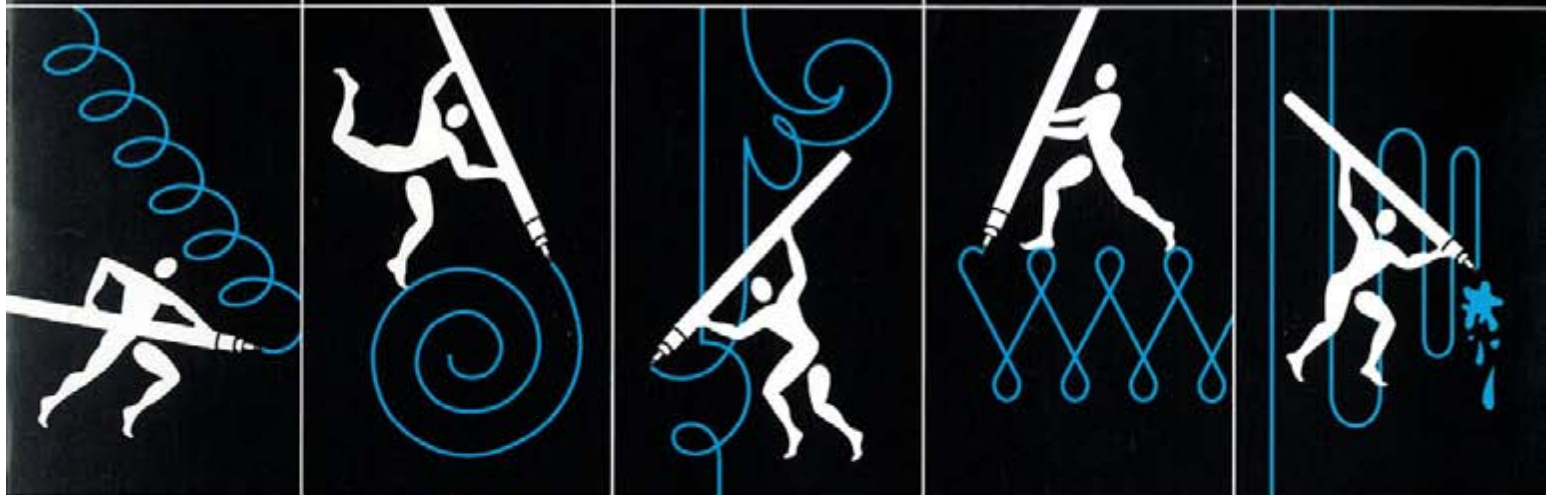
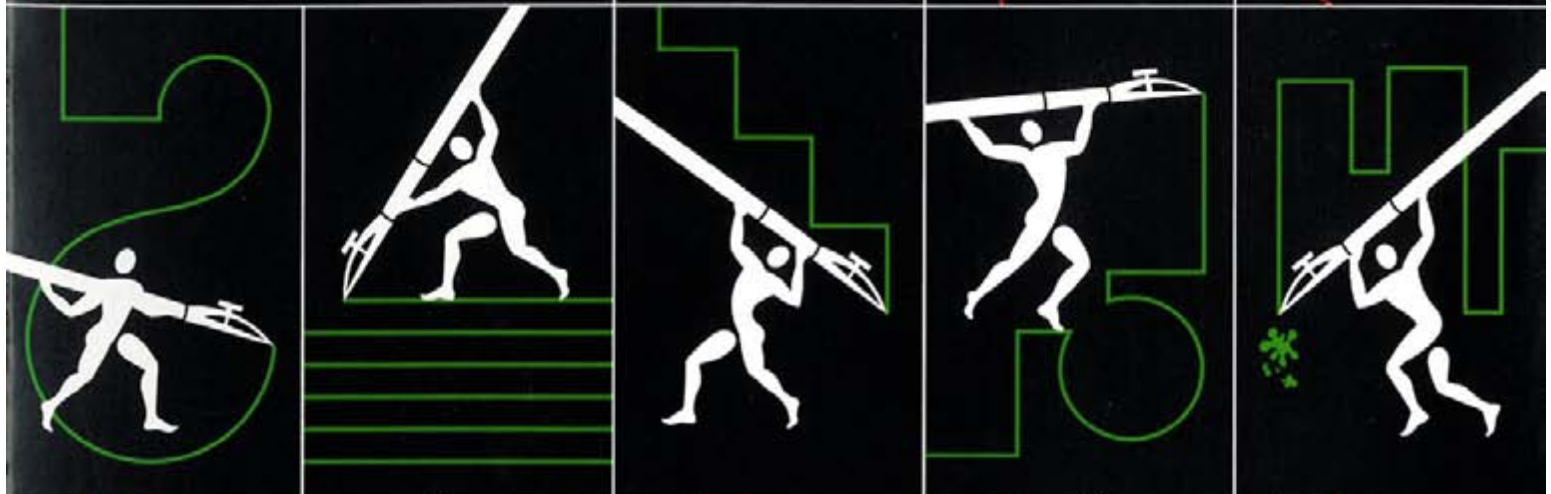
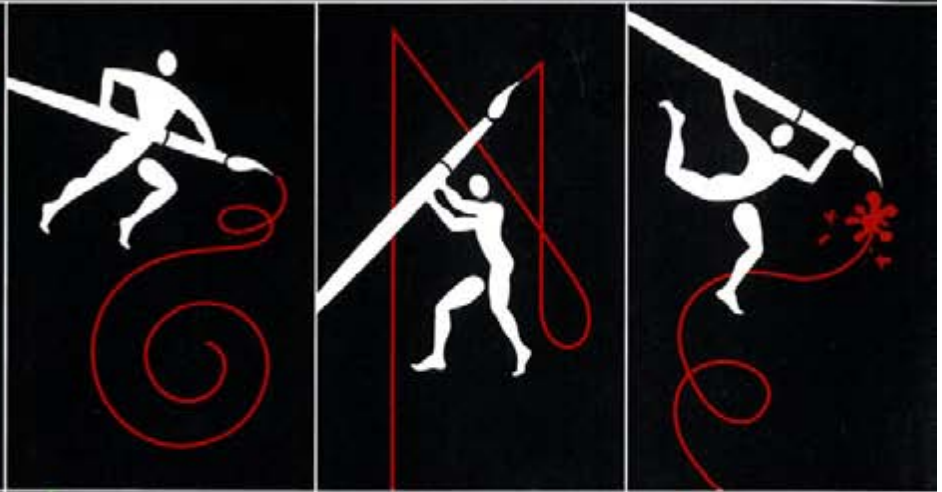


