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Minimalism is
the new trend
in office design

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BUDGET GETTIN

Minneapolis-based advertising agency Preston Kelly chose a minimalist office design to emphasize its fiscal prudence, and other service-oriented companies are following suit in this down market.

By Sarah Brouillard

When ad men Chuck Kelly and Chris Preston hired Shea to design their new offices in northeast

Minneapolis, the assignment was straightforward: create a stylish space on a slim budget.

Shea's design professionals accepted the challenge with relish. Their low-cost alternatives for office walls, for example, included particleboard, concrete blocks and steel siding otherwise found on the outside of agricultural or industrial buildings. And while on the hunt for raw building materials, "we actually went to Home Depot," said Shea architect Gregory Houck.

The project, completed in early July 2008, saved up to 30 percent of the costs typically associated with a more conventional office design and build out.

"We want to be perceived as we truly are, and that is we watch our dollars like we watch our clients' dollars," said Kelly, president of the Preston Kelly advertising agency, whose former offices were in Edina. The firm's move into the historic Fire Barn building in Minneapolis also coincided with a name change, from Kerker to Preston Kelly.

In the past, companies regarded their headquarters as a showcase of success — whether that projection was true or not was beside the point. But times have changed. With a possible recession on the horizon, creative firms like Preston Kelly believe that one way to attract new clients — and perhaps reassure existing ones — is by demonstrating fiscal prudence. For them, that often means a minimalist approach to office design.

"I don't think success these days is equated to how much you're paying per square foot or

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PRESTON KELLY

Description: Employee-owned, full-service agency (formerly known as Kerker) that provides advertising, marketing, design and interactive services.

Location: Minneapolis

Founded: 1950

Leadership: Chuck Kelly (left), president; Chris Preston (right) Executive vice president and creative director. Scott Dahlgren, connections and media director.

Representative clients: HealthPartners, Minnesota Zoo, Piper Jaffray, YMCA.

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how many floors up you are in a building,” Kelly said. “There are different ways it’s measured. We think, quite honestly, our hard work speaks for us.”

Michael Nolan, studio director and vice president of Minneapolis-based SmithGroup, was not involved with the Preston Kelly project, but said his architecture firm frequently encounters projects where expectations are high but the budget is low. This doesn’t necessarily signal financial hardship — instead, it may be part of the larger mentality of scaling back that has taken hold across the country.


“I think you see more of [these projects] when the economy starts to slow,” Nolan said. “Leasing slows down, construction slows down. If people can put off a decision, they typically will. Or, they’re going to take smaller steps than they would if they were more confident in the future.”

Many creative firms, especially those in the communications and computer industries, desire a space that is more casual, collaborative and — most importantly — expresses their ingenuity.

While their budgets may be tight, companies are still asking designers not to compromise creativity. And spending less provides companies and their design team with an opportunity to express their brand in a unique, unconventional way, Nolan said.

In other cases, companies are simply letting their building speak for itself. If a project involves a historic or unusual location, many design professionals argue for preserving as much of the physical surroundings as possible.

“We want to make the most of the building’s assets rather than spend money that, really, the budget doesn’t have to conceal them,” Nolan said.



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— Chuck Kelly, president of Preston Kelly advertising agency in Minneapolis



However, applying a limited budget to a more traditional office space can have the opposite effect. Instead of a distinctive look, a company could instead wind up with cheap-looking results, Nolan said.

Preston Kelly's new 11,000-square-foot space not only used inexpensive materials, it is organized in an energy-efficient way to save money.

Instead of enclosed offices that require their own environmental controls and artificial lighting, the firm opted for semi-private rooms, where the walls rise only 8 feet high. Air conditioning, heating and ductwork in the ceiling thereby remain intact, Houck said.

Century-old features of the space were left alone. The company chose not to cover the concrete floors with a carpet or finish. Large cracks and pock marks in the floor were left exposed, helping to preserve the historic nature of the building.

The company did invest more heavily in one large conference room, which was built with a traditional design and includes carpeting and a lid for privacy and better acoustics. That area is used primarily for important face-to-face meetings with prospective and existing clients.

While Shea may not have made a huge profit from the Preston Kelly project (it generates its fee as a percentage of construction costs), there are still many advantages to Shea's participation, especially on the marketing front.

"We're not doing art for art's sake," said Kimberly Baldwin, an account manager with Shea. "We're creating stuff for businesses who have real business plans."

Nolan said low-budget projects are challenging yet rewarding for design professionals.

"Anybody can throw money at a project. Personally, I like [these kinds of projects] because I think they demand a more creative solution."

