

11. Building with a Soul

Tom Bender

Editor's Note

Tom Bender is a practicing architect residing in Nehalem, Oregon. In 1992, he won the American Institute of Architects/Union Internationale des Architectes (AIA/UIA) Sustainable Community Solutions International Competition. As a founder of RAIN Magazine and author of the popular Environmental Design Primer, Mr. Bender was a leader in the early days of the movement toward ecological consciousness in building. Mr. Bender's work has now expanded to unite spirit with the need to use resources wisely. His writings have inspired architects to re-evaluate their creation of forms and use of materials. His work in Oregon gives physical examples of what it looks like to build with the spirit of the place.

In the following chapter, Mr. Bender distills his previous work into a series of principles and guidelines for building with spirit and combines these guidelines with wonderful pictures to delight and inspire the imagination.

MANY INTRACTABLE SOCIAL PROBLEMS—alcoholism, drug abuse, crime, child and spouse abuse, homelessness, obesity, poverty, failing schools—have a common root. They all arise out of lack of self-worth, lack of respect by and for others, or lack of opportunity to be of use and value to family and society. They are all diseases of the spirit.

Our built environment embodies our attitudes and manifests these same diseases. Change our surroundings to reaffirm the sacredness of our world and we can restore a sense of respect, honor, and value. This is a necessary part of solving these social problems, and necessary for sustainability.

Build schools that treat students as people and touch the excitement of discovery. Build places for health care that cherish the sick. Build work places that treat the workers as being as valuable as the machines and the boss. Give builders a chance to put something into the building they can show their children with pride. Respect the patina of age in buildings and people.

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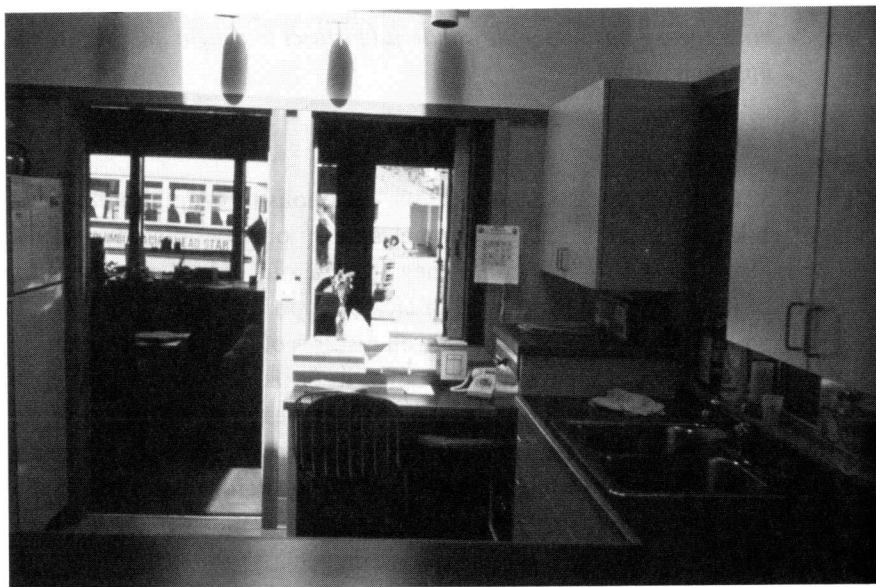
Create Magic, Touch the Heart of All You Make

Love is expressed in our surroundings, as elsewhere, in our willingness to give without condition. The most precious thing a building can convey is that sense of unstinted giving—of doing something out of love rather than calculation.

In a Head Start Center we asked ourselves what we could give that would make a kid coming in the door feel best. “The smell of good food!” was the immediate answer. We made the kitchen the physical and organizational heart of the Center. With the kitchen opening into every room, the cook represented a friend and bite of food for every kid, a cup of coffee and a sympathetic ear for every harried parent, and an extra eye for everyone’s safety.

The lobby expanded into a comfortable Commons—a place to give community volunteers and staff to work, a place to give parents a moment of peace and rest in an often tumultuous day. A space just for kids—not teachers—was built. We designed it to bring them close to the earth and the sprouting spring bulbs outside a low window, with a skylight to watch clouds and rain running off the roof, and with hidden mirrors to give them new views of their world.

Give the unexpected, create magic!



Seaside Head Start Center, Seaside, Oregon

Transform Tourism

Visiting other people and places should enrich both them and ourselves through exposure to different values, conditions, and achievements. An Oregon coastal community decided that this “spirit of place” is a fundamental element of successful tourism. They concluded that people come to the Coast for its specialness, which should not be lost among look-alike tourist facilities. This visitor’s center included a community hall to house events for both community and visitors, and obtained a special grant for architectural crafts to help their building more powerfully convey the unique character of the Oregon Coast.



