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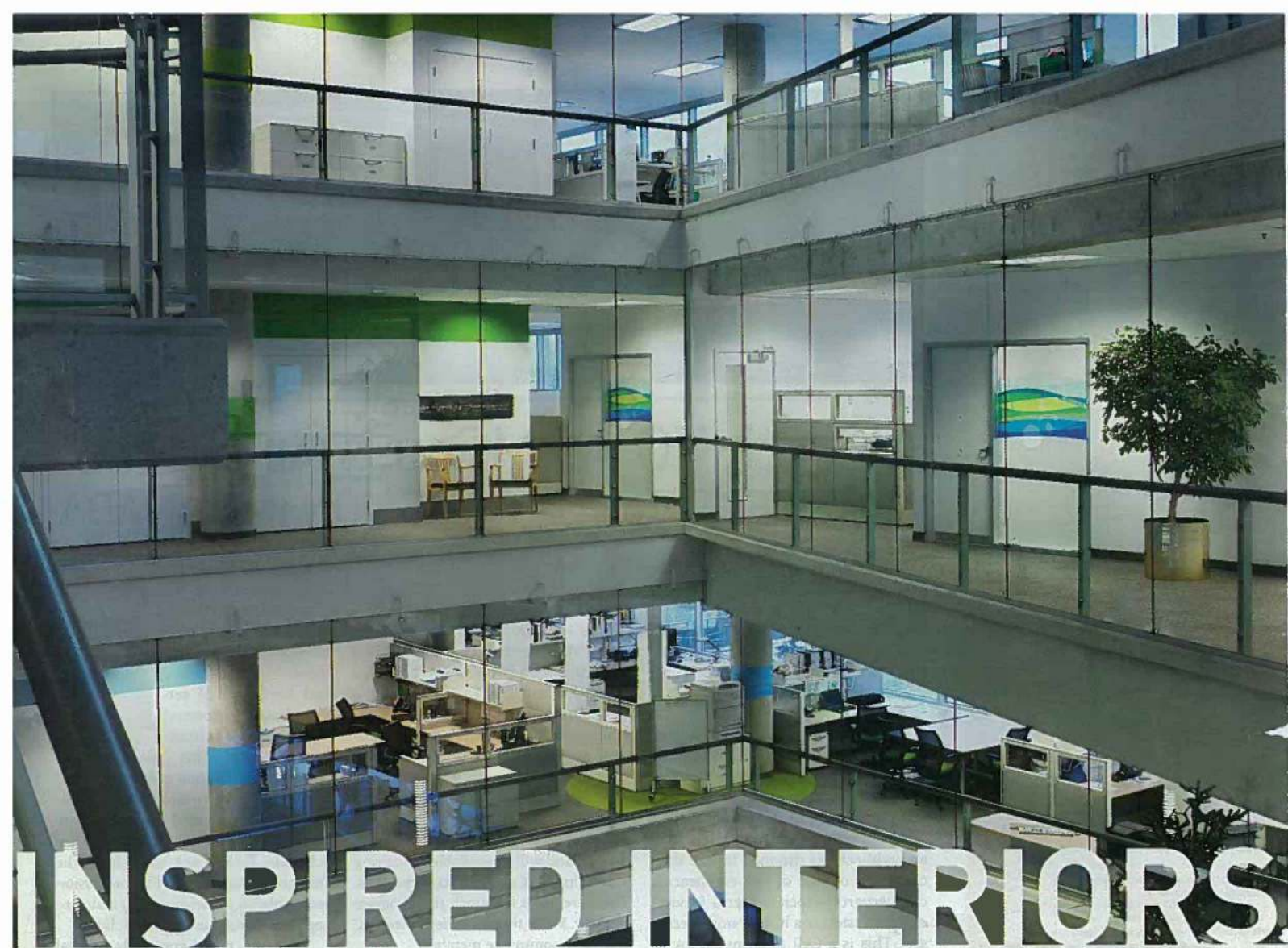
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Seeton Shinkewski
Design Group

