

substance

Purity and simplicity lead small Midwest architectural firm to wow judges and win 2006 Best of Competition.

By Michele Meyer

When in doubt, leave it out.

That adage proved a winner for Des Moines, Iowa's Substance, a small architectural and interior design studio whose first creation was its own workspace.

Among more than 300 worldwide projects, Substance's seamless simplicity captivated judges and won the fledgling firm the prestigious Best of Competition Award in IIDA's 2006 Interior Design Competition. The award was announced June 12 at IIDA's *COOL* gala held during NeoCon in Chicago.

Certainly, the firm's entry was atypical. The project cost \$250,000 out of pocket – just \$48 a square foot – including custom

millwork, computers, file cabinets and chairs. It also was the first competition the staff of 15 had ever entered. And its office, which opened in September 2005, is based in a smaller Midwest city rather than a cosmopolitan capital such as New York, Los Angeles or London.

“Good design doesn't have to be a huge project with a huge budget to be profound,” says S. Russell Groves, a judge and Principal at his eponymous Manhattan firm. “Substance's did not try to scream anything. It was an exquisite Haiku versus the *Iliad*.”

The sunlight dancing through the airy space and over a ribbon of custom-made birchwood desks,



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partitions and shelves was recognized by the panel of judges that included Groves; Kenneth Baker, Associate IIDA, Managing Director and Principal at Gensler, Washington, D.C.; Clara Igonda, Principal, Perkins + Will, Los Angeles; and Adrian Wilson, Photographer, Interior Photography, New York. John Mack, IIDA, AIA, then IIDA's Vice President of Communications, served as facilitator for the

judging, which took place Feb. 24–25.

“We had four incredibly opinionated judges, and I was shocked all of us selected the least flamboyant, most pure project by an architectural firm nobody knew about,” Igonda says. “We were touched by the love that went into it and the consideration of every detail, down to the furniture. It was totally integrated, and they also designed

practically everything themselves. They captured the essence of design. It was magical.”

The space itself wove a spell on Substance. “Even in its raw state, the room was powerful,” says Substance Partner Paul Mankins of the 5,200-square-foot structure with 15-foot-high wood ceilings supported by 6-foot-deep steel trusses, but no columns. “We just tried to get out of the way.”

Thus, the architects of commercial, residential and institutional buildings kept the original trusses, brick walls and window frames – and the concrete floor with markings from decades past, when the space housed a window manufacturer and, before that, an auto dealership. Using the tenant improvement allowance of \$104,000, they reorganized ducts and concealed lighting fixtures.

“We joked with [the] general contractor, ‘You’re going to get done, and people will say you didn’t do anything,’” Mankins says. “He worked for a month, and it still looked like one big, empty room.”

The firm’s collaborative spirit guided each decision. Partitions were kept low so employees can talk to one another across the room. The architects can stand, rather than stoop, as they gather around 21-inch plasma computer screens on raised desks that are 36 inches tall (instead of the standard 29 inches). Mankins adds, “Everyone sits at the same kind of desk – architects, partners and interns.”

Equally impressive is the studio’s layout. Three pods accommodating five workers each flow logically, from function to function, and from desks to architectural files to conference areas.

“The way the firm used traditional materials – especially wood – in a contemporary way was really innovative,” says Wilson of the handcrafted Baltic birchwood shelves, desks and file cabinet casings that folded and flowed to accommodate workers’ needs. “The wood also was a thread throughout the space. That stole it, for me.”

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— Paul Mankins, Partner, Substance



Substance designed pieces to complement the starkness of the space and the warm tones of its ceiling, brick walls and century-old steel trusses that have turned brownish-red.



and the warm tones of its ceiling decking, terracotta brick walls and steel trusses, which have turned brownish-red from century-old primer.

Unexpectedly, the partners found that the warm surroundings of their own office began to influence their work. “Before, the architecture we created was cool, aluminum and glass,” Mankins says.

Mankins could not have predicted the quiet of the openness. “You’d think there would be overwhelming din, but there isn’t – despite the lack of walls,” he says. Substance took advantage of large windows to the north, west and south to provide ambience, daylight and breezes, since they open.

The reliance on natural materials and respect of history also reflect Substance’s belief that architecture should be environmentally aware. “The natural lighting is quite energy-efficient,” Mankins says. “And if we ever move out, we can take the furniture, and the space will be very much as we found it. That’s one of

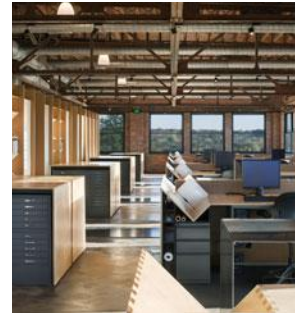
the biggest issues facing designers right now – how to design in a way that’s sustainable.”

Mankins confesses the designers cared not a wit about trendiness. “We picked our firm’s name very consciously – we choose substance over style,” he says. They are proud of honoring their Midwestern practicality. “We’re very rooted in Iowa, which is a direct, pragmatic place. So we focus on solutions, not philosophical concepts.”

In the end, the approach works not only for their Iowan clients, but also for the competition. “Pragmatism forced a layer of editing that strengthened the work. Our design was modest, direct and reduced to the minimum. Part of it was we don’t have a lot of money, and part of it is that’s how we think,” Mankins says. “By and large, designers are not plagued with too few ideas; they’re plagued by too many.”

The staff’s youthful spirit also has its advantages – and not just the enthusiasm the staff showed in their work and at the

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awards ceremony. The architects and designers weren’t intimidated by their sometimes internationally renowned competition. “This is the first space we’ve entered for an award. Literally, it’s the first project we’ve ever had photographed,” Mankins

says. And that attitude might have been as winning as the work itself. After all, how many small firms can stand up against the heavy hitters in their field? “I always thought our biggest achievement was having the nerve to enter,” Mankins says. 📍