Iowa State University

From the Selected Works of M. Monica Gillen

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Expand What Exists: a contrast with old and new

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With the architect as client, OPN Architects, Inc., utilized existing resources and explored different materials and ideas for a space about their own creation.

Architects work with clients to think carefully about ideas and plans both as a big picture and through the details. As the staff at OPN Architects Des Moines studio considered these items for their own workspace, the process became a series of discussions about a space they themselves would create. When the architect is the client, a sense of freedom exists to explore different materials and investigate ideas that may not be possible with another client.

"This type of project became a platform to experiment a bit with materials and systems that we might not otherwise get an opportunity to work with, including a firsthand experience with many sustainable approaches. It gave us a true sense of 'practicing what we preach,'" Brett Mendenhall, AIA, project manager.

The project was an office expansion, so it was business as usual in terms of occupying the space on a day-to-day basis, and the development and construction went on as work proceeded for other new and existing projects. The Des Moines office of OPN Architects is located in a six-story building at First Street and Court Avenue that was formerly a hardware company warehouse.

The casual observer may or may not notice the exposed hardware fasteners and joist hangers. These details, coupled with exposed brick and ventilation systems, fit into the master plan for the space in the same way as the giant pivoting bamboo conference room door, which grabs visitors' attention in the reception area. According to Danielle Hermann, AIA, "Visitors and clients tend to say a lot of the same things. They are all intrigued by the big pivoting door."

Staff took part, witnessed the development and asked questions. Charrettes and discussions took place. The staff gave input and thoughts about how the design was coming along and investigated concepts to develop the plan.

This was an extension, which took the module that was set up and expanded it. The space has rhythm, with primary access on one side and secondary access on the other, and it works well.

Architects looked at every detail, every day. In an effort to repurpose and reuse, each existing component was carefully considered, and nothing was thrown out. Bookcases were cut down and relocated to various points in the office. As a result of the lowered built elements and in the absence of traditional doors, natural light floods the expanse.
uncovered brick and displayed support systems warm the space and add color in the same manner. New suspended ceiling elements draw a pleasant contrast between the masonry and giant oak columns.

"I loved the process of exposing the historic building elements and appreciate the inviting quality and warmth that those materials lend," says Emily Kistner, intern architect, associate AIA.

Increased collaboration between office leadership, staff and clients was an essential goal. To draw attention to the new and old was similarly vital. Both objectives were realized, which resulted in a space favorable to impromptu partnerships and discussions.

Out of the chaos inherent with any remodel, repurpose or change emerged order, fostering an environment for thought and creation.

—M. Monica Gillen lives and works in Ames.