DesignIntelligence®
Quarterly

NOURISH THE SOUL

PRAGMATIC DESIGN

Q3: BALANCING PRIORITIES

Nourish the Soul

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Vera Iconica's CEO Veronica Schreibeis Smith examines the balance of pragmatics and intuition.

DesignIntelligence, Michael LeFevre (DI): We are joined by Veronica Schreibeis Smith, CEO of Vera Iconica Architecture, a Jackson, Wyoming-based global design firm specializing in environmental design, health and well-being. In a short 13 years, you have enjoyed success in carving out a niche around wellness architecture. You have been featured in the Wall Street Journal, Forbes Magazine, Architectural Digest and the publication Twenty Under Twenty and are active in the Global Wellness Institute. Congratulations. Thank you for being with us. I'm looking forward to discovering a little of the magic.

Veronica Schreibeis Smith (VSS): Thank you for inviting me to have this conversation.

DI: Your firm is a relative rarity in the architectural profession these days: Amid a sea of relatively undifferentiated firms, you've managed to distinguish yours as having a clear focus and expertise in health and well-being. How did you choose that path?

VSS: It was serendipitous and perhaps meant to be. I wasn't sure what type of architecture I wanted to practice when I was in school. I finished my undergraduate degree in three years, so I lived abroad my fourth year, using a degree in German to do an

international exchange. I lived in Tübingen, Germany, and took independent studies in architecture. I designed my schedule with classes Tuesday afternoon through Thursday morning, so if I missed one week of school, I could get in almost three weeks of travel. I would do big loops through Europe studying historical and contemporary architecture. That was very influential.

I was living in student housing. Everybody had a flat, and the floor had a shared kitchen-living communal space. I loved my flatmates. We had 10-foot-high ceilings and beautiful, daylit views of the Neckar River Valley. It would have checked many of the wellness and LEED boxes. But I was miserable and hated being there. I couldn't put my finger on why at first. So, I moved to an old, timber-framed Fachwerkhaus in the center of Tübingen. It had tiny windows and no furniture. And I was infinitely happier.

That was when I started to realize the materials surrounding us and the objects in the atmosphere have huge impacts on our lives. The old student housing I lived in was an all-concrete building – a cold material. I didn't feel happy surrounded by that material. But every time I returned to the old house it felt more comforting. So, my master's work was about how an intuitive design process can lead to buildings that have soul and how the inanimate objects and materials in our lives have bigger impacts on us than we know. That was over 20 years ago. Those ideas have since been refined and are now focused on how design strategies can fuel health and wellness in people's lives.

DI: At DesignIntelligence we counsel our clients that the best strategies derive from values and vision. How did you come by yours? What experiences shaped your values?

VSS: Living abroad for those first few years of my career put me in situations with discomfort. Everything is foreign.

> Our rational or logistical mind should be in service to intuition.

Making friends and understanding a foreign language is hard. One person or the other is speaking a foreign language, so communication is a challenge right off the bat. There are different cultures, beliefs and ways of doing things. That leads to openness and nonjudgment about what people are doing – and perhaps a search for why they're doing it and a greater quest for universal truths.

When I went to design school, it was at the cusp between traditional means and methods of architecture, with hand drawing and model building, and the onset of computer integration. I realized I valued the dichotomy between these two different ways of designing. The popular architecture and the projects that scored highly in design school tended to be sharp, wild or digital. That was the cool thing. When I traveled, I saw works of architecture by Zaha Hadid or Frank Gehry, but I also saw the traditional buildings, which were not cool. In design school, we weren't pushed to design traditional buildings, we were steered to do wild, crazy ones.

I started to notice the timelessness, quality and beauty some of the older buildings and cities had. I also started to notice which contemporary structures were being well used and loved. Many were less than 10 years old because a lot of new construction happened after the Berlin Wall came down. As a result, in the 1990s, there was a design and construction boom in Germany. I started to notice how people were interacting with those more modern structures.

One value that occurred to me is that it's important as architecture develops to maintain the richness of humanity, a sense of culture and cultural identity – as we push for contemporary articulations and architectural expressions, that we hold onto what's true to the culture and local ecology. That we're not designing buildings where you can't tell if you're in Miami, Rome or Tahiti. As a firm, that kind of sensitivity to climate, ecology and culture has started to impact our design values in a big way.