Visitor's Center, Cannon Beach, Oregon

Make Where We Are Paradise

Lessen our needs for vacations, tourism, transportation, and our impact on the ever fewer remaining places of powerful natural patterns. In making our places more special, we make them of more value to us and to visitors both. Make winter gardens. Put the stars back in the night.



Ice Garden, Wilson,
Wisconsin

Mirrors Distort

They focus our attention on outer, rather than inner qualities—often in our groggier states. A window into a garden can connect us to our surroundings instead of reminding us of a hangover. Hide mirrors until needed—here inside a medicine cabinet door.



Bender/deMoll Residence,
Neahkahnie Mountain,
Oregon

Durability is Magic

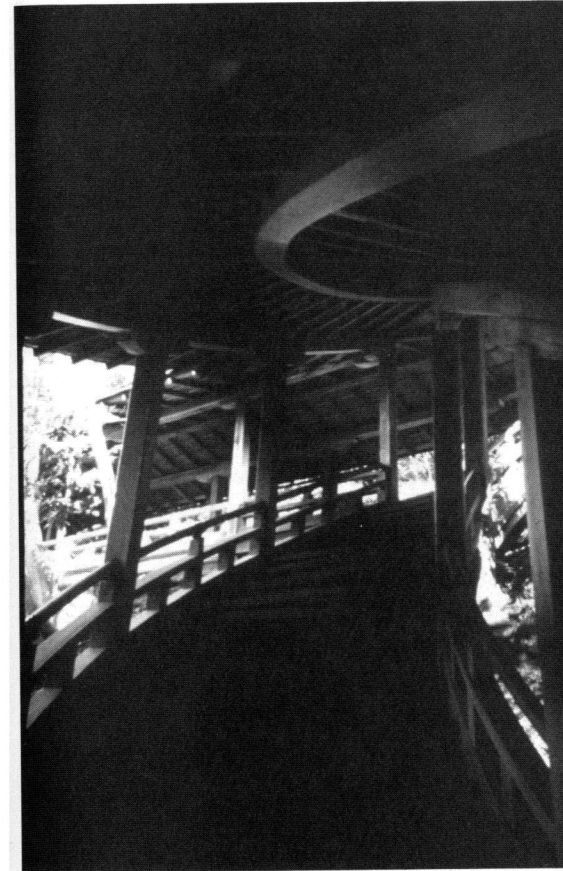
A cathedral or palace serving twenty generations costs each one less than a novel. Long service-life makes the generosity of quality unquestionably affordable. Remodeling rather than replacing substitutes employment for resource use. We use half the resources if our buildings last twice as long.



La Sainte Chapelle, Paris,
France

Rewarding Work is Wealth

Such work requires giving an opportunity for builders and users as well as designers to contribute their skills. Durability provides the budget. Its product reflects to everyone that skill and competence is honored and valued, and it expands our belief in what is achievable.



Zenrinji Temple, Kyoto,
Japan

Building with a Soul

Silence has power. It is as vital a dimension in our surroundings as space. Eliminating the sounds of TV, refrigerators, heating systems, dishwashers, and office equipment can be essential to the peace of a place. Adding bird song, the laughter of children, or the sound of the wind can give a place new life.

Give our spirits places of shelter and nurture as well as our bodies. That nourishment creates our real wealth and is the glue that holds sustainability and well-being together.

In this home, heating is by passive solar, solar hot water, and site-grown wood heat. A non-mechanical "cool box" was used for food storage, and foot valves on sinks for energy and water conservation and hygiene. Other elements included high-efficiency lighting, owner-built and state-approved compost toilet, insulating window shutters, native plant landscaping, and low-toxicity materials for indoor air quality. The quietude and freedom these technical changes gave permitted a spirit in the building to support its inhabitants and connect them to its surroundings.

Designing a building with a soul requires focused attention to each decision in design and construction, so that each element answers its need in the same spirit and relation to others.



Bender/deMoll Residence, Neahkahnie Mountain, Oregon

Connect Us with the Stars

We are their children. So are all lives and all life on our planet. Honoring these connections in making our surroundings acknowledges our place in the whole incredible dance of the universe.



