

Architects make what's old new again

RoehrSchmitt carves out a niche working with historical buildings

BY DAN HEILMAN

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Architects Michael Roehr and Chris Schmitt could scarcely have more shared history if they were related.

The principals of Minneapolis-based RoehrSchmitt Architecture have leveraged that history and their experience and expertise into a growing practice that has shown a flair for historical renovations - even though the firm also works in educational facilities and libraries.

"We were in architecture school together in the 1980s," recalled Roehr. "Even in school, when we came across little freelance opportunities, we'd partner up on them. We always talked about eventually working together."

After graduating from the University of Minnesota, it seemed that wherever one landed professionally, the other soon followed. Roehr started a small design-build practice while Schmitt worked at Minneapolis-based HGA Architects and Engineers, which Roehr eventually joined. Years later, Roehr got an offer to be a senior designer at Minneapolis-based Ryan Cos. US Inc. and to rebuild the company's internal design department, and Schmitt followed.

"Our time at Ryan was like our master's degree," said Roehr. "We were always intending to step out."

We didn't have clients lined up, but we had a lot of experience and a lot of contacts - and a lot of naive optimism."

Together with interior designer Kopper Kettering and two design interns, Roehr and Schmitt have developed a style that finds ways to retain historical and traditional aspects of a building with sometimes aggressively modern touches.

They were on the project team that converted the former Minneapolis Public Schools headquarters into the Highlight Center, recently named one of Finance & Commerce's Top Projects of 2015. They also were on the team that won the same honor in 2014 for the 1600 Fillmore Street project.

Lately, RoehrSchmitt, which celebrated its 10th anniversary in June, has brought that combination to bear on a number of historical renovations in Minneapolis including:

- The Washington at 121 and 125 Washington Ave., developed by Falcon Ridge Partners.

- The Campbell Logan Building at 212 N. Second St., also developed by Falcon Ridge.

- The Miller Textile Building at 861 E. Hennepin Ave., developed by The Ackerberg Group.

The firm brought in \$600,000 in revenue last year, with between 20 and 30 percent growth in each of the previous four years. The growing specialty in historical sites has its origins in Schmitt's past work expanding and updating public libraries, most recently a century-old Carnegie library in Northfield.

The firm earned its spurs in historical renovation five years ago when Hillcrest Development tapped it to contribute design work on a number of projects in northeast Minneapolis, including converting the former Minneapolis Public Schools headquarters into the Highlight Center on Broadway Avenue North-



Michael Roehr of RoehrSchmitt Architecture, stands outside one of his firm's latest projects, the Miller Textile Building at 861 Hennepin Ave. E. in Minneapolis. STAFF PHOTO: BILL KLOTZ

"It's always been a part of our work to think of where a building has been and where it's going. There's always room for old and new."

— Michael Roehr, principal, RoehrSchmitt Architecture

east. RoehrSchmitt also worked on the Crown Center (also known as The Shed), where the architects opened up an abandoned exterior zone and turned it into an urban garden that encourages visitors to check out the nearby Bauhaus Brew Labs. They have their offices in the complex.

In the case of The Washington - the former site of the Sex World store - the firm took an almost archaeological approach, digging in and finding the building's inherent charms and strengths. Because the building had started as a dry goods warehouse, it didn't have much openness, a flaw the designers fixed with historically accurate windows around the entirety of the ground floor.

"It's almost a process of liberating the



The Miller Textile Building's lobby sports a variety of century-old gunny sacks that were manufactured there. SUBMITTED PHOTO



FILE PHOTO: BILL KLOTZ
RoehrSchmitt worked on the Crown Center, where the architects opened up an abandoned exterior zone and turned it into an urban garden that encourages visitors to check out the nearby Bauhaus Brew Labs. RoehrSchmitt also has offices at the complex.

building so that it can be what it wanted to be in the beginning," said Roehr.

Falcon Ridge partner Amanda T. Hawn said her company has found that Roehr and Schmitt bring a yin-and-yang quality to their work that suits projects such as The Washington perfectly.

"They're a nice combination of code and creativity," said Hawn. "The two of them have worked together so long that they're completely aware of each other's strengths and weaknesses. They're inherently different, and they know that."

Other RoehrSchmitt projects exemplify the firm's determination to find the best of what's old about a building and integrate it into the new.

The Miller Textile Building's lobby sports a variety of century-old gunny

sacks that were manufactured there. The Northfield Public Library, whose renovation was completed just recently, uses a glass structure in its courtyard to join the original library, a 1910 Carnegie-funded project, with a 1984 expansion.

"We want our buildings to be relevant to the present, even if it's a historical building," said Roehr.

That might sometimes mean tension between how the firm wants to do a project and how the Minneapolis Heritage Preservation Commission might want it done - or the secretary of the interior, if the client is going for a historic tax credit. But that's OK.

"It's always been a part of our work to think of where a building has been and where it's going," said Roehr. "There's always room for old and new."

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