Where's the Beef?

Randy Brown builds mouthwatering executive offices for the Greater Omaha Packing Company

Architecture's reach holds perpetual surprises. Who would ever have imagined a meatpacking plant in Nebraska as a potentially progressive piece of commercial design? The founder of Randy Brown Architects Design/Build and his client, the Greater Omaha Packing Company, did—to rave reviews. The AIA gave the project the National Architecture Honor Award and also named Brown the 2002 young architect of the year.

A 3,500-square-foot executive facility on two levels, the project drew on not only the architect's previous involvement but also the client's 100-year history and ties to the Omaha stockyards, where the company is located. In 1997, the architect completed a strikingly contemporary sales-office addition to an existing steel-clad packing plant. Sales grew, the company prospered, and the client called Brown back for a third component to bring on-site executives into the fold. His primary concerns were a seamless integration of separate buildings and an equally strong interpretation of the谩o谩 factor.

Brown's turf was a 56-foot-wide by 58-foot-deep void between the facility's sales and meatpacking arms. Within this compact area, he created a 22-foot-high structure fronted by a bowed glass-and-steel curtain wall. A galvanized-metal roof hovers above the most recent piece and extends over the common entry as a gesture of fellowship.

Left: With its glass-and-steel curtain wall, the executive facility joins a packing plant and sales offices. A two-level volume (left) adjoins the stacked conference room and president's office (right).
Opposite: A suspended steel, glass, and concrete staircase, backed by a wall of apple-core maple plywood, is the focus of the installation. A fiberglass oar adds an appropriate reference to the workplace.

PHOTOGRAPHY FARSHID ASSASSI
Brown's new component, in contrast to the solid adjacent elevations, is a transparent jewel, with interior elements immediately visible and enticing. Inside, Brown organized offices for president, CEO, and controller, plus service areas, into an L shape on the 2,600-square-foot first level. Above, the 900-square-foot mezzanine accommodates a conference room and offices for bookkeeping and accounting, bridged by a concrete-and-steel catwalk that addresses context. "The old stockyards had catwalks so that buyers could inspect the cattle from above," Brown says.

Overall, openness and interconnection prevail. "The focus is on the stair wall, which links spaces horizontally and vertically," the architect says. "Twelve-five feet long by 18 feet high, it features apple-core maple plywood panels and black-painted reveals, repeating a treatment dominant in the earlier sales quarters. The stair wall, which conceals the service core, extends to emphasize the stair's central position. "The stairway is pulled into the space as a sculptural piece," Brown says of the suspended steel, glass, and concrete composition. (Additional envelope materials include stainless-steel panels for a wall concealing rest rooms, granite tile flooring, sandblasted glass, and acoustical wood-fiber boards for the walls and ceiling.)

"One of the big challenges came from the fact that there was only one view. ..."
through the curtain wall,” says Brown. “How could everyone participate? How could everyone share light?” Considering sunshine as part of his materials palette, Brown clustered workstations toward the window wall and installed translucent glass doors on the offices to provide a partial solution.

He completed it with a dazzling light play. A 3-foot-wide by 29-foot-long slot in the roof forms a skylight. “It’s skewed over the catwalk and the mezzanine offices and conference room,” he explains. Below, he continues, perforated metal deflectors “bounce the light around—and in the summer act as a shade to the skylight.” Additional sunlight pours from a light shaft at the conference room and executive offices’ end of the building, enabling these areas to share the commodity. “The intent is to use light and shadows, rather than walls, to define volumes and spaces,” he says.

Brown notes that his final consideration was to “create an open environment where everyone ‘belongs’ when they walk through the door.” At the Greater Omaha Packing Company, that includes the fiberglass cow below the main staircase, too. —Elie Cohen

Above, left: Randy Brown’s latest construction filled a void between the meatpacking plant and its sales offices.

Left: A shaft brings daylight to the conference room as well as to executive offices below. Brown designed the glass-enclosed table.

Opposite: The apple-core maple plywood stairwell (right) intersects a service corridor. Doors (left) lead to copy centers and rest rooms. At the end of the corridor, a translucent glass door leads to an executive office.

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