DI: Interesting benefits of your larger worldview, revisiting local and regional aspects, with culture shaping your priorities at an early stage. Did you have any mentors?

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VSS: My first job out of school was in Lima, Peru. I worked for an architect named Luis Longhi. I met him as I was finishing my thesis. My thesis was called "Designed by Instinct," based on the idea that intuition can handle all sorts of complexity our rational mind can't. Our rational or logistic mind should be in service to intuition but needs an innate trust in what feels right as the correct design move. Because sometimes it's only later in the design or after the building has been executed that you can understand why that was such an important move. As a student, I had to find precedents in designing with intuition because my thesis was that the process creates buildings with soul and character, ones that we can fall in love with, that become timeless.

I was having trouble finding architects designing in that manner, as well as just having trouble putting my finger on what that meant or looked like. Luis came to Montana State University to give a lecture called "Living by Instinct," and it was a beautiful coincidence. When I saw his architecture, it was surprising and delightful, and it wasn't a style. It had a Peruvian undertone, very true to the culture and the place, but it didn't look like anything seen before. At the same time, it felt so appropriate and right. It wasn't just me. The whole audience was completely captivated by his work. His buildings felt like sculptures within the landscape more than buildings.

I worked with him for that year, and we designed a couple homes and some hospitality projects. He later went on to win the Architect of the Year Award in Peru or something like that. But what he became well known for was developing a contemporary Peruvian architectural style, because all his peers at the time were doing white, modern boxes – very Miami-centric.

That year I wrote a book about his set design work called "Architecture on Stage." We'd have these wonderful afternoon sessions where we would pick one performance at a time and talk about the set design and how he was led to the solution. I got an insider's look into how he was guided by feelings. If he had a notion, he acted on it. It wasn't a thought or something rational he was acting on. One of the most beautiful things he said was that design comes from two words: divine and sign. The idea was, as an architect, when you're in your flow state, connected to the site and to your client, there's something flowing through you that is beautiful or sacred. That's when you just let it be and you draw out what you're feeling in that experience.

DI: A fine counterpoint to our rational, objective-sounding theme of priorities. Your website says that you "design experiences" and that "architecture just happens to be our medium." This is a refreshing new posture in a profession that for 50 years was largely about its buildings, not their users. Was there a particular impetus that steered you to this realization?

VSS: I think it's having been sensitive to space and surroundings my whole life. Even when I was young, I didn't understand why there were so many ugly, uncomfortable spaces like strip malls. If I was going to my dentist or to buy my soccer cleats, I had to traverse some vast asphalt parking lot with toxic, stinky smells. I had to walk through it to some ugly building with an ugly façade. It doesn't have to be like that. If you look at older designs and urban planning, the shopping experience and moving through daily life was more beautiful. Architects and urban planners have been studying this. It's not news, but it influenced me at an early age.

Image courtesy Dan K. Haus

I realized many of the projects we were building were so practical they hurt our well-being. They have horrible lights that hurt your circadian rhythms. They're depressing. Environmental psychology has proven their negative impact. The person working there is worse off than me as a consumer going in to buy something. So, what impact are you having on the population by having ugly spaces and being only practical? "Just being practical" isn't practical because as humans, we're not robots. Other aspects of our lives are just as important. You can also realize on the bottom line how wellness design and thinking about experiences and all the dimensions of well-being can become the practical, financially viable solution. We can get there.

As a building industry, there are the very practical buildings. On the flip side, there are buildings that tend to be ocular. They photograph well or are intellectually surprising, but sometimes they don't feel very good. Many times, they're luxury for the sake of luxury. They might be beautiful, but something in them feels hollow. Some are well done and are amazing, and some just feel like an exotic version of trying too hard. At the end of the day, they didn't execute or achieve it.

As I go through buildings noticing spaces I love, sometimes they're high-end, luxurious and beautiful, and sometimes they're rustic and low-end. The questions I ask are:

- Why do we fall in love with this space?
- What makes us happy?
- What brings joy to our life?
- What ends up being that nostalgic sense that brings beauty and love and warmth to our life?
- What nourishes our soul?