Bender/deMoll Residence,
Neahkahnie Mountain,
Oregon

Honoring Things

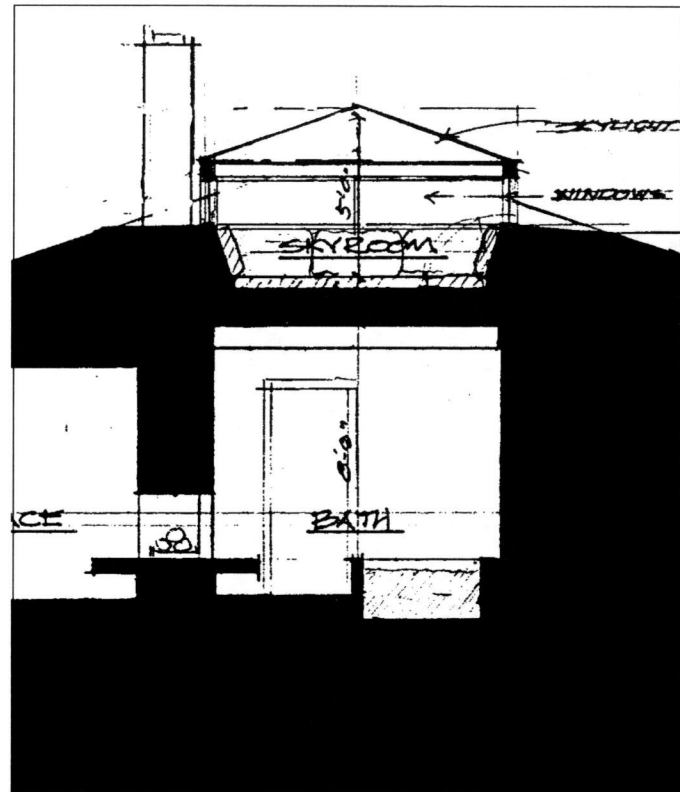
Honoring things in our building empowers that attitude in our actions. Tradition honors the insights of the past. Planting trees honors hope for a future. A *tokonoma*—a space in the room reserved for art—honors our guests. Providing place for birds to nest honors the other lives that share our world. Honoring the past lives of building materials makes us aware of the beauty and struggles of all life.



Bender/deMoll Residence,
Neahkahnie Mountain,
Oregon

Earth, Air, Fire, and Water

These are elemental forces. Bring us closer and deeper in experience and empathy with them. The bath was made central to the design of this house, with a fireplace of wave-rounded, fire-born basalt rock beside it. Above was a sky room at the roof peak—under a ten-foot pyramidal skylight—surrounded by the ocean, fog, wind, sun, rain, and the wheeling of the stars at night.



Dorscheimer Residence, Arch Cape, Oregon

Celebrate Death

It is part of life and of all cycles. Celebrate what was given and what remains with the living. Share grief. Know that the pain of loss acknowledges the wonder of the bonds that grow between us. Create a setting that touches the wonder of these events plunging deep into our hearts.



Nurse Log Garden,
Neahkahnie Mountain,
Oregon

Connect Us to the Life Around Us

This does not require large budgets or spaces. It needs only the desire for that connection and a willingness to evolve a life and surroundings that are unique. This native wildflower meadow needed only control of competing vegetation to reveal its beauty.



Bender/deMoll Residence, Neahkahnie Mountain, Oregon

Foundations

Making places that have a soul and that can enrich and sustain our lives is possible. Though such places may be outside of the experience of most of us, there are some guidelines that can help our process of learning their nature:

- Protect and enhance the *feng shui* of the site.
- Minimize waste and impact on resources and connected systems.
- Make where we *are* paradise.
- Focus on inner rather than outer qualities.
- Seek durability—build for eternity.
- Work *with* nature.
- Provide rewarding work in design, construction, and use.
- Honor all life and the power that begets it.
- Create silence and peace.
- Connect us with the stars.
- Give our spirits places of shelter and nourishment.
- Acknowledge the limits of our material world.
- Celebrate death.
- Connect us to the life around us.
- Put us in touch with the seasons.
- Touch the spirit of where we live.
- Help us touch invisible worlds.
- Create intense and fresh experiences.
- Touch the heart of all you make.
- Learn to say no—learn restraint and simplicity. Practice enoughness.
- *Give* the unexpected. Create magic.
- Affirm sacredness and meaning in our buildings.
- Create a topology which fits the use.
- Pay attention to economics rather than finance.
- Embody sustainable values; and most simply and importantly,
- Put love and energy into the place.

Touchstones—Seven Tests

Once designed, there are a few simple tests (without any right answers) that we can use to sense whether our efforts are moving in the right direction.

1. Time: The Test of Duration

This test asks if the qualities of a design are truly enduring, or a flash-in-the-pan enthusiasm which will become an embarrassment tomorrow.

Roll time back a thousand years. Does the design feel comfortable with its neighbors? Would the people find its spirit embracing the same deep-rooted values of their lives?

