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Bricks, Mortar and Serenity

New Rockville Building Has a Peaceful, Meditative Air

By Miranda S. Spivack, Washington Post Staff Writer



From afar, the shiny office building seems like so many others in the Washington area: glistening, glassy, gray. But inside there are signs of something different.

Sunlight flows through the building, end to end, side to side. Paintings and plants are arrayed throughout. Everyone, no matter where they sit or what job they hold, can see the world outside.

In the center of the ground floor is honeycombed colored glass embedded in tile. A visitor might step over it and not realize its significance. It is the building's nucleus, a feature of

Vedic architecture, which encourages light, open space, closeness to nature and a focal point, or nucleus.

This building is the culmination of a dream for Jeffrey Abramson, a principal of the family-owned Tower Companies. The company opened 2000 Tower Oaks Blvd. in Rockville a few months ago and is now on the hunt for appreciative tenants.

Abramson, a developer who for years has pushed the edges of his profession as an early proponent of environmentally friendly designs, also is a longtime practitioner of Transcendental Meditation, a practice that has been linked by some scientists to improved mental health and physical well-being.

"I think of buildings as a way to elevate the human spirit," he said recently as he sat in his sunlight-drenched office on the building's ninth floor, describing how Vedic features can contribute to that goal.

Vedic architecture is based on Sanskrit texts that point to a connection between human well-being and spatial relationships, materials and the orientation of buildings. It was said to have been practiced in India 5,000 years ago in the construction of sacred buildings. The architecture was revived several years ago by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, a onetime adviser to the Beatles and a proponent of Transcendental Meditation.

Abramson knows that his views might appear a bit mystical in a hard-charging industry in which economics encourage builders to put up structures quickly and move on to the next project. For now, only three floors of the building are occupied, with the Tower Companies' headquarters on the ninth floor and the Lerner, longtime business partners and major developers who recently brought baseball back to Washington, on seven and eight.

A spokesman for the American Institute of Architects said Vedic architecture is not well known in the United States. Fairfield, Iowa, a center of the Transcendental Meditation movement, has several Vedic buildings, and there are buildings based on Vedic principles in at least 13 other states. A handful of buildings in the Washington area, including Abramson's Potomac home, are built on Vedic principles.

Abramson said Vedic practices make good business sense and will pay off for his company and those who choose to lease in the building.

"We are builders. We are very cautious people who build on firm foundations," he said. "That is what companies want, firm foundations."

The design begins from the outside and works inward. The building, which from a distance resembles an ocean liner at sea, is off Interstate 270 near Rockville and is surrounded by a garden and low walls. It was sited with an east-west orientation, which is encouraged in Vedic architecture. The building's design is modeled on the geometry of nature, which Abramson and Tower colleagues say have helped to produce a work environment that has spurred them to be more productive and creative.

"It's not a philosophy. We are not making moods. We do not have fountains and pretty pictures," Abramson said.

Instead, the building's airy feel, low walls, glassy interior and plantings help produce a sense of calm and clear-mindedness that allows high productivity, Abramson said.

"The human brain reacts to space," he said. "With proper proportions, we create space that people can thrive in, succeed in."

Luann Sinclair, a top attorney for the company, said her office space makes her feel calm and at the same time energetic. Like many in the company, she takes 20-minute breaks twice a day to meditate. The company has a room for meditation. "I am more relaxed. It is less stressful," she said. "My colleagues really want to be here."

For decades, the Abramson family's Tower Companies, led by patriarch Albert, 91, did business in a fairly traditional way, constructing office buildings and apartments and collaborating with their good friends, the Lerner, also master builders in the region.

But Jeffrey, 56, was interested in moving beyond environmentally friendly design, which the company embraced earlier than many. "Just being a green and healthy building isn't enough," he said.

His niece, Marnie Abramson, 36, who heads the company's marketing efforts, said the move to Vedic design is also a way to keep family members engaged in the business. "We love what we do and we want to figure out how to keep multiple generations interested," she said.

Some of the building's features are subtle, others more obvious. Among the features cited by the Abramsons: The streaming sunlight is ubiquitous but doesn't appear to interfere with computer screens; the low dividers separate some employees from others but allow the spaces to remain well-lit; glassed-in offices help maintain a feeling of openness; and lush plantings inside the building give a connection to nature. The ground-floor cafe serves organic food.

"There are about one hundred others that we haven't even told you about," Jeffrey Abramson said.

Abramson became interested in Vedic architecture about 14 years ago, when he assumed a leadership role in the family-run company that his father started with \$500 after World War II. Working with his brothers Gary and Ronnie, Jeffrey became intrigued with ways to reinvent the business and find new strategies to stay ahead of the competition. To his consternation, he decided that the building industry creates as much as "40 percent of the pollution in this country" and pays too little attention to the people who eventually occupy the buildings.

"We can build buildings where people excel or become sick inside," he said. "If we can explore new avenues to make our workforce healthier, then we should do that."

The rent at 2000 Tower Oaks Blvd. is higher than for other buildings nearby -- about \$45 a square foot compared with about \$37. But Abramson thinks there is an eventual payoff for tenants. He is convinced that the building's features will enable businesses to have happier, more fulfilled employees who are less inclined to quit and more inclined to produce.

"It is fun to explore the building as more than just a beautiful piece of architecture that would one day make money," Abramson said. "Each building has to be better and better."