and a framed piece of red brocade fabric warms the wall outside Caligari's office.

This is, not surprisingly, some of the coolest office space in the Berkshires, with a simple brown, black, and white palette for the walls and furniture, punctuated by deep colors in the well-chosen selections of artwork. William Caligari, managing principal of the firm, is tall, spare, and elegant; his voice is low and well-modulated as he conducts an informal tour of the space, beginning with his office.

A large, elaborately carved door forms part of the wall behind Caligari's desk. It's an eighteenth-century piece from

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Portugal that he found in Tucson, Arizona. Caligari designed the trim around the door and added a classic Corinthian column, made of wood, at the corner. It's an audacious mix of styles and periods that works beautifully. This combination of styles is one of Caligari's strengths as a designer. "It's an art, not a science," he explains. "It's hard to do; you really have to pay attention. It's easy to make mistakes. When you're successful with that look, you're really successful."

The building, purchased by Caligari in 2002, is mid-nineteenth-century post-and-beam, and was once a dye factory involved in the manufacture of uniforms for the Civil War. The front of the building faces the street, and the back rises straight up from the bank of the Housatonic River. "The air quality is great because of the greenery and the river," says Caligari. "We get visitors from the river; bats once or twice a month and, sometimes, enormous bugs."

Like many former mills, the second floor in Calligari's building offered a large, open space with tremendous potential. "The design direction was clear when I saw the

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building," Caligari says. "It was easy to follow our instincts as to how the space needed to be designed and build on the strengths that were here."

Caligari calls working with an historic structure a double-edged sword; both an opportunity and a problem to solve. Access is a difficult challenge, and environmental contamination is another potential problem. When Caligari bought the building, he took a risk; there was lead in the soil along the riverbank, probably from the nineteenth century. After extensive testing, the necessary cleanup was completed.

The total value of the project, including purchase of the building, the renovation, and furnishing, Caligari recalls, was less than \$750,000. Caligari has one regret about the renovation; he wanted to build a balcony off his office over the river and decided against it. "I thought it was a little too over the top. Now I'm sorry." Other than that, Caligari says he's very lucky, saying that interior design firms usually don't have the luxury of so much space. Clients who visit, he says, are impressed.





How Bill Does it

What is your favorite productivity tool?

My planner is my most useful productivity tool. It is how I organize my time. It's faster than using an electronic device, and it does not lock up, have a dead battery, or shut down. Also, I can sketch in it or write down field dimensions.

What books have had an impact on how you do business?

Would Steven Pressfield's book about the battle of Thermopylae count? I hate business-related books.

What's been playing on your iPod lately?

I don't have an iPod, but I have been listening to Leonard Cohen in my car.

What is the Berkshire-based business that you most admire and why?

Guido's. It's well-run, owner-operated, offers excellent quality, it's consistent, it's community-oriented, and a great value. It's one of the differentiators for the Berkshires. You can't get better

A Berkshire native, Caligari received his formal training at the New York School of Interior Design. He had success in the city, but returned to the Berkshires in 1989 to start his own firm—Lenox Design Resources. The name changed to William Caligari Interior Design in 2004. The firm specializes in hospitality and high-end residential; Caligari has been the designer of record for Canyon Ranch Resorts, here and in Tucson, for fourteen years.

In designing the office space in the restored dye factory, Caligari and his team approached the project as if they were their own clients. Caligari wanted, first, function; and second, flexibility. "The flexibility is important," says Caligari, "because in this business, I knew there would be times when there are three or four of us and times when there would be twelve or fourteen of us." The decor reflects his personal aesthetic; the space planning and workflow reflect the team.

The second-floor space is basically two enormous rooms, with Caligari's office and the reception area anchoring the center. Tall, narrow windows line the walls front and back; the back-facing windows overlook the river. The window



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Nearly 120 miles equidistant from Boston and New York, this campus-style park, once completed, will be centrally located in the beautiful Berkshires, adjacent to the city center and residential neighborhoods. Created through a unique private/ public partnership between GE and the City of Pittsfield, the William Stanley Business Park will have a strong sense of New England and historic details. Office, industrial and research buildings will be set on tree-lined streets with landscapes of native plantings, pedestrian paths and a bike path. This project is both well-funded and supported by a host of potential tax, training and building assistance grants from local, state and private sources.

