

# ArtisSpectrum

## The Art of Healing Spaces

Designer, Gay Kanuth,  
Accepts a Sublime Challenge

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# HEALING

# The Art of SPACES

Designer Gay Kanuth accepts a sublime challenge from the blossoming Orchid Recovery Center for Women.

*by Tom Kerr*

**W**HEN ASKED TO DESCRIBE HER VISION and methodology as a designer, Gay Bortal Kanuth admits "To explain something innate is a problem for me. As an artist and a designer it is inside me, but to voice it is not easy."

Although the Norwegian native has lived on several continents, Kanuth's current home is in West Palm Beach, Florida. The beautiful manifestations of her intuitive approach have helped to establish her as one of the most sought-after domestic and commercial designers. Her business, IMAGLO, is especially known for quickly transforming static spaces into vibrant, nature-inspired sanctuaries of comfort, luxury, and elegance.

One of Kanuth's current creative endeavors – a redesign of the Orchid Recovery Center in Boynton Beach, Florida – will draw upon her entire repertoire, as she seeks a discerning balance of environmental elements. Kanuth explains the artistic challenge of redesigning the substance abuse treatment facility. "As a painter, I have a freedom to create the ideas and colors as I myself need them to be"

"In the quietness of it all I feel a hum. I keep that within myself and go into that space whenever I can."

Kanuth explains. "It is the freedom and personal joy of a project with no attention to any person's ideas and needs but my own." But the design of the Orchid Center is based upon the theoretical concept of "healing spaces", and requires a thoroughly empathic and selfless approach. "Sometimes designers get caught up in fashionable hip designs, not really taking note of the client's needs. The result can be a cool-looking place but it does not feed the soul as it should," she says.





Using the crystal "singing bowls" and the human voice, sound healer Laura Di Bello conducts an educational workshop to acquaint the staff of Orchid Center with the principles of sound healing therapy.

The philosophy of designing "healing spaces" focuses upon integrating a variety of environmental elements to create an ambiance that is not only attractive, but has a measurable effect upon the health and well-being of those who use the space. Julie Queler, director of the Orchid Center, is a passionate advocate of holistic approaches to therapy. The Orchid Center is the first treatment facility of its kind to incorporate art, color, sound, aromatherapy, and other powerful elements of interior design in a deliberate attempt to make the living environment its own unique therapeutic tool.

"Central nervous system problems, restlessness, the inability to calm the mind – these are all common side effects of detoxification from any substance," explains Queler. "One of the reasons we hired Gay was for her unique and intuitive ability to 'feel' spaces and to create an inspiring and peaceful sense of well-being."

Whereas a Feng Shui master employs the use of a traditional energy-locating compass known as the Lo-pan, Kanuth relies upon her artistic percipience – and practical common sense – to accurately identify the elements in an environment and arrange them in their healthiest positions. But to design an environment like the one at Orchid, where the intention is to provide a safe haven for people the artist may never know, Kanuth needs to pursue nature's own universal remedies. On a personal and intimate level it is necessary for her to undergo a continual creative process of self-balancing, in order to envision and implement an effective therapeutic design.

"Working with the Orchid project has made me confront the why and how of my approach," she says. "I realize that all types of women from all walks of life will come here. The importance is to make them all feel right at home in the space. They are at a place of surrender in their lives, and are in pain. I am interested in creating environments that are restful, peaceful, and surround them with a secure place to heal."

Kanuth is building upon the so-called Planetree design model, first established in the 1970s. Emphasis is placed primarily upon the spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical influence of an environment

and the specific needs of those who inhabit the space. Most people experience fear, angst, loss of personal control and a heightened sense of isolation as soon as they enter the institutional setting of a technologically oriented healthcare facility. Planetree design strives to eliminate those effects, by providing positive therapeutic stimuli and support through a proactive strategy. The design itself becomes an intentional instrument in the healing and recovery process.

People have gravitated toward safe and comforting environments since the beginning of time. The Mayans chose construction sites based upon nature, and used everything from soil samples to calculations of math and astronomy to determine the ideal orientation for their buildings. In ancient Greece, patients were restored to health through harmonious combinations of music and art. The physician Galen induced laughter to treat depression 2,000 years ago. Ancient Chinese medicine called for balancing the energy centers of the body via sound, aroma, and meditation. In India, ayurvedic musical tempos, corresponding with different cycles of physiology or times of day, were recommended

as treatment for both physical and mental maladies.