Because at the end of the day, we're people. Not cold or austere, not just going after something, grinding or punching a clock. There's more to us. Our buildings need to reflect that. They need to nurture that aspect of our lives.

DI: Your flow across the boundary between practical and experiential, higher order issues is fascinating.

VSS: It's a prerequisite as an architect serving clients that the solution is financially sustainable. Because if you don't have financial health or financial sustainability, the project's not going to get built. Or if it gets built by some altruistic client, it's not going to survive. That's sad. You don't want to see your client or

Image courtesy Dan K. Haus

project fail. So, practicality and understanding financial models are prerequisites. But I believe they are pragmatic rational tools that serve intuition.

That's where we get caught up as architects. Too often we put those two in conflict with each other. We have an "either/or" mentality. Either we can do a beautiful, perfect, ideal building, or we can value-engineer it and make it financially feasible and lose all the good stuff. The other thing we do as architects and designers – or it's just human nature – is that we make things too complex. We break things down into little pieces so we can understand our one little piece. Now we have a million pieces, and we can't possibly understand them all.

DI: And then they're also disconnected, not part of their larger system ...

VSS: Exactly. We've had hundreds of years of history doing this in our education, science and processes, and those have been great exercises. Wonderful knowledge, but that science needs to inform intuition. We need to go back to being holistic. Being holistic is understanding the snowball effect of a design decision.

I'll give you a couple examples. If we want to specify something sustainably, if we have to read every SDS cut sheet there is before we specify that material and then have to learn about every chemical and product, we can't do that. Maybe there's a specialist, but even that person needs a 40-year career and still can't know everything.

Rather than trying to understand everything, our design philosophy is simplifying it and relating it to food. Michael Pollan had some catchy mantras. Something like: "Eat food, not too much, mostly vegetables."

Another mentor of mine is Paula Baker-Laporte. I met her through the Building Biology Institute. She shared her adaptation of that quote: "When you're trying to specify systems or materials in architecture, it's simple, don't overthink it. The closer to nature it is to its natural state and the less adulterated it is through the manufacturing process, the healthier it is going to be for humans and for the planet."

Instead of sorting through all the options out there, focus on materials that we understand where in nature they come from and see if they're sustainably harvested. The closer they are and the fewer processes there are getting them into their finished states, the healthier they're going to be.

It's just thinking about things in simpler ways and designing and detailing the building in simpler ways, with simpler assemblies. I try to avoid building assemblies that have layer after layer of synthetic material installed by different trades trying to fight nature and keep it out. How can we go back to materials that work with the local climate and integrate more passive design strategies with natural materials with physics that work for the performance requirements of the building?

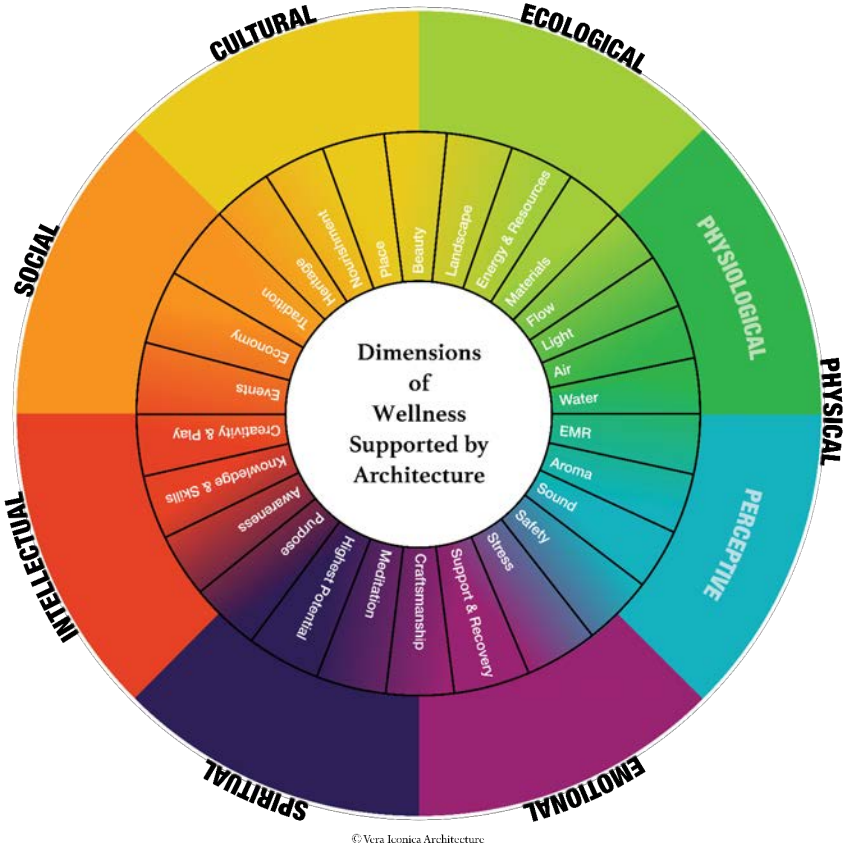
DI: Those are clear, simple ideas, but as your organization is growing and you're dealing with multiple offices and people, how is your design decision-making process evolving? How do you maintain that simple vision across the firm? More infrastructure, checklists, processes? Or is it just relying on the intuition of well-selected teammates?

