

# Zehno Goes Zen

by Susan E. Davis



A focal point of Zehno's renovation is the dramatic staircase linking the two floors (ABOVE). To diffuse light streaming through the windows and set a tranquil tone, architect David Keiffer created a two-story, green-and-white translucent screen that also silhouettes the stairs' modernist sculptural form.

A wall of glass block in the building's interior courtyard (RIGHT) floods light into Zehno's space and other offices in the complex.



Designing a tranquil, spacious work environment helped this Crescent City firm foster both individual and group creativity. An unexpected bonus: It also promoted Zehno's business.

**W**ho says a design office has to be hectic? Wouldn't an atmosphere of zen-like calm and peacefulness be more conducive to creativity? That's what Zehno Cross Media Communications principals Kathy Cain and Paulette Hurdlik sought when they renovated a new duplex office in lakeside New Orleans in 1999.

"Zen was the concept for the office—quiet, airy, lots of light," Hurdlik says. Formerly squeezed into 2,600 sq.ft., the firm's 15 staffers (all but one of them women) responded positively to the spacious, sunny 6,000sq.ft. office. "It's not a big surprise that productivity levels soared immediately after we moved," Hurdlik adds.

Cain and Hurdlik know what it's like to be cramped. After meeting as colleagues in Tulane University's design department, they founded their firm, then called Design Partners, in 1984 with two drawing tables pushed together in Hurdlik's living room. Ready to expand by 1987, they got a great deal on space in a recently reno-





Zehno uses the second-floor patio outside its office (ABOVE) for crayfish boils and viewing Mardi Gras parades. A "Zehnotron" in the lobby (RIGHT) welcomes clients to the office. The custom-designed kiosk, featuring the Zehno (a hybrid of zebra and rhino), houses a video display featuring the firm's Web site.

vated 1918 building (originally a hotel) in the up-and-coming warehouse district near the 1984 New Orleans World's Fair site. Nine years later they were bursting at the seams, with no adjacent space to grow into. After searching for three years for other real estate, the partners decided they still liked their current home—albeit with more space and modifications. So they recruited two other small businesses to purchase their building in 1999. The three owners occupy about two-thirds of the 21,000 sq.ft.; they lease the remaining space, and that rental income helps pay the mortgage. The group hired Wettermark + Keiffer Architects to renovate the space.

"I made it a habit to inquire whenever I saw a creative architectural solution that I liked. Wettermark + Keiffer's name came up more than any other," Hurdlik says. "Their work impressed us because they used innovative materials and were sensitive to the user's needs without compromising style." In fact, the two firms worked so cooperatively that Hurdlik describes their relationship as "participatory architecture."



#### A CALMING BACKDROP

Solving a major problem—a two-story bank of windows across the back wall—set the tranquil tone. Though each window opens, providing lots of inspiring fresh air, sunshine and views of the cityscape, the light cast a blinding glare on computer screens. So architect David Keiffer hung a giant translucent green-and-white fiberglass wall to filter the light coming through the windows.

"During the day, the natural light is diffused and the space is flooded with an ethereal, almost reverent quality of light," says Keiffer, who attached the panels to a maple frame with exposed fasteners. "After sunset, the panels are backlit with wall-washing floodlamps, producing a theatrical glow. The quality

## ENCOURAGING COLLABORATION

Zehno principal Kathy Cain stresses that "Zehno's open office design makes us more likely to brainstorm, bounce ideas off of each other and ask for opinions. All of our designers have such different strengths. For example, Rod has an architecture and design education background, while Karen, who sits right next to him, draws on extensive experience in journalism and information organization. They approach things from different perspectives. And out of that, creativity flows."

Some of architect David Keiffer's solutions promote communication in a purposefully wide-open space:

- 1. Common worktables.** A minimal partition between each pair of offices ends in a worktable that enables staff members to consult on projects.
- 2. "Communion windows."** Small framed openings between partitions help staff communicate without leaving their individual spaces.
- 3. Reference center.** Staffers gather at the curved focal point of the duplex to do research and use light tables. The huge custom-designed desk, with bookshelves around the outside, functions as the office hub.
- 4. Minimal privacy for principals.** Although each of the two principals has a private office—one above the other on different floors—the spaces have glass walls and doors. Cain says that promotes maximum art direction. "I'm a great multitasker: If I'm on the phone with a client, I can look at a designer's monitor across the room and send an email asking why she's using all lowercase for a job for a different client."
- 5. Interior stairs.** Though situating a set of stairs within the duplex took up valuable room, it facilitates communication between and provides access to communal areas—the reference center on the lower floor and the kitchen on the upper floor.





