

## Art is no afterthought in architects' designs

Smith + Associates' offices illustrate art-centric design in converted dog pound

By MARY STONE

Three years after moving into the former city dog pound, Smith + Associates Architects PLLC is expanding for a third time.

Since 2007, the company has grown from seven employees to 28, as revenues have continued to climb despite the recession.

Billings doubled from 2008 to 2009 and are expected to triple this year. The firm's projects range from small design/build jobs of 2,000 square feet to master planning projects of 1.3 million square feet. In total cost, projects range from \$100,000 to \$20 million.

Specializing mainly in health care, retail designs and renovations, Smith + Associates, at its own building, will have roughly 5,000 square feet of space by the time renovations are finished on Central Avenue.

Company officials say their own building is an example of what they like doing best: breathing new life into old buildings using creativity and strategic cost cuts.

That was the case with a recent project at the Irondequoit Country Club in Pittsford.

"Irondequoit Country Club wanted to tear (its building) down and build a new one that was quite expensive. Instead, I worked with the president of the club (on a plan) that gave them a much bigger building at a much smaller cost that they have been unilaterally very pleased with," Managing Partner Kenneth Smith said.

The new design had to emphasize its golf course surrounds and harmonize different aesthetic styles, remodel locker rooms, add handicapped access to the building, expand the capacity of the dining room and do away with drop ceilings and dark paneling.

John August, the country club's president, said the new design surpassed members' expectations.

"As an added bonus, we have increased membership as well as a flow of returning



Photo by Kimberly McKinzie

Kenneth Smith, managing partner of Smith + Associates, started the architecture firm in his living room in 2005. The firm recently expanded for a third time at offices on Central Avenue.

members that we lost in protest of the project, which is a surprising and rewarding result," he said.

The 36,000-square-foot clubhouse, designed in 1916, was destroyed in a fire and rebuilt in the 1930s. Over the last 70 years, the space weathered at least four major renovations, including an interior facelift in 1989. Since then, it had become outdated and non-functional.

Club officials were looking for an elegant and efficient entertainment and meeting center, August said. They took three years to review options.

In the end, they decided to use the existing footprint by reorganizing and redesigning the interior spaces to improve aesthetic flow and flexibility.

As a rule, Smith + Associates looks at all designs with interior design in mind. Integrating an artful approach from the early planning stages, they say, is essential so that art does not look like an afterthought.

"We're selectively detailing where the high-visibility areas are. And that's what people's first impressions are, and that's what they're going to walk away with. You can save money elsewhere, where people

aren't looking," said Scott Grove, the firm's creative director.

For example, he said, at Irondequoit Country Club and many other buildings, the design firm spent a little more using higher-end stone at the entrance for a good first impression.

"Now that's selective detailing because the rest of the building may be stucco. But you look at the entrance, which may be 5 percent of the whole building, but that's what people perceive," he said.

Artful details are as important in health care settings. The company's work in health care spreads beyond Upstate New York to other states, where developers are expanding their medical properties to facilities such as dialysis centers.

"There is evidence-based design that shows art in architecture improves healing," Grove said. "People spend less time in recovery. Instead of designing a raw space that gets built, and then some interior designer comes in after the fact, we actually incorporate art."

"If you're walking down a hallway, most people put in doors because it's an easy traffic flow. What we like to do is offset

Reprinted with permission of the Rochester Business Journal.

that doorway, so there is an end view there, and you make a little niche."

In that niche, a sculpture can be featured or another art work. It also can represent a donor opportunity.

"People love to have their name on a plaque, by donating \$500 or \$1,000 or whatever it is, and we'll buy a really nice piece of artwork and place it in this niche that's already been designed into the initial architecture."

Smith + Associates looks for savings wherever possible to afford accents in locations where they can be appreciated. One cost savings comes from using hand sketches.

"They're accurate, and they have all of the information that you need," Grove said. "Why waste the time doing a drawing when, quite frankly, often designs change. They go through an evolution. ... Let's not waste time doing something we don't need to do until (the client) has confirmed the design."

Smith added: "If we can capture the heart of a building, and the different trades see what we're trying to do, and we're all working together collectively, more money is left for the project."

Even if a client spends a fraction of a percent of its construction costs on art, the impact far exceeds the cost.

"If you spend \$1,000 on artwork, it's going to make that space look like you spent \$100,000 on the entire space, when you've only added a couple accent walls of paint and one piece of art," Grove said.

As a sculptor, he understands the relevance of art.

At the company's offices, every new employee has a portrait painted. The paintings line the firm's entryway.

"When you get hired, you feel really honored," Grove said. "The artist doesn't paint from a photograph. I had to go sit in the guy's studio for four hours. I felt like a real part of the team."

Smith, who founded the firm from his living room in 2005, previously worked at SWBR Architects & Engineers P.C.

For his headquarters, he purchased the city dog pound a year later for \$64,000 and renovated it for \$200,000.

The pound was built in 1833, but the footings suggest the foundation was there well before. Given its proximity to rail

lines and the train station, it is speculated that the previous building might have served as a hotel.

The firm's space spreads across 3,500 square feet, with 1,250 additional square feet for a separate tenant in the building.

The first expansion was 1,000 square feet, which added work stations, a library and a conference room to the firm. The second expansion added 400 square feet and four more work stations. The current expansion is adding 1,250 square feet, which will include six work stations, a third conference room and a second kitchenette.

Rebranding the former dog pound to professional office space, Smith said, is a perfect example of how the company creates unique spaces cost effectively.

"One of the good things about this firm is knowing the code. You manipulate the building as cost effectively as possible toward the code and zoning, structure and mechanicals, and working as a team you try not to throw money where you don't see it," Smith said. "That, again, puts the money back where you can see it."

mstone@rbj.net / 585-546-8303

Reprinted with permission of the Rochester Business Journal.