VSS: The vision for our company is that it's a legacy company that can grow. It's not about a sole practitioner. Checklists are tricky business. A few organizations have done them well. But it takes a well-funded organizational beast to come up with

checklists. That serves some well, but what we're trying to do is what you said: hire the right people with natural talent and sensitivity in tune with their intuition. Because a lot of us have been taught almost to break away from it in a sense. Characteristics in our culture have suggested that intuition feels a little fluffy – not the right way to go about something. But it's just putting things back in balance, not being extreme in either way but looking at things from afar and understanding the design strategy from an evidence or science-backed position.

It's a combination of training our staff to understand the science behind wellness strategies and interpreting that science – the environmental psychology, neuroscience, biophilic design and circadian rhythms – so you understand how a design decision is going to impact somebody psychologically, emotionally, cognitively, performatively and biologically. Once you have that knowledge, it becomes a tool set in the background while you design. We do have two tools – not checklists – we've developed, that help us gut-check that we've been thoughtful about the holistic system. One is our Wellness Wheel. It's the seven dimensions of wellness. Inside that, we have spokes of design strategies: environmental, physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, cultural and social – different aspects of how the architecture is going to impact those areas of life.

The second thing we have also stems from building biology, which I have found to be one of the most comprehensive set of principles in designing for health and well-being. We've adapted that to 68 items we look at. The Wellness Wheel shows how this impacts humans. You put yourself in the experience and see how it's going to impact somebody. The other list is about the site. What are the site's health impacts? For example, is it near an airport? Is it under the flight path? That's going to have a negative impact. Is it near a freeway? There are studies on how loud noise has negative impact on the development of children and the psychology and emotional states of people.



Wellness Wheel image courtesy of Vera Iconica Architecture

We look at site and these other areas of design that might be more practical, that scientific, analytical mode of breaking it down into pieces. We look at things both ways as a gut-check to see that the design, when you experience the building in its executed format, has been thoughtful about all the ways it's going to impact the person and the local ecology, which then, of course, impacts the planet.

DI: With growth comes change. How do ensure your adherence to your plan in setting or maintaining priorities? Or do you? Perhaps it's more about continually reacting and going with the flow? The Zen and reading clients and contexts? In that balancing act, being on both sides of the line, a firm that's interested in science and pragmatics and also experiences and well-being, I could imagine your approach toward decision-making strategy is: We're just living in the now, we're just reacting to the data, or what happens, versus having a strategy. Because, as anybody who has a plan and a strategy knows, life and change happen. Where are you on that continuum? How do you approach planning?

VSS: I have big plans!

DI: Love it.

VSS: That's just the way my mind works. Vision is everything from what we want to create one project at a time to visions of where the company and brand goes at large. The Vera Iconica brand has multiple companies underneath it. Architecture is our cornerstone. We've started an interior design department within the architecture firm, with the idea being that if we're creating experiences, really what we're doing is we're designing from the inside out. In a way, the interior is more important than the shell of the building. It's about how people experience the spaces created.