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McRay Magleby



Business

A Pittsburgh-area design firm bucks urban life and works wonders with a historic stone building.

For a big city, Pittsburgh can be a bit territorial. It's mostly a function of geography: Rivers, hills, bridges and tunnels divide Pittsburgh into distinct neighborhoods. Folks aren't likely to move around much, and businesses stick mostly to the downtown area.

All of which made Bradley Brown Design Group's 1992 move from an urban warehouse office to a historic building in nearby Carnegie a tad risky. Although the new space is only six miles from downtown Pittsburgh, the move put the studio farther from the city than any other major design firm in the area.

"It was such a hard decision," recalls Principal Susie Bradley. "Would

Creativity Among Stones and Steel

By Bryn M. Mooth

we lose business? Would clients want to come out to our new office? But it was a matter of having the guts and making the leap." Having made that leap, Bradley hasn't looked back.

A Matter of Dollars and Sense

In business for 16 years, with corporate and health-care giants (including BF Goodrich, PPG Industries and Heinz) at the top of its client list, Bradley Brown Design had good reason to question the move. But Bradley says the firm's history made severing ties with downtown easier, not more difficult. "When we decided to move, we had been in business for 12 years, so we were well-established," Bradley says. "Had we been in business only a year, I doubt we could have done it."

Like most urban design-firm owners, Bradley and then-partner Dennis Brown were weary of commuting headaches and parking nightmares. More important, they realized their monthly lease payments weren't contributing to the firm's long-term equity. "One of the major driving forces of the move was to control our costs," Bradley

says. "However, we wanted a space that was really interesting and that would reflect our personality. We had been in a renovated warehouse downtown, and we wanted to maintain those interesting architectural details."

