

Not Your Standard Office Décor

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Rather than putting their own projects on display, some design firms are using communal areas in their offices to stage art exhibitions throughout the year.

By Jenna M. McKnight

When it comes to decorating their office walls, architects typically display images of their projects. But in the early days of Fox & Fowle (now FXFOWLE), the firm, launched in 1978, didn't have any completed buildings to show off. So cofounder Bruce Fowle enlisted his artist friends to hang their work in his budding Midtown office.



In the spring of 2010, FXFOWLE staged a show featuring the work of artist Elizabeth Langer. The gallery is booked through 2013. Photo courtesy of FXFOWLE.

More than three decades later, FXFOWLE has built award-winning structures around the globe, yet the company is still inviting artists to present their creations in its Manhattan headquarters. In fact, when the firm relocated to a larger space in 1986, it incorporated a room specifically designed for exhibitions. “We wanted an area dedicated to the work of artists,” says public relations director Brien McDaniel, who manages the firm’s in-office art program.

FXFOWLE now organizes four shows a year, each running about three months. “We have more applicants than we have room for,” says McDaniel, noting that the gallery is booked through early 2013. “A lot of people are interested, and it’s all by word of mouth.”

While corporations often own art collections, and while libraries and coffee shops commonly stage shows by fledgling artists, exhibitions are rarely hosted in private offices. But FXFOWLE is

one of a handful of U.S. firms that serve as venues for painters, photographers, sculptors, and other artists — both emerging and established — to exhibit their work. Generally, these shows are not widely advertised and are open to the public by appointment.

Organizers say the benefits are manifold: The art adds zing to the office and stimulates creativity among employees while also conveying the firm's enterprising spirit to visiting clients. For artists, the program offers a chance to show their work outside of their studios, a hard-to-come-by opportunity in cultural meccas like New York City. Some artists even make money off the venture. "We had a client from Japan in here one weekend," says McDaniel. "He stopped in the gallery on the way out, loved the work [by Linda Abbey], and bought six paintings." The watercolors, which featured Americana scenes, each sold for \$600 to \$700.

Gensler's Midtown Manhattan office introduced its art exhibition program in 2007, when it moved into a new space. (The company's San Francisco branch started a similar program in the 1980s.) To date, the New York outpost has presented 13 exhibitions, with pieces put on view in corridors, conference rooms, and the lobby. "We try to make the shows as different as possible," says design principal Mark Morton, who serves as curator. Past exhibitions have included a collection of images by students and faculty members from the New York-based International Center of Photography and a bold mural by the German artist Markus Linnenbrink. For each show, the firm prints a brochure, hosts a reception, and pays for delivery and installation of the artwork.

Recently on view at Gensler was *Adrift/Afloat*, a collection of diagrams, drawings, and sculptures by Stephen Talasnik. The Manhattan-based artist, whose abstract work is inspired by the "language of architecture and engineering," says it was his first time assembling a show for an office. "I'm usually in museums and galleries. But this is no insurance agency," he says of the design firm. "This was an opportunity to show my work in an incubation environment." Talasnik even created four site-specific sculptures for the Gensler show, including two skeletal, serpentine forms that hovered over separate conference tables.

In-office exhibitions aren't limited to the two coasts. In Denver, Roth + Sheppard relocated to a historic brick building in January, and at the center of the loftlike space is a long gallery framed by wood columns and sheer curtains. So far, the firm has staged two exhibitions there. One featured the work of University of Colorado architecture students.

The other, which stemmed from a design competition the firm helped organize, featured roughly 80 models and drawings of modern houses.

Principal Jeffrey Sheppard says they plan to host a show in their "Temenos Gallery" every few months. "Right now, we're putting together a photography exhibition," he says. "We want to see how the space works for art."

<http://archrecord.construction.com/news/2011/07/110701-Art-exhibitions-slideshow.asp?slide=3>