We also have a company we're looking at launching in 2024 called the Vera Iconica Wellness Kitchen. It's a study of how we can reimagine kitchens to bring more joy and ease to supporting a whole food, nutrition-rich diet and how food can enhance other wellness areas. Things like social gatherings or behavior like reducing plastics packaging and waste, being a good shepherd of organic matter by composting it and sending it back to support local farmers and growers. That's another company.

We are also starting to look more at development and raising capital to do wellness-oriented projects, wellness real estate and communities. That's the focus of that company. We're looking at how we can vertically integrate our companies to bring this vision, experience, behaviors and ways of living into reality and to more people. Those are the big-picture ideas we're looking at building.

DI: Big plans indeed. Can you share an example of where something didn't go according to plan – a recent pivot, lesson learned or sudden change? How did you cope and what did you learn?

VSS: Ten years ago, we were a younger firm and tended to be more idealistic. If we designed something one way and it got value-engineered out, those felt like big hits or big blows sometimes. And now we have adapted to those situations and become more aware that we are here to serve our clients. We have tools and wellness strategies, but don't have to use all of them. We're not going for a perfect building. What we're going for is understanding the needs, pain points, lifestyle aspirations of our clients and what strategies are appropriate and have high value to them.

For example, if you have respiratory issues, how can we create a healthy building for that? That goes for everything from how we detail and specify the materials and the mechanical systems

to the programming. From a mechanical standpoint, we might have high oxygen in the bedroom, and from a programming standpoint, we might have halotherapy or a salt cave as part of a spa circuit, an elevated bathroom or bathing experience.

But there might be other areas where it's not ideal. For example, they might not be into photovoltaics, energy savings or net-zero. So, we offer them things at the beginning of the project to see what they value, and then focus on where the project wins. We don't view those other things as failures. "Well, it's not a net-zero building, so it's not regenerative. Have we failed?" No, the project hasn't failed. We celebrate those areas where we were able to serve the client with health and wellness. It's been a shift in attitude. That's how we've adapted to the idea that there's no ideal project out there, and it's also helping move the industry forward one step at a time. We share the wins with the rest of the industry because the next architecture firm might be able to see that, use it and take it another step forward. If we're growing as an industry, that's encouraging.

DI: Your shift from a self-focus to client-focus, and more broadly to an industry-focus and helping others, is a wonderful change in emphasis. Operating as a small business, to maintain an edge against larger competitors with more resources, do you employ an external support or advisory network? As Michelle Obama calls it, your "kitchen table."

VSS: Yes! We have the best advisory board in the world. We have Scott Simpson and Jim Cramer on our advisory board. Scott has coached me for several years and has been coaching our entire leadership team for 18 months. We are very grateful for the wisdom, experience and knowledge that has come from those two individuals with deep backgrounds. It's been invaluable, because we are a young firm with big ideas, and we are navigating how to get there. Thanks to them, we're doing it with more grace and knowledge. There are always growing pains and learning experiences, but enjoying learning and failure can propel you further. It's much easier to do when you have the counsel of great people.

I've been incredibly grateful to those individuals. Our whole team has. Some of our weekly highlights are when we get to meet with them and glean their wisdom. They always make it so simple. We realize we're overcomplicating things, or, as professional as we're trying to be, there's a little bit of emotion in there. Then Scott or Jim will shed some simple light on it, and we'll say, "Oh, yeah." So, it's great.

DI: Two heavyweights with over 100 years of collective experience. What are some of the highs and lows of leading a small firm? How do you cope personally? How do you balance the demands of running a firm with your desire to have a larger purpose and mission? To give back, volunteer and serve as a thought leader in the health and well-being design and construction communities and still be with your family?

VSS: It's hard. I struggle with it daily. It's better now than it was six months ago. In the last seven years, I've had three children. With each child the company has gone through incredible growth, failures and dips in the business cycle. As a woman-owned business during my family-building years, I'm happy to share that story with others. There has been nothing easy about it. When it comes to my health and well-being, after having my third child, I was just depleted physically after six continuous years of being pregnant or breastfeeding a child. Physically, I could feel I didn't have a lot to power the mental energy needed to run a company. During that time, our company was tripling in size. I remember having conversations with my husband saying the only things I was going to do were keep the baby alive and keep my company alive. I wasn't going to have time to do much else, including exercising or taking care of myself.