Their search for a cheap and distinctive space led Bradley and Brown to the town of Carnegie and the 175-year-old (and aptly named) Mansfield Brown House. The property has a fascinating history. Carnegie's oldest home, it's a massive, three-story stone structure. The building was once a stop on the Underground Railroad, became a seminary in the 1800s, and was a bootlegger's headquarters during Prohibition. Local lore has it that both slaves fleeing the South and moonshine were hidden in a cave in the hillside behind the house.

Not Exactly a Restoration

Bradley Brown purchased the Mansfield Brown House in 1992 and began the four-month renovation to convert it into a 3,700 sq.ft. design office.

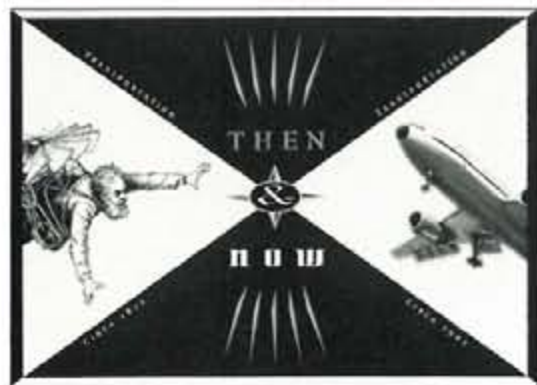


Photography: Ed Massery, Massery Photography (412) 344-6129.

Opposite page: Bradley Brown's moving-announcement postcard campaign was mailed to clients, competitors and suppliers.

Above: Architect Gary Carlough replaced the aging wood porch of the historic Mansfield Brown House with a modern combination of materials indigenous to Pittsburgh. Although the steel and glass contrast with the original stone, the vestibule design mimics the building's lines.

Right: Bradley Brown staff members (seated left to right) Streeter Nelson, Sharon Berk, Megan Conti, Gil Urlick, (standing) Donna Hyatt, Matt Weichel and Susie Bradley.





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W WORKSPACE



A casual seating and reception area is located just inside the building's entrance. The architect tore out the original staircase connecting the first and second floors, and designed a modern version reaching to the third story. Steel beams and cables were arc-welded in place, bringing inside some of the materials introduced in the vestibule.

The prior owners leased the house as office space to a cable company, so major structural work like heating, air conditioning and roof replacement was already done. Not that it was a simple task. Architect Gary Carlough (Bradley says he was the only one of several architects the firm interviewed who saw the building's potential), working with the designers' input, created an office that's both thoroughly modern and solidly historic. In the process, the interior was gutted, the porch ripped off and the facade updated with local materials.

Most notable is the front vestibule, which rests on the foundation previously occupied by a wooden porch. Carlough's design incorporates glass, aluminum and steel—all materials key to Pittsburgh's history—in stark contrast to the rugged stone. Megan Conti, a copywriter and account executive with Bradley Brown, calls it "'Positive opposition'—acknowledging the past and the building's heritage while also recognizing the progressive nature of Bradley Brown and its future," she says.

Major work on a historic building usually means contending with the local historic-preservation board's renovation requirements and city council restrictions. But because Carlough's design amounted to a modernization, not a preservation, the firm was able to go forward with its plans. Although the project contractor, a member of the city council, helped guide the project along smoothly, Conti notes the project wasn't universally approved. "The architect had a strategy to produce a response, positive or negative. That was a little bit controversial."

A Clean, Well-Lighted Space

When they first toured the building, Bradley notes, the house was broken up into many rooms. Since the designers wanted an open, clean workspace, breaking down walls was the first part of Carlough's interior plan. "As designers, we always think we can design everything, including our own space," Bradley says. "We worked with an architect and had plans, but when we saw it after it had been completely gutted, we were shocked."

Bradley and Brown allocated the first floor to business-management functions. Just inside the vestibule (which houses the reception and casual seating area), a conference table fills a space dominated by a massive fireplace. Carlough removed the original staircase from the center of the building, opting for a welded steel-and-cable structure that incorporates the native-materials theme. From the first floor, a light-filled atrium reaches directly to the peak of the roof three stories above.

