

Conversations: Michael Held

Meet Steelcase's new Vice President of Global Design

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Michael recently took over the reins for the Steelcase Global Design Studio and relocated his family to Grand Rapids, Michigan. He has lived in seven countries and traveled the world extensively. Work Better caught up with him just a few days after he arrived in the U.S.

WB: How did you get attracted to the field of design?

MH: I grew up in a small German town that was almost like a medieval museum. When I was 12, my brother and I got to move into our basement. I got to think of what I would do with my own space for the first time. A few years later, when my parents redid their living room, for whatever reason, they listened to my ideas. A carpenter used my rough sketches to create my first pieces of furniture. They liked it and so I also ended up designing my dad's office. My parents still live with that furniture today. I also built furniture for a couple of friends, very industrial pieces of welded, raw steel and cushions my mom sewed. I wanted to learn more about design as a means to learn new things.

WB: How do you approach design challenges?

MH: Curiosity and creativity. Asking questions instead of falling in love with answers and valuing creative ideas. It's a privilege to work in a job where you get asked to be creative every day. That needs to be paired with a purpose for what we do. For us, it's our customers. You have to connect creativity and curiosity to a tangible business mission. You can work all your life on crazy explorations, but what's the point if none of it impacts what people do or how they go through their day?

WB: What do you do when you have a creative block?

MH: Empty my head. Do something else. Ask others for help. Go cycling or walking, hiking, climbing, making, building ... anything to lose myself in repetitive physical activity so my brain can do the work without being watched.

WB: How do you think about sustainability when designing new products?

MH: We should design lighter-weight products with as much recycled or recyclable material as possible. And we need to make it intuitive to disassemble. My grandmother went through WWII. She learned how to live with less. How to reuse. We used to think that was crazy as kids. But now as an adult I look at that with different eyes. We grew up in an era of abundance. Just use more, there's always more. But now we're realizing that designing less is more.

WB: How is that reflected in the way you've designed your own home?

MH: The way we live is inspired by the way we lived in Asia. It's super efficient. The layout is smart. There's nothing that isn't there for a reason.

WB: What is the biggest workplace design shift you are seeing right now?

MH: People can work anywhere. The office will play a different role than it has in the past 100 years. To be truly customer-centric, we will help our customers solve their problems wherever they work. I'm excited. This challenge is different from anything Steelcase has thought about. Work is not going away. It's changing. Some people want a routine. Others want freedom. All of this means the workplace is changing, too. I'm not in preservation. I'm in design and I think about where we're going next.

WB: What's your favorite part of your workplace?

MH: Project areas when new prototypes are set up. It's the fastest way to engage and learn. I enjoy a good barista bar for great coffee and pastries, meeting colleagues and customers while learning new things. And our new hybrid-ancillary spaces at our Learning + Innovation Center in Grand Rapids make it easy to connect with great technology in beautiful spaces.

WB: How has living and working in different parts of the world influenced you?

MH: My views are much more diverse because I have more cultural references to draw from and more comparisons to make. I've become more humble, reminding myself not to jump to conclusions. It's helped me to understand people a bit better and become more empathetic. I am able to draw on my experiences to help open other people's minds as well.

Last Words

MH: I've always been fascinated by creatives that operate at the fringes of their fields or society, the weird ones (and their collaborators) that push us forward with new ideas and commit to radical approaches at the time. I always liked to do things a bit different from other people. I was okay not fitting in, maybe that's why I was lucky enough to stumble into design relatively early on.