Let There Be Natural Light: an open space for the design process

M. Monica Gillen, Iowa State University
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AN OPEN SPACE FOR THE DESIGN PROCESS

JURY COMMENTS: Another project that embraces the industrial heritage of the region—this project—with minimal means—creates an edgy loft-like studio environment out of the shell of an anonymous office building. It favors the honesty of expression by revealing the existing concrete construction at the exposed ceiling, and the evidence of earlier use at the raw concrete floor. The exposed surfaces contrast with refined and elegant details of metal and glass for the new insertions. Jurors appreciated the simple, logical plan and its careful fit with the existing structure—understated yet elegant.

INVISION desired a space where teams could collaborate in an open environment. The expanse has the added benefit of natural daylight streaming in from three sides.

Twelve people. One room with desks. No partitions. Aspiring to foster an open and collaborative design process like the studio culture to which architecture students become accustomed, the INVISION staff gravitated to an atmosphere that encourages interaction. “We know when one group is chatting relaying a project, and we know when one person is discussing construction details on the phone with a contractor,” said Tom Feldmann, Associate AIA. “Staff on different projects offer suggestions on details for each other’s projects and discuss construction solutions on other projects.”

With about three times more space to work in, the new expanse will allow for growth. “We were moving from a walk-up office in Valley Junction that was approximately 1,600 square feet (with 10 staff), and needed plenty of extra rooms,” said Feldmann. “Our new office is approximately 6,000 square feet.”

Substantially larger than the former offices, when the new space was first considered, it was loaded with partitions eight feet tall or taller and created a barrier that sealed off most occupants from a long window to the outside world. After removing the obstruction, the way was clear to use the natural daylight as the primary source of light for the newly renovated space. With windows all around, the studio culture is alive and illuminated with ideas.

“The Des Moines office for INVISION was an interesting challenge to photograph because of its wonderful quality of light in the open office space,” said Cameron Campbell, Integrated Studio photographer. “The challenge was to capture the open feel of the office in the photographs by responding to how it was organized as well as the connection to the outdoors.” In order to foster collaboration, the designers necessarily desired a systemized space. The result is confident cooperation between individuals and teams as the inventive process unfolds.

The project progressed from June to October in 2005. Construction and furnishings cost about $118,000. The INVISION offices are on the second floor of a 1943 edifice.

The existing electrical, fire protection and mechanical systems were maintained. To address sustainability issues and reduce costs and construction waste, as many materials as possible from the demolition process were reused, including casework, clear-grain cedar framing and mill-finish steel sheeting, among other items.

The plan for growth brings with it the need or desire for changes. The original plan called for 12 desks, which turned to 20. According to Feldmann, because it’s an architectural office, the space continues to be refined. New signage has been added and as well as display shelves in the lobby. Plans are also underway to add a door system to the linear glass wall.

As a collective design endeavor, the occupants are content with the outcome. The luxury of the space rests with its austerity. The mix of materials, including new and those adapted for reuse, coalesce in the same way as the teams of architects who function in the space each day.

—M. Monica Gillen lives and works in Ames.