INSPIRED
INTERIORS



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Seeton Shinkewski Design Group

by Sonu Purhar

The first noticeable feature at the entry to the sleek Vancouver office of Seeton Shinkewski Design Group (SSDG) is the boardroom: the imposing workspace is front and centre, taking the place of what would normally be a reception desk. Its wide-open doors reveal a massive conference table cluttered with tile samples, catalogues and blueprints. One pastel-hued wall is covered entirely with framed awards that SSDG has earned in its nearly 30 years of operation; another displays computer-generated images of resorts, restaurants and offices – future projects in the making. The commanding picture window offers a glimpse of trees and bushes on a busy street's meridian: downtown greenery at its finest.

When it comes to interior design, first impressions are everything.

"People form an immediate opinion when they open a door and walk into a space," says Keath Seeton, one of SSDG's three principals. "It takes only a matter of seconds to make a positive first impression." He motions to the boardroom. "And that's what we do here. We help clients create that good impression."

Seeton and co-principal Susan Steeves are walking examples of this philosophy. There's no question that Steeves, wearing a chic leopard print skirt and suede boots, and Seeton, in head-to-toe black accessorized with stylish glasses, are a creative pair. They exude both sophistication and casual professionalism – a reflection of the business ethic that has kept their company among the city's top design firms for nearly three decades.

The company was formed in 1979 as Seeton Shinkewski Design Group, a small New Westminster-based startup specializing in office design, and headed by business partners and fellow University of Manitoba alumni Keath Seeton and Gerry Shinkewski. It wasn't long before the pair decided to diversify their client base, taking on projects that included hotels and spas, showrooms and retail stores. To accommodate the resulting growth and expansion of what had fast become a thriving business, the partners hired

additional staff and relocated to the bustling business core of downtown Vancouver. Steeves became the firm's third partner in 1996.

Today, SSDG provides interior design consultation services for a range of commercial sectors, including hospitality, offices and retail. In addition to the three principals, the company's 22 employees consist of designers, technicians and support staff, all of whom work together to guide clients through a comprehensive process that involves everything from conceptual planning and liaising with suppliers and contractors to overseeing installation and construction of the final design.

The combination of so many personalities and job roles in this modest one-storey space seems to work, if the office's vibrant yet relaxed atmosphere is any indication. There are no closed-off workstations – even the partners



clients, the firm's designers take time to explore and fully understand the personal history, resources and motivation of the company, as well as the image it hopes to communicate to customers, the community or its own employees. Depending on the size and scope of the project, a single designer or design team is then assigned to sift through the information and generate custom design concepts that enhance and promote

work out in the open – which sustains the collaborative and accessible ethos that has become a trademark of many SSDG designs. And though the office might appear purely esthetic upon first glance, with its trendy kitchen, chocolate-coloured walls and glass partitions, the space has been carefully designed to communicate a specific image to potential clients. Though we often claim that appearance isn't everything, the look of a workplace, spa or restaurant can make all the difference to prospective staff or customers – and that's why hiring the right interior designer can be crucial to a company's potential for success. For SSDG professionals, creating an atmosphere that is both suitable and beneficial for a client is a meticulous process that starts with one key ingredient: a story.

During initial consultations with

the client's brand. In subsequent sessions, materials, finishes and sketches are produced and discussed, and a working concept is developed, honed and finalized – all with the client's input and approval. "The companies that come to us are striving to be successful, or more successful than they already are," Seeton explains. "And by shaping the environment they're looking for, we facilitate that desire."