Roll time forward a thousand years. How does the building feel with the patina and bumps and wrinkles of time upon it? Is it mellowed and enriched, or tarnished and tattered? Did it have enough lasting value in it to be cherished and loved, or will it have been long-demolished and forgotten?

There is a hoary strength and a nourishing peacefulness in the timeless qualities of a building that truly fits our hearts and spirits. Once known, those qualities can be immediately sensed in any situation. Buildings of different periods express those qualities in unique ways specific to their time and nature, but within that uniqueness is the oneness of the same needs gaining satisfaction.

2. Arrangement: The Test of Invisibility

This test looks at serving, at our egos, the spirit of place, and the un-self-centered bringing forth of that spirit.

Like a good servant, a good place fulfills needs—giving warmth, security, happiness, and joy—without calling attention to itself. A flashy building that screams for attention may provide momentary pleasure and interest, but soon becomes tiresome. When we find ourselves again and again gravitating to a certain place, it is usually because we feel especially good being there. Even then, we may be hard pressed to figure out what invisible combination of things present and absent create that specialness.

Close your eyes. Forget what the place looks like, and feel if it does its job well and invisibly. Spend a day in it in your mind. Curl up in its sunlight. Clean house. Even if nobody else ever knew of the place, or whether you designed it, would you be happy? Think of designing a place. What qualities would permit it to escape your notice, yet attract you back to it again and again because of how good it feels and how well it fulfills its purposes?

3. Cost: The Test of Investment

This test tries to separate freedom and value from expense.

Just as between people, the relationship between people and places is richer, more rewarding, and more enduring if based on love and giving rather than economics and “payment.” An older, paid-for building can be used more generously than an expensive new one. A building that does as much with one brick or one watt of electricity as another does with five conveys a sense of assurance and confidence as well as frugality and economy.

A wall that offers a place to sit as a free bonus while holding back the dirt, gives that sitting place more freely and less self-consciously than a purposefully made bench. And a place that does not demand recognition for the owner, builder, or designer is freer and more giving to those who use it. A place that gives more is loved more, and is given more in return—in our feelings towards it and in the care, maintenance, and enhancement of it in our use.

What real investment has the place required—in work, materials, energy, love, and frustrations? Has that investment been repaid? What does the place give in return? Is it old enough to be free of the demands of those who initially put resources into its making? What can it give in addition to its primary intended purposes?

The investment test asks us to see what kinds and amounts of things have been invested in a place, and how effectively that investment produces a good place. It reminds us that excess is as harmful as meagerness, and that we need to discriminate between things that harm and those that enhance our abilities, our relationships, and our lives.

4. Openness: The Test of Connection

This test looks at whether we design a place as something isolated and separate, or as something that is enriched and given meaning through its connection with other things.

Does the design of a place close people off from, or bring them into closer touch with the rest of the world and the rhythms of nature? Does the design itself adapt readily or resist changes in its use and additions to its structure? Does it gracefully accept the changes of time, or demand to be kept in the pristine condition of youth? Does it bring people together and cause good things to happen?

A good gardener plants a tree, then leaves it open to respond to the nurturing forces of its surroundings, rather than forcing it to remain in conformance to a limited preconception. A good builder does likewise.

5. Honor: The Test of Worth

This test asks how well gifts are acknowledged and repaid, and how the act of giving is itself encouraged and respected.

Does the place honor its surroundings, its materials, the things which were given up to make its existence possible? Does it honor the work that went into its making, its heritage, and the future? Does it give the people using it a sense that they and their activities are of value? Does it reflect a questioning in its design of

what it can give to heal, enrich, or create greater harmony within the community of place it is joining, and to its present and future users?

6. Grace: The Test of Importance

This test asks if we are working with the right questions, and whether we have resolved the basic issues before considering refinements and less important details.

Consider the place in terms of what the *I Ching* says about grace and beauty:

Grace—beauty of form—is necessary in any union if it is to be well ordered and pleasing rather than disordered and chaotic. Grace brings success. However, it is not the essential or fundamental thing; it is only the ornament and must therefore be used sparingly and only in little things.

In human affairs, aesthetic form comes into being when traditions exist that, strong and abiding like mountains, are made pleasing by a lucid beauty.

. . . beautiful form suffices to brighten and throw light upon matters of lesser moment, but important questions cannot be decided in this way. They require greater earnestness.

7. Heart: The Test of Rightness

This is the simplest and hardest test.

Set aside all the words, images, and games of our minds. Does the place have a soul? Does its personality fit and support its use, its location, and its community of life? If so, that's all we really need to know. The rest is refinement and polish.