To accommodate the needs of staff members who like to work both individually and collaboratively, Keiffer devised workstations that are both open and private. "The partitions were designed as screen walls constructed with white translucent fiberglass panels mounted on a simple wood framework similar to the main screen wall," says Keiffer, who kept them as low and minimal as possible. "A common reference table built into the end cap of each partition was designed to support teamwork and staff communication. That was also the reasoning behind the 'confessional window' within each partition." The overall aim was to keep the office as open and spacious as possible.

A central atrium linking the two floors helped achieve that objective as well, although Keiffer points out that it was necessary to sacrifice "valuable, leasable floor area" in the process. But that didn't worry Cain and Hurdlik. The staircase that Keiffer designed to link the two floors provides a strong sculptural element, as does the large curved reference/resource area on the lower floor.

The partners also wanted to indulge their penchant for whimsy, so they hired movie-set designer Dave Kelsey to create a ZehnoTron for the reception area (a computer kiosk that shows images from the Zehno Web site) and the "Kitchen Lady" (a 2D life-size plywood waitress holding a 3D metal tray with assorted remedies like aspirin and chewing gum).

A major constraint in the six-month renovation was the \$300,000 budget. But Keiffer says that actually turned into a benefit because it prompted him to choose materials wisely. "We had to work hard to find inexpensive or common industrial materials and use them in very detailed and refined applications," he says. "This forced us to be very clear about what the design goals were and to evaluate the effectiveness of our solution. The choice of materials and finishes also helped to communicate a straightforward, no-nonsense approach to design common to Zehno's philosophy."



The curved reference and research desk (ABOVE), custom-designed by Keiffer, is the hub around which the lower floor circulates. Note that a communal table (LEFT) was built between workstations to enhance communication and collaboration between designers.

of light in the room changes with the angle of the sun, giving the whole space a sense of movement and time you can feel. We selected fiberglass panels with small filaments suspended within, so the texture gives them a natural, almost organic quality."

Other design solutions contributed to the calm. Keiffer spec'ed simple materials for the eight built-in workstations, conference room, two principals' offices, reference center and interior stairs: glass, wire mesh, steel plate,

maple trim and more translucent panels. These natural finishes contrast with splashes of blue, green and violet, which serve as accents against white walls. For instance, the cushioned seats on the metal chairs in the conference room are bright purple; the table is pale green glass. The only dark element—the blue/green carpeting—grounds and unifies the space, while echoing the pattern of the wire mesh. "Our office is designed to be a lot like a gallery—it's a background for our work," Cain says.





Simple materials—such as glass with wooden framing—were used throughout the space to keep it as open, accessible, straightforward and calm as possible. Splashes of color (including chair upholstery and carpeting) provide contrast.

#### A PROFESSIONAL STATEMENT

The office conveys that businesslike message by design, and clients clearly respond. “The size and professionalism of the space give our larger out-of-town clients comfort because it demonstrates that our level of service is institutionalized—it runs throughout the business,” Hurdlik says. “We’ve put our money where our mouth is in a way that’s appropriate for our client base.”

But the client base has changed since the renovation. Zehno is one of the largest studios between Houston and Atlanta, with clients in a variety of fields, including education. In 2000, the partners decided to focus solely on education in order to promote marketing efficiency and penetration. Seeing the growing role of the Web in that niche, they added a Web division. To pinpoint the new comprehensiveness of their services in both digital and print, they coined the name Zehno Cross Media Communications.

“I made up Zehno—it’s a hybrid of zebra and rhino,” says Hurdlik, who converted her 1995 Mazda Miata into a four-wheeled incarnation of the creature. (The horned, yellow-and-black striped vehicle, designed by Kelsey, was featured in *HOW*, August 2002, p. 24.) “Each zebra has unique markings, and

rhinos wallow in the mud. That fits us because we create distinctive products for each client and really enjoy a creative mudbath.”

Clients like Columbia University School of Social Work, Columbia Business School, Population Action International and the Graduate Management Admission Council appreciate Zehno’s expertise. In fact, in 2002 Zehno won two gold awards for communications work produced by colleges and universities from the Council for Advancement and Support of Education. The judges found their viewbook for the Columbia MBA program “bright, contemporary, energetic, informative, engaging—hits all the right notes. Now, whoever said MBAs were dull?”

Although Zehno’s workplace aesthetic may be zen, the office can’t escape its vibrant New Orleans roots. An outdoor patio on the building’s second floor is used for spring crawfish boils and viewing Mardi Gras parades. “Our out-of-town clients love to come to our offices to work with us,” Cain says. “We take them to our favorite restaurants—just steps away. We even take them to get their own inventory of voodoo candles to give their offices in Washington and New York just a little bit of that New Orleans flavor.” **HOW**

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Zehno Cross Media Communications is a stop on the New Orleans Studio Tour, part of the *HOW* Design Conference, June 5–8. [www.howconference.com](http://www.howconference.com)

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