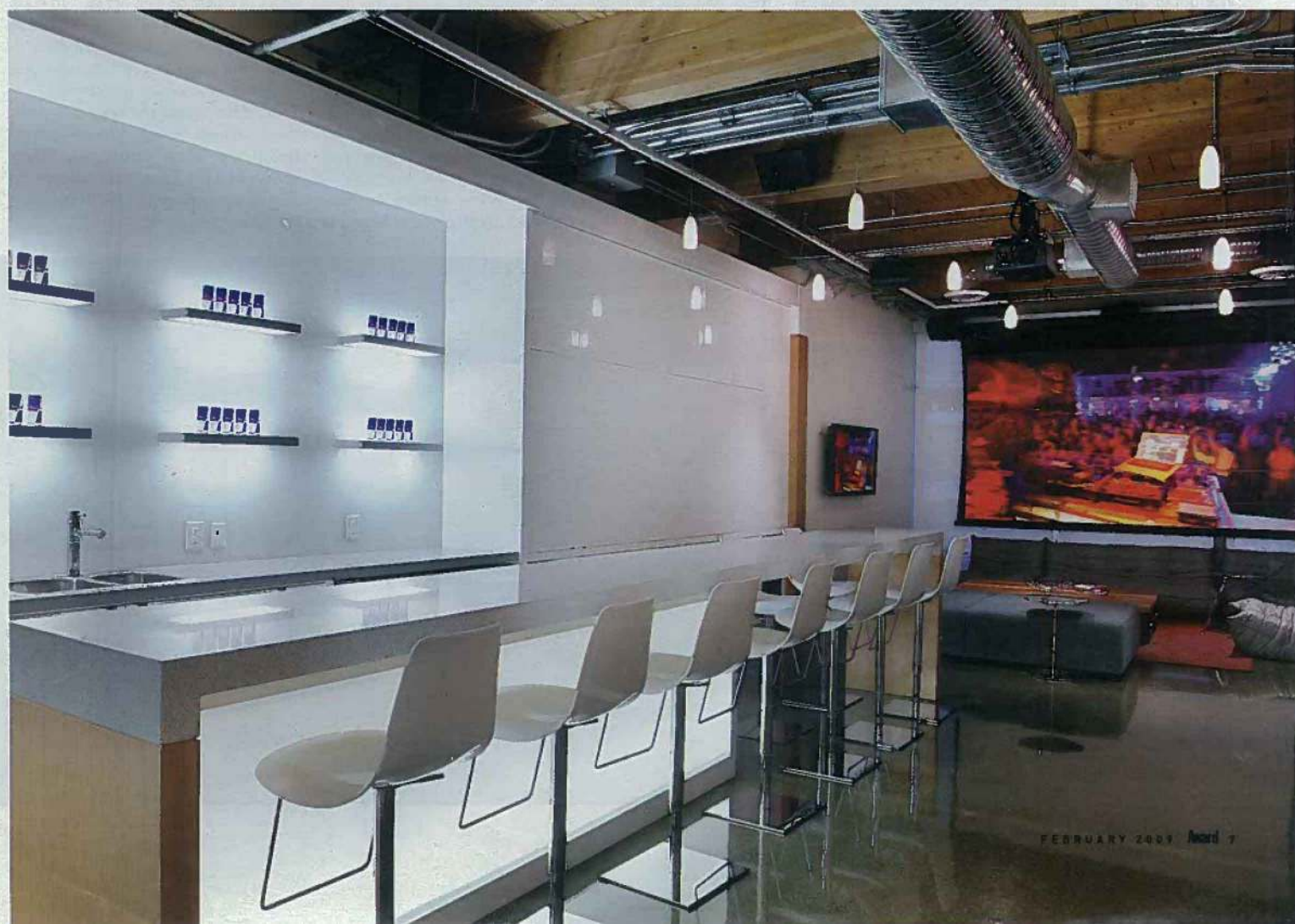
Creating and executing design concepts can be a complex process, especially with SSDG's requisite that every space it designs must be functional, esthetically pleasing and cost-effective, while showcasing the business's unique identity. But adhering to stringent standards such as these is precisely why SSDG stands out from other firms in the industry. Steeves puts it simply: "Successful companies are about people." She pauses, no doubt contemplating her own company's success. "There are a lot of good designers in this city, in this country, on the continent," she says. "At the end of the day, though, it comes down to building relationships and trust with your clients. It's having fun working on projects, and wanting to get out of bed and come to work. All of those things make us a company that other people want to work with."

