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Architects Smith Metzger firm building a reputation

National AIA award for Reiman Gardens project honors the patient, creative approach

BY JIM POLLOCK

Your architect hands you an elaborate, time-intensive artist's rendering that shows what your new building will look like, and silently prays that you don't start listing things you want changed.

You, on the other hand, are thinking about the thousands or millions of dollars you're about to spend on this building, and hoping that you haven't overlooked some detail that's going to haunt you every time you walk in the door.

This moment is the reason architects Rob Smith and Daryl Metzger spend so much time showing 3-D computer graphics to clients. "No surprises," said Metzger. "That's our goal during the design process."

The final results, however, have been surprising and impressing people all over Central Iowa.

The two hardly knew each other while studying at Iowa State University in the mid-1970s, but wound up becoming partners in 1998. Earlier this month, their firm, Architects Smith Metzger, received a national award in the 2004 Innovative Design and Excellence in Architecture Using Structural Steel (IDEAS) competition at the American Institute of Architects convention in Chicago.

The firm was honored for the Reiman Gardens Conservatory Complex at Iowa State University, which includes a delightful glass enclosure for more than 800 exotic butterflies.

Metzger, an Urbandale native, and Smith, who grew up in suburban Chicago, also have worked on Pella's Molengracht, a downtown development with an old-world ambience; the cutting-edge conference center in Principal Financial Group Inc.'s original headquarters building in Des Moines; and the



Photo by Duane Tinkey

Daryl Metzger, right, and Rob Smith display some of their projects at their headquarters at 2111 Grand Ave.

remodeling of the Grinnell State Bank building, which has stood in Grinnell since 1910, among many other projects. Just last week, Josephs Jewelers broke ground at the West Glen Town Center in West Des Moines on a jewelry store and corporate headquarters designed by Metzger. "We had knocked our list of possible architects down to four or five when we visited with Daryl," said Toby Joseph, president of the jewelry company. He really listened, and I could just tell he was very enthusiastic and very eager. I knew he was somebody I really would want to work with."

Design ideas and attention to detail may be the keys to good architecture,

but Metzger attributes a lot of the 10-person firm's success to its use of computer modeling. "I'm a little surprised by how much resistance there is in the architectural community to this technology," he said. "A lot of architects are really hanging on to tradition."

That tradition relies heavily on blueprints, artists' renderings and small-scale models. "A nice rendering is a lot of work, and you fall in love with it," Metzger said. "Many of us have defended a rendering to a client for that reason."

With computer software, the architects can show a client any section of their design at any angle, and make significant changes in a matter of seconds. "This allows the client to take a more meaningful role early in the process," Metzger said. "With drawings on paper, most clients have a hard time comprehending what the building will actually feel like." With a digital model, they can experience the difference when the architect changes paint color, scans in the image of a carpet sample or turns a wood wall into glass, as Metzger did during a session for Josephs last week at the architecture firm's office at 2111 Grand Ave.

"We have asked hundreds of questions and Daryl made changes, changes, changes," Joseph said. "I was not looking forward to the process, to be honest, because I don't know anything about building a building. But it was a fun experience."

The digital approach also makes it much easier to exchange files with consultants who might be far away. "For the Reiman project, we had consultants all over North America," Metzger said. "In the

old style, that would have meant overnight mail. We were able to bring the team together in a much tighter way by sending electronic files."

Metzger wanted to be a designer or artist when he was young, and thought that designing cars would be the perfect occupation. "But I realized that not many cars are designed every year." Then he noticed that lots of new buildings go up annually in a city the size of Des Moines, and decided that architecture might be a good career to choose. "It's fascinating. It's a combination of art and science," he said.

You can see that when the question of sunlight enters into the discussion. Want to know how much sunlight will enter your planned jewelry store at 3 p.m. on July 7? Smith and Metzger have the software to show you exactly what to expect.

When the firm was called upon to design the Reiman project, then-ISU President Martin Jischke wanted to know how it would look to someone driving past on Elwood Drive. Smith and Metzger merged photos and computer drawings to show him, and the projected appearance matched the actual result almost perfectly.

Then, when they set out to design a building for ISU that would store radioactive and explosive materials, they had to learn about those substances to ensure that the building would stand up in a worst-case scenario.

"Our projects vary a lot, and that's intentional," Metzger said. "We want to keep fresh energy and not get bored. We like to do things we've never done before."



Photo submitted

The Reiman Gardens project was finished in 2002.