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VOLUME 2 | ISSUE 6 | \$9.00
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Captured synergy

BY R. COLLINS

In 2016, two southeastern Michigan organizations—and the women spearheading their programs—merged efforts to complete an office design project emphasizing a Detroit-centric brand and, in the process, successfully embodied the best of the city's talent, drive, and restlessness for change.

The Skillman Foundation, a non-profit organization established in 1960 as a support system and voice for Detroit youth, and the architectural firm of Hannah-Neumann/Smith in Detroit, Michigan, redesigned both the physical offices of The Skillman Foundation and the ways in which the foundation's policy makers, office representatives, and child participants collaborate and induce change.

"We were intentional about [choosing]

a Detroit-based firm," said Maria Woodruff-Wright, vice president of operations and chief financial officer of The Skillman Foundation.

"We interviewed suburban firms who did good work, but ultimately felt that Hannah-Neumann/Smith would be best able to reflect our mission and deliver the vibrancy we were looking for," Woodruff-Wright added.

Hannah-Neumann/Smith is a Detroit-based architectural firm comprised of the independent offices of Neumann/Smith Architecture and Hannah & Associates, Inc. The latter, a woman-owned, Minority Business Enterprise, was founded in 1993 by Beverly Hannah Jones, AIA, to provide architectural, interior design, and construc-

tion services for an array of projects in the commercial, educational, and governmental sectors, among others. After collaborating on various projects together in Detroit for more than 15 years, the Hannah & Associates and Neumann/Smith Architecture offices combined during city's comeback to work both independently and jointly on revitalization projects.

The Skillman Foundation is a children's foundation built on the principle that Detroit's greatest asset—and its best chance at longevity and sustained growth—lies in its youngest generations. Initiatives like Teach 313, which was launched in partnership with the Detroit Children's Fund, aim to attract and retain exceptional teachers in Detroit's public schools; while Grow



Detroit's Young Talent, a youth employment initiative championed by the foundation, has grown to provide more than 8,000 Detroit youth with jobs each summer. Thus, the space in which the foundation's staff operates needed to reflect the positivity of the work being done.

Before the completion of the remodel and redesign project in April 2017, The Skillman Foundation's existing office space comprised two wings separated by a communal lobby, which belonged to the historic Talon Centre Drive building. Its space was weighted by opaque doors, walls, and a maze-like setup, which made close collaboration difficult to achieve in an efficient manner.

To address the infrastructural challenge, Jones knocked down the barriers to expose the office space to both outdoor light and a picturesque backdrop of the Detroit River beyond the gravel driveway. After leveling the single entrance door and sloped floors

in the foundation's West-wing-foyer, Jones cut space for windows on the river side and enlarged an adjacent hallway that would organically move the flow of traffic from the foyer into the gallery.

"We wanted to bring light into the office; we wanted the space to reflect the work that we do," Woodruff-Wright said. "We're a children's foundation focused on improving the lives of children in the city of Detroit. When we looked at our office space [initially] it did not reflect that."

To begin the process of making the West wing both visually appealing and representative of The Skillman Foundation's mission, Jones and Sarah Doornbos, interior designer at Hannah-Neumann/Smith, utilized preexisting features such as tall ceilings and doorways; potential to access natural light; and the foundation's original entry signage to satisfy project-based budget constraints, all the while breathing new life into well-

loved materials.

The foundation's lettering, cut in muted grey stainless steel, was laid atop a mural of multi-colored, wooden blocks hand-crafted in undulating patterns by seven young artists from Detroit. Woodruff-Wright said she can recognize the personality of each artist in different sections of the mural.

"We had local young and talented artists come in on weekends and use their design skills to lay out the blocks and put them together," Woodruff-Wright said. "That is really reflective of what we do; we wanted to incorporate art from the city and young people [into the space]."

After replacing walls with glass partitions set in the ceiling and framed in black steel to ground the new enclosures, the Hannah-Neumann/Smith team recycled original dark oak doors by adding simple side-lights. To compose the grantee room—a



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professional meeting hub just beyond the foyer—Jones and Doornbos used floor-to-ceiling glass walls in a zig-zag pattern, which was also framed on the short edge by concrete painted in jewel tones of green, indigo, honey, and red. It marked the perimeter and brought visitors on the outside of the room closer to the foundation's collective of contributed art work on the opposite wall.

Doornbos also leveraged LED canned lighting along the gallery hallway to highlight art work lining the off-white walls, creating a canvas-like effect and further enhancing the hallway's function as a gallery space. Blue accents were used throughout the West wing to bring different aspects of the complex floorplan together. Covering the entire floor space, commercial-grade block-style carpet in muted shades of blue and grey was installed to create continuity from the West to East wing, allowing for easy cleaning and replacement of different sections upon future wear.

Woodruff-Wright noted each finely-edited detail of the design—from the longevity of the carpet, to which specific countertops in the 16,000-square-foot space used blue quartz and which used laminate material—were a testament to Jones' and Doornbos' eye for strategic design and acute understanding of project scope. This project in particular, concerning a space dedicated just as much to youth as to growth, needed to yield a quiet energy and forward movement.

"Sarah [Doornbos] really captured that

energy just in the carpet—just in that one piece," Woodruff-Wright said.

In the East wing, which primarily housed offices, collaborative spaces, and a custom brick paver outdoor patio, Jones and Doornbos replaced individual office doors with glass and created a central hub of work stations framed by blue half-partitions by Steelcase. The work stations were complemented by rocking, backless buoy chairs by Turnstone, a Steelcase brand, and height-adjustable work tables to make daily work more adaptable.

Jones noted that since the design plans included re-positioning Skillman Foundation employees from private offices into the East wing of the building, the new work environment had to be engineered to support their work styles while encouraging new styles of close collaboration.

Private offices were customized with each occupant's choice of accent wall color and re-upholstered seating, complemented by new additions from Steelcase. Engaging and adaptive furniture—notably, a black and cream high-backed sofa lounge and multi-colored Mitt chairs by Bernhardt—were integrated into the open, collaborative area just beyond the work station hub to give the semi-traditional office wing a creative and vibrant finish.

Following 18 months of close work with Woodruff-Wright and several visioning sessions and interviews with office workers, Jones and Doornbos composed an office layout that would result in employees utilizing

the collaborative areas organically; a gradual process which Jones said was satisfying to watch.

"We really worked to listen to what they wanted and then incorporated that into a workable floorplan," Doornbos said.

For Woodruff-Wright, the stakes involved in overseeing an extensive remodel that satisfied the needs of the staff were high.

"I wanted to make our staff proud of the decisions we had made; I wanted our President and Board to be happy with the ultimate project; and I wanted our community to be able to utilize the space," Woodruff-Wright said. "We ended up with a space that is beautiful and highly functional. We partnered with the right firm."

In the end, the project culminated in a successful collaborative effort between Detroit youth, those generating change through the foundation, and two firms lead by influential women who hold the city's well-being as a top priority. The playful-yet-refined gallery spaces and many flexible collaborative units emphasize the synergetic flavor of the foundation's work as a key constituent in Detroit's continued growth.

"With every foundation, you have a different design response," Jones said. "It's important to our portfolio, because we are Detroit. If somebody asks 'what's your favorite project that you've done?' I'm always putting The Skillman Foundation in there somewhere. It's reflective of our [continued] commitment to the city."