Musical tones can be used to restore the body to its original and natural resonant frequency, according to Laura Di Bello, a classically trained vocalist and sound healer, is a consultant at the Orchid Center. "Sound therapy is the utilization of sound vibration as a medium for healing," she explains. Di Bello works with the human voice, crystal bowls that give off particular tones, and meditation and yoga sessions, to help participants relieve stress and feel more physically, psychologically, and spiritually centered and balanced. She is also producing a CD recording of the therapy meditations, so women who visit the Orchid Center can take the exercises with them and continue practicing the modality at home.

Kanuth began to hear and feel a resonance of creative inspiration within herself, while living in a remote oceanfront location near the rain forests of Australia. "In the quietness of it all I felt a hum", she says. The artwork and spiritual attitude of the indigenous people had a profound influence upon her. "I keep that within myself and go into that space whenever I can."

In the same way that she once listened to the quiet wilderness of Australia, Kanuth now listens for inspiration on how to design Orchid Center. "I am listening to people that are already in sobriety. I am listening to and observing families who visit treatment centers and AA meetings. I am listening to the wonderful work and ideas Julie Queler is creating for these women staying at the Orchid. And I am convinced that the next step in the healing process is the surroundings. It is all about inspiring these women to change, to open their eyes to what possibilities lie ahead for them. Creative thinking and exploration of their own ideas can be inspired by their surroundings."

Studies have measured the effectiveness of healing spaces and lend scientific credibility to this alternative design approach. Findings suggest that well-planned environments can reduce depression, restlessness, insomnia, perception of pain, high blood pressure, and anxiety. Mood elevation, increased endorphin levels, enhanced cognitive functioning, and improved immune-system responses are



all strongly correlated with the Planetree model. The Orchid Center melds traditional 12-Step philosophies with modalities based upon the latest empirical research, to create a "recovery Mecca" where women can join a treatment community whose rhythms move to a feminine beat. Acupuncture, yoga, meditation, art therapy, sound therapy, and color therapy are all implemented in the Orchid's multi-modality approach.

One of Kanuth's tasks is to enhance and support those recovery tools within the context of physical architecture, functional space, and practical, comfortable furnishings. She plans to incorporate basic Planetree concepts while adding her own visionary ideas. She will include, for example, "simple but beautiful touches, and also some elements of surprise, to challenge them to take more notice of their surroundings." A red wall – "a challenging color, but muted by the elements of nature," – might be used as a backdrop for a Buddha figure surrounded by lush green plants, Kanuth suggests. "Simple ideas can be effective, like a long piece of bamboo tied up on a wall. Just the colors of the bamboo are fascinating enough to hold your attention."

Kanuth is "encouraged to create magic with simplicity", and will use mosquito netting to give a sense of simultaneous privacy and freedom. While a canopy bed offers a sense of security, privacy, and elegant luxury, the diffused light of the soft and airy netting will help avoid feelings of claustrophobia. "The beds will be made of rattan and covered with white linens and feather pillows. The walls will be in yellow for warmth or a very Mexican pink for joy, and an intense pale blue for calmness. With the right mix of soothing elements, color becomes a background for the comfort and calmness of the room and its contents. In the evening when lying there, they will hear the water fountain and the bamboo clinking as the wind blows gently, and will be able to find the security and the hum of the simple things we never hear when too busy or too stressed." Kanuth wants residents to enjoy the experience so much that they will be inclined to recreate healing spaces in their own homes, once they leave the Orchid Center. "I make spaces for people to live in, enjoy, and find the peace they need to nurture the soul, so that they can go out into the world again and again, as warriors."

"The art I will be installing will include close-ups of huge colorful orchids," Kanuth says. She wants to create portals to verdant nature through the placement of nature photos, landscapes of the human body as hills and valleys, wood carvings, and a ceiling lamp made from crystals that dance in the sunlight, along with the art of

words. "I love profound sayings," she reveals "and sometimes print them out and make them into art in oversized frames."

A thatched hut with sumptuous cushions, a huge stretched canvas in pink to offer shade over a conversation pit in the garden, cobblestone pathways, and the sound of flowing water will conspire to create sanctuaries throughout the Orchid Center, in what Kanuth says will be "a spa of living space."

In seeking creative refuge within the context of helping to heal others, Kanuth once again redefines herself as an artist while following the exquisite and mysterious journey of self-discovery. Along the way she gives voice to that innate force within herself that she finds so difficult to articulate in words, the voice we all hear and recognize when we are confronted with living works of original, authentic art.

## THE ART OF RICHARD TUTTLE

NOVEMBER 10, 2005 –  
FEBRUARY 5, 2006



# WHITNEY

New Mexico, New York, #14, 1998 (detail). Acrylic on plywood.  
Collection of Susan Harris and Glenn Grasser, New York. Photograph by Tom Powell.  
courtesy: Sperone Westwater, New York. © Richard Tuttle

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