For more information contact Tom Hickey, Director of PEDDA, 80 Kellogg St. Pittsfield, MA 01201; 413-494-7332; thickey@peda.cc.

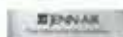


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treatments are simple brown wood Venetian blinds with black tapes. The library, with its shelves of resource materials, is at the north end of the space; at the south end, the space is more flexible, with a conference area and workstations for larger projects.

The library, described by Caligari as the "creative center," has eight workstations; the dividers, topped with elegant molding, are upholstered, providing a place to pin up artwork and swatches. There are towering shelf units for the extraordinary collection of fabric swatches, catalogs, paint samples, wood finishes, granite and marble, window treatments, and more. "The library enables me to run this business three hours from New York or Boston," Caligari says. "I go to New York once a month, but here, I have thousands of samples neatly organized. It's a valuable tool."

The library area is highly driven by function. "We needed some acoustical privacy and large spaces for people to lay out finishes and materials," Caligari says. "Everyone needs a computer; many also need computers that use AutoCAD, which produces twenty-four by thirty-six-inch drawings." Those workstations have a table that can accommodate the large drawings.

A large, counter-height work island dominates the room, with a storage area below and above, a light soffit, suspended on chains from the ceiling, which offers halogen,



THE WORK ISLAND IN THE LIBRARY INCLUDES A LIGHT SOFFIT EQUIPPED WITH A CHOICE OF HALOGEN, FLUORESCENT, OR INCANDESCENT LIGHTING.

fluorescent, or incandescent lighting, the better to evaluate color and fabric choices in the proper light.

As the tour of the building continues, the air conditioning kicks on. Instead of traditional ductwork, a long, inflatable tube made of a black polymer fabric is suspended from the ceiling, attached to a system of cables with shiny metal clips. The black fabric ducts inflate with a papery, fluttering sound, and the cool air is distributed by way of circles cut in the sides of the bag. "I didn't want to run ductwork in the space," Caligari explains. He asked his staff to research some options, and the inflatable fabric was the least expensive choice. It is also unobtrusive, lightweight, and easy to install.

While the library appears to be all business, the second large space at the south end of the building is more inviting, almost like an open atelier. The original ceiling is visible, the heavy beams highlighted by industrial-style lighting fixtures. The center of the space is defined by a large red Oriental rug, accented in cream and blue. A sleek black marble-topped oblong table is flanked by modern chrome and black leather chairs. The staff and volunteers of the Berkshire International Film Festival used this area to mount their weekend event in May.

The conference area is set apart from the workstations by a system of cream canvas panels, like sails, suspended from the beams by cables, clips, and grommets. The angled

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top edges allow air to circulate freely. "You can use nautical cable and canvas very easily to make partitions," says Caligari. "We had our upholsterers take thirty-two-ounce canvas and put grommets in it. We bought nautical cable and had our drapery installers put it up in one day. It's a neat aesthetic."

A row of matte black bookcases, shielding some of the workstations, is topped by a row of thriving bamboo plants in glass pots. An additional piece that contributes to the flexibility of the space is an enormous five-fold screen that marks the room's center; it boasts a reproduction of the painting, *The Horse Fair* by Rosa Bonheur.

The visual surprises make these offices so appealing. Carefully restored beams, more than a hundred years old, are illuminated by high-tech industrial lighting. Contemporary ergonomic chrome and leather chairs are placed on an antique Persian rug. And a set of white canvas sails stands in for the walls of a conference area. A harmonious interaction of innovative materials, contemporary furnishings, and a classic setting are all blended together in the service of the very real work that is accomplished in this space. **BBQ**

Lesley Ann Beck is managing editor of BBQ: Berkshire Business Quarterly.

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