Three offices, a library, production room, kitchen and smaller conference room occupy the second floor. Rather than completely enclosing individual offices, the walls rise only part-way to the ceiling, revealing as much of the stone construction as possible.

The bulk of Bradley Brown's creative work goes on beneath the peaked roof on the third floor, originally accessed by a trap door. The four workstations nestled in among the dormer windows were designed with the firm's work habits in mind. "We sat down with the architect and, in talking about how we work, came up with these tables that tuck into the dormers to accommodate computer equipment," says Creative Director Gil Urick. "And we decided that even though we use the computer a lot, we wanted work tables where we could spread out and do thumbnails."

The workstations were built on-site from bent steel, with press-board countertops surrounded by a steel band. Like the rest of the space, the tables are solid—Bradley says they're so massive they probably can't be removed. The entire office is wired with a 10-Base T network that was installed fairly easily after the space was gutted.

A Smart Move

While many design firms hesitate to purchase a building for fear of mortgage expenses, Bradley says the move has helped to greatly improve the firm's bottom line. She expects to pay off the \$320,000 total purchase/



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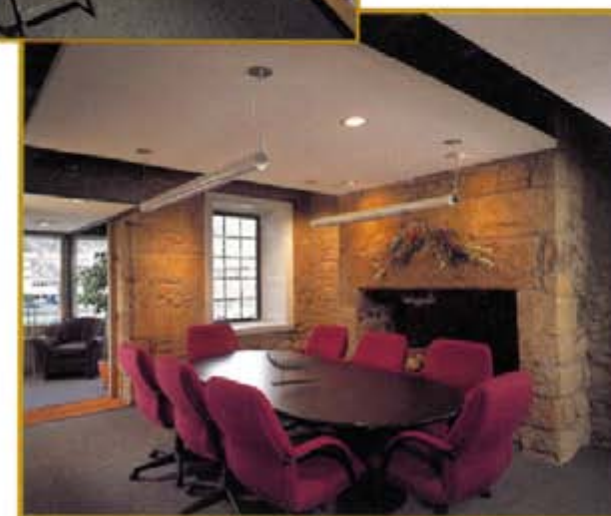
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Left: The design workstations nestled among the third-floor dormer windows accommodate computer equipment and worktables made of bent steel and pressboard countertops surrounded by a steel band. Principal Susie Bradley chose a neutral palette of gray, black and white for the studio's interior.

Right: One of several fireplaces dominates the first-floor conference room, the massive stone mantle a testament to the building's solidity. Bradley notes that the fireplace is wired to accommodate multi-media equipment (not yet installed) for client presentations.



renovation price in only eight to 10 years, and the firm's monthly overhead expenses have dropped 20% from its previous lease. The firm now pays a flat tax on the property value rather than on a sliding scale based on annual earnings, and the parking is free. "Most service businesses don't own anything but their computer equipment," Bradley says. "This move has enabled us to control our overhead and become more cost-competitive."

Rather than let clients wonder where they'd gone, the firm aggressively promoted its move with a three-part mailing to clients, competitors and suppliers. "We're very marketing- and PR-oriented," Conti says. "We sat down before the move and talked about the marketing of the building and discussed client reactions."

Not surprisingly, clients have eagerly followed Bradley Brown to Carnegie. In fact, the firm now hosts

more client meetings than ever before. "Being in this area reflects our personality—it's very relaxed," Bradley says. "This space has helped us distinguish ourselves from our competitors. It has become a real marketing tool for us." ■■■

HOW Contributing Editor Bryn M. Mooth is a St. Louis-based freelance writer specializing in design and business topics. madhoosier@aol.com; (314)227-6783.

Source Box

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Collaboration is the key to our success at Bradley Brown Design Group. We believe in working closely with our clients, seeking their input throughout the entire creative process. With this knowledge, we produce innovative solutions for each unique business challenge. Challenges representing a diverse range of local and regional industries—corporate, financial, high technology, health care, higher education, manufacturing, and nonprofit.

Years of collaborating with a wide variety of clients has made us what we are today—a client-focused, results-oriented creative firm.

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