



Art, design draw for new Park Blocks craft center

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Art is the draw for the DeSoto Project, the banner name that's landed on developer Jim Winkler's transformation of the 1914 DeSoto Building at Northwest Davis Street and Eighth Avenue into a new creative center.

But as the galleries and museums open this weekend, architect-crafted interior spaces are also on display. Within the existing structure of back-to-back historic buildings, five architectural firms made standalone spaces for a museum, galleries and architectural offices to showcase daily creation.

"Indeed," Winkler said, "a true creative arts center in every sense of the word."

Richard Brown Architects and Forsgren Design Studio teamed to design the destination-anchoring Museum of Contemporary Craft, the 15,000-square-foot space that spans two stories. The move means almost two times more space for the museum, Brown said, but fitting the museum's programmatic needs – and wants – into the spot was challenging. "The design solution really springs from the vision of the museum and the space that was available," he said.

A wide staircase runs along the edge of the double-height main exhibition space to the tucked-up secondary display room. Visitors push through the main entry door to see the front desk, a steel, glass art and ebonized white oak affair that Brown, John Forsgren, glass artist Walter Gordinier, museum sign maker Matt Deschler and design firm The Felt Hat all had a part in.

"That desk, in a way, is symbolic of the whole process," Brown said. "It takes lots and lots and lots of different people with different vision and skills."

The vision of other Portland firms stretches out in neighboring spaces. Holst Architecture designed Froelick Gallery's long, open space with an understated touch: a plain light wood greeting desk, light shining from rectangular cuts in a dropped ceiling. At Blue Sky Gallery, architect Rick Potestio paired pale slate touches with white gallery walls and the wide expanse of the main room with narrow, peek-through passages into rear spaces. Simple spaces for Charles Hartman Fine Art and Augen Gallery were designed by LRS Architects.

LRS also designed the core and shell of the 58,000-square-foot building, which is actually two buildings that join midblock. Much of the existing structure was retained, said LRS principal Bill Ruff, while upgrading seismic conditions, adding entry canopies, repointing exterior brickwork and creating a new Ipe rooftop deck for gatherings.

And in August, the 85-person firm will move its own offices – now in three separate buildings – to the DeSoto Building's third and fourth floors. Elements that appear in the rest of the building, like the stretches of reclaimed wood that warm the elevator ceiling, are carried through into the firm's designs for its own office. Many of the features, like the exposed wood and concrete, stayed as the firm worked to earn a Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design platinum rating for the space.

"The bones of the building are so good," said Paul Frank, an LRS principal "... As much of the existing components as possible were left intact."

The remilled timber from the old space now appears as the slatted wood panels within the new. A flywheel from the former elevator will decorate one of the firm's conference rooms. And the open floor plan lets all desks get direct light from the huge original windows.

"All the windows open up into the office," said LRS principal Trish Nixon, "so that everybody has a view from their desk from a seated position."

Buying space from Winkler, Ruff said, has been in the works for a while, but timing was never right for an office condominium purchase.

"It was always kind of on the back burner," he said, "until this building came."

The firm put together a complicated financing package that involved several loans, historic tax credit equity, and gap financing. It was tough, Ruff said, but they got there.

So did the rest of the building occupants. The restoration also offered a chance for the museum and the galleries to own their own spaces.

That financial stability, Winkler said, means protection against rising rents – and sustainability for members of the arts community.

"We needed to look for an antidote," he said. "And the antidote is ownership."

CORRECTION

"Art, design draw for new Park Blocks craft center," a page 1 story in the July 19 DJC, should have mentioned Mahlum Architects as the firm responsible for the design of the Blue Sky Gallery in the DeSoto Project.