The design group's portfolio boasts a diverse mix of industries and enterprises, with projects running the gamut from award-winning to innovative to simply enjoyable. The IBM and VANOC 2010 offices, for example, which were completed in 2001 and 2007, respectively, each received an IDIBC (Interior Designers Institute of B.C.) Award of Excellence. The IBM design also placed in *Canadian Interiors Magazine's* 2001 Best of Canada Competition.

Earlier this year, SSDG was awarded LEED Gold certification for the VANOC 2010 building, making it the first Olympic venue to receive the honour. Thanks in part to a design that seamlessly integrates function and beauty, the seven-storey highrise was also granted the National Design Exchange Award. SSDG designed the VANOC offices to promote teamwork and flexibility – both hallmarks of the Olympic games – with work pods organized in small groups and portable walls that can be easily rearranged. A winter theme is integrated throughout: glossy concrete flooring resembles sheets of ice and tiny backlit "coves" made of white resin look like snow.

More recently, the firm helped to fashion a contemporary office space for the Fraser River Port Authority.

Below: Red Bull staff lounge. Opposite page and inset: VANOC 2010 building, all Vancouver, B.C.





"It was a fun project, and challenging. We took great imagery from the Fraser River," Seeton recalls. The design includes an entrance area shaped like a nautical compass, a panel of security cameras that resembles the console of a ship's hull, and abundant use of materials like grey tile and fir veneer to symbolize the river's ecological environment. "All of these projects are memorable not just for the design spaces," says Seeton, "but because of the lasting relationships we forged with clients."

In addition to the welcome variety and fresh challenges that an industry-spanning client base affords, Seeton stresses that this "cross-pollination" will also play a key role in dealing with the current global financial crisis. Because SSDG caters to such a range of companies, the impact of poor economic conditions in one sector isn't likely to curtail business in others. The company has seen and survived many fluctuations in the market throughout the last three decades, and Seeton, Shinkewski and Steeves are confident in facing any obstacles that present and future changes in the economy might bring.

Clockwise from below: EvelineCharles Salons and Spas; Fraser River Port Authority offices; Crown Wallpaper and Fabrics; Seeton Shinkewski Design Group studio space. All Vancouver, B.C.



In fact, the firm is steadily forging ahead, with several projects currently on the drawing board. One notable endeavour is the multimillion-dollar Sparkling Hill Resort & Wellness Hotel in Vernon, a landmark luxury resort slated to open in winter of 2009; a trail system will link the property to nearby Predator Ridge Golf Resort, the interior of which is also an SSDG creation. Another high-profile venture is the Terminal City Club, a private business retreat in the heart of downtown Vancouver. With renovations of the clubhouse recently completed, SSDG is now focused on the Club's hotel. A significant ongoing project is the renovation of the CBC's offices and newsroom; perhaps in validation of the importance the firm places on building lasting relationships with its clients, SSDG has been working closely with the news conglomerate for nearly ten years.

Solidifying the firm's already well-established reputation is its unpretentious commitment to environmental sustainability. While many firms boast about their green standards, SSDG quietly introduces sustainable design practices whenever it is practical and feasible for the client. "There are so many things that can be integrated naturally," points out Steeves, who is LEED-accredited. "It doesn't have to be with great fanfare. We're not the ones running with the torch in front so much as quietly going about our business, and that includes using sustainable design practices wherever possible." Despite its longstanding prosperity, the secret behind SSDG's many achievements – its dozen-plus awards, loyal clientele and solid reputation – is deceptively simple: "Ultimately, it comes down to the people," says Steeves. "Our designers respect one another and work well together, which I think comes from a real genuine care for individuals. That's really the fundamental part of a successful office."

"My father said that when you choose a career, or whatever you do in life, choose something that you're happy to



go to every morning," Seeton adds. "For me, interior design is just a wonderful profession. There are different projects and challenges every day." He pauses to reflect, as if looking back 30 years to where he first began. "To walk into a space that you've had a hand in designing and know that your client is in a much better position because of it... it's really cool. It's great."

So what about the next 30 years? "We're always looking for new and interesting projects," Seeton says. "We're always looking for new and interesting people to work with. We'll see what the future brings." ■

