# DESIGN AT WORK> SERTA INTERNATIONAL CENTER

DESIGNER:
EPSTEIN | METTER
STUDIO

ALL PHOTOS: MARK BALLOGG, EXCEPT BELOW LEFT: ANDREW METTER

There's something different about being enveloped by nature versus merely looking at it, just as cruising down a road on a bicycle stimulates smell, sound, sight, and awareness more than does travel inside a car. For the Serta International Center near Chicago, Andy Metter, senior vice president and principal designer of Epstein | Metter Studio, has taken a sense of being within nature to the workplace, floating a 90,000-square-foot building atop a 20-acre Illinois prairie site at the edge of a wetland.

According to Metter, the planning strategy is organized in response to the land. "It came out of the notion of the beauty of the landscape and wanting to have a strong relationship to the site; to have a building responding to and growing from the site."

The mattress company's principal goal for the project has to do with employee attraction and retention—what Metter describes as Serta's strength, and a priority that corporate executives strive to maintain. With 65,000 square feet dedicated to office space and another 25,000 devoted to a high-bay research and development facility, the 700-foot-long-by-67-foot-wide building also houses amenities like outdoor work areas and an employee lunchroom with a trellised outdoor wooden deck, as well as a large showroom, a training auditorium, and an employee lounge.

The building's program is expressed by a consistent interior and exterior massing strategy designed to frame the views. "Each opening gives a sense of prospect that positions the viewer toward the horizon," said Metter. The attenuated nature of the building (taking the form of an unfolded Z-shape) means that there is plenty of natural and borrowed light with views of both the prairie and wetlands for all employees. Individual thermostats and operable windows throughout the facility provide employees access to fresh air and personalized thermal control of the space.

The new building consolidates five former corporate locations under one roof to streamline the organization's communication processes and encourage collaboration among departments. Guests and employees access the building by means of a ramp placed at the east and west elevations of the site. Both ramps gently guide visitors to the building's raised structure and form the recessed entry lobby that Metter designed to "read like a punch through the building, telegraphing the landscape from both elevations." Other support functions that intersect with the long and narrowly shaped structure, like the stepped training auditorium and conference rooms, project out from the building skin like an open, aluminum-and-glass chest of drawers. "These areas are discrete from the rest of the center's program, therefore the architecture expresses their distinction," he adds.

Metter negotiates the public and private aspects of the headquarter building through a double circulation strategy. The east elevation corridor, with a view onto the prairie, is zoned for visitors and separated from work areas and proprietary information through the linear placement of translucent, glass-enclosed support functions. The west elevation is intended for office workers, with wide-open spaces, low-paneled workstations, and views looking toward the wetlands. A second-floor showroom overlooks the two-story research facility where employees, wholesalers, and customers are introduced to Serta's products.

Throughout the headquarter building, the interior materials take their cue from the exterior finishes of post-tensioned concrete, aluminum panels, and glass—lots of glass. Inside, the glass walls are clear, translucent, or fluted to mediate privacy and maximize daylight penetration.

The spare, clean interior emphasizes views of the prairie landscape. A neutral palette and abundant natural light create a serene work environment.

Black rubber or terrazzo flooring materials separate the floor surface from the pure whiteness of the wall and ceiling planes, furthering the notion of the building floating above the prairie. Inside, private offices and conference rooms receive aluminum-colored sound-absorbing fabric panels detailed to align with the aluminum panels of the exterior. The white, gray, and glass-paneled workstations with black upholstered desk chairs complete the composition in the open areas.

While the architecture and interior envelope are both purposefully neutral, the color inside the building is in constant flux, thanks to the center's insertion and integration into the natural environment where the sun, sky, and seasonal colors transform the prairie, the building, and the spaces within. **CINDY COLEMAN**

## RESOURCES:

**Rubber flooring:**
Norament from Nora Systems
www.nora.eu
**Floor grating:**
Stainless steel bar stock grating from McNichols
www.mcnichols.com
**Ceiling system:**
TechZone from Armstrong
www.armstrong.com
**Channel glass:**
Bendheim
www.bendheim.com
**Interior glass walls:**
Transluscent glass from CUDA
www.cudaglass.com
**Lighting:**
Microline 30 from Delta Light
www.deltalight.com
**Handrail lighting:**
Luxrail from io
www.iolighting.com
**Workstations:**
Autostrada from Knoll
**Desk chair:**
Life Chair from Knoll
**Guest chair:**
Open Up Side chair from Knoll
www.knoll.com
**Sofa and lounge chairs:**
Canal from Keilhauer
www.keilhauer.com
**Coffee Table:**
Nienkamper
www.nienkamper.com