That was a conscious decision, one I don't resent or regret at all. I'm glad that was a conscious decision. But at that same time, an autoimmune disease presented itself, and I've had trouble gaining back some strength and balance in my life. So now I'm getting back to a place where I'm putting more time and energy into kids. We had a lot of help. And when you see your child being raised in part by somebody else, because a nanny has to pick them up, or your child comes home and says, "Mom, why am I the only kid whose mom doesn't pick them up?" that kills you.

There have been all sorts of hardship or sacrifice, but I'm happy to report that because of good advisers, intentional growth and sharing a vision with an extremely talented team that cares, nobody on our team is just showing up to their job for a paycheck. We're lucky because we are a smaller boutique firm with a strong vision and mission that's bigger than ourselves. We have a passionate team of people. I've been able to communicate where my capacity is, where I can best fit into the growing company and how other leaders can emerge and advance different aspects of the company. For the last six months, there's been a lot more balance between personal and professional life. All of us get just one life. There's not a personal life and a professional life. We get one life. So now my life is a little healthier because I get to pay attention to more things and not just those two things, keeping the baby alive and the company alive.

DI: I appreciate your vulnerability and willingness to share. You've been through some challenging times personally and as a company, but it bodes well for the future. Is there anything else I haven't asked you, a message point you'd like to get out as we close?

VSS: Well, there's the trajectory of wellness real estate and wellness architecture. The reason we have the label wellness is unfortunate. From the beginning of time, architects were designing to uplift humans. It was shelter, and it was love and beauty. As we moved up Maslow's Pyramid, there were always aspirational qualities to buildings that improved our lives. At some point in recent history, we had a few missteps and people stopped dealing with those things. Those missteps didn't happen on purpose. I'll give you an example.

Nobody meant to create sick buildings, but we did, and we created a lot of them. But what we were doing there was in response to the energy crisis and to needing our buildings to use less energy. We tightened building envelopes, we made windows nonoperable and we had a minimal number of air changes per hour that could heat or cool and keep the temperature comfortable. Those were all good things people were trying to do. Less than 10 years later, we realized we had created medical conditions with so many people that the medical profession coined the term "sick building syndrome." With all sorts of immune system, respiratory, cognitive performance issues happening, it was only when you left the buildings that you started to regain your strength or health.

We still have sick buildings today. My point is that we haven't thought holistically of what impact these design solutions were going to have. That design solution was always a response to an issue. Nobody's the bad guy out there, but we've had negative impacts happening. What we're trying to do with this wellness movement is to get back to creating healthy buildings. Nature's the gold standard. If we can create a building that functions, a place in which we have the same health and well-being as we do in the natural, unpolluted world, that's the goal.

The message is that wellness real estate and wellness architecture are nonnegotiables in the future because we're living in an era where, thanks to COVID, people are now more aware and more sensitive to the impact their space has on their health and well-being. Now everybody has smart devices they can wear, with inexpensive sensors and social media. So, when you go into a building you can measure things – and yourself.

DI: No one can argue with wellness as a nonnegotiable priority. Thank you!

VSS: It's been a pleasure. Thanks for inviting me – and for having me.

> All of us get just one life. There's not a personal life and a professional life. We get one life.

Veronica Schreibeis Smith AIA, NCARB, LEED AP, BBNC, is founding principal architect + CEO of Vera Iconica Architecture, a global design firm based in Jackson, Wyoming. Vera Iconica creates environments to support optimal living providing services in architecture, interior design, Wellness KitchenTM design and real estate developments.

Recognized for pushing the envelope on design and design theory, Veronica is a world-renowned expert on wellness architecture as well as a certified building biologist through the Building Biology Institute. Her international work experience in Peru, South Korea and Germany solidified the importance of cultural influence in her architectural practice. She founded the Wellness Architecture & Design Initiative for the Global Wellness Institute as well as the nonprofit organization Wellness Architecture + Design. She received the Leading Women in Wellness Award at the 2020 Global Wellness Summit, an award honoring a woman making a standout contribution in any of the wellness sectors. Veronica continues to work, write, speak and lead think tanks internationally.