



Yamamoto visually welcomes visitors with black-and-white photos of the staff hanging from red bungee cords. (Staff photo: Bill Klotz)

## Yamamoto yearned for well-lit space

By: Nancy Crotti March 19, 2014 6:50 am 0

In a way, life at Minneapolis advertising agency Yamamoto's old office paralleled a couple of familiar British TV sagas — "Downton Abbey" and "Upstairs, Downstairs."

It's not that some staffers were considered superior to others, but they were split between two floors at 252 First Ave. N., hindering collaboration, the hallmark of a creative agency. The only significant natural light entered through

east-facing windows, further dimming the creative spark. Thirty years in a space that was last remodeled in 1994 further inspired the desire to move.

"We made that all work, but everyone really craved a much more open, well-lit space," said Yamamoto CEO Kathy McCuskey.

Yamamoto seized the opportunity to move after Miranda Moss, a former principal in the agency, sold 242, 248 and 252 First Ave. to developer Peter Remes and his First & First LLC in 2012.

Working with broker Colliers International and developer The Ackerberg Group, the agency found space on the second floor of the Northwestern Building in the city's North Loop. It's a century-old, 85,000-square-foot former glass factory at 219 N. Second St.

At 12,000 square feet, the new office is one-third smaller than the old one but has much more usable space. The agency also has plenty of large windows and stunning city views, thanks to a remodel by Minneapolis-based RJM Construction. Betsy Vohs, senior associate at the architecture firm Gensler, designed the interior with sensitivity to the building's historic status.

The office formerly housed Fischer Edit, an editorial, video and audio production company. "They had a terrific-looking space," building owner and restaurateur John Rimarcik said of his previous tenant. "They didn't need the light and didn't have the light that (Yamamoto has) now. With the new windows and the removal of some interior walls, it's opened up tremendously."

There were some tradeoffs, however. To preserve the historic integrity of the building's interior, Vohs employed modular walls of faux-frosted glass and sliding walnut doors to form workrooms and offices along the inside perimeter. Each room has a name inspired by an influential idea-maker: Steve Jobs, Walt Disney, Jim Henson and even Tina Fey.

The floor's semi-divided layout challenged but did not defeat the agency's goal of collaboration. Visitors entering from the elevator may turn right to the creative team's section, or left to find the leadership, strategic and accounting teams.

Hindrances to collaboration halt there. Individual workspaces include cushioned benches that invite employees to confab. So do a 16-foot-long, high and narrow table with barstool-style seating and a pair of black metal flat-file cabinets newly topped with wood. Just off the lobby, the agency chose to eschew artwork and instead use the bare walls to display ideas, either on paper or on a large screen.

"I think it's important when you design for creative agencies, you balance the architecture and their work," Vohs said. "It's not about unnecessary uses of color and design elements. This has to be a space where they create."

Vohs made judicious use of Yamamoto's signature color, red, in seating and on walls. A wall that flanks the elevator serves as an enormous pegboard where staff and visitors can use giant red rubber bands to create geometric patterns or spell words. Red frames the frosted glass wall to the formal conference room.

Color makes bolder statements in a pair of murals created by Minneapolis illustrator Adam Turman. Riffing off the translation of firm founder Hideki Yamamoto's last name ("base of the mountain" in Japanese), Turman drew a pyramid-like mountain with yellow light blazing from the top. A red-shirted man at the base brandishes a red banner, poised to lead the climb. The 13-by-18-foot mural covers the freestanding wall that separates the kitchen from the rest of the office.

"It's the idea that Yamamoto is the leader of their clients," Turman said. "(With) their design, they want to take their clients to a new level."

The combined kitchen/conference area offers 600 square feet of informal space to meet and eat, fulfilling another agency goal — hospitality. Sunny goldenrod ceramic tile covers a wall that holds dark-wood kitchen cabinets above and businesslike gray laminate ones below. Twin dishwashers and refrigerators, a pair of microwaves, a wall-mounted TV and treat dispensers lend an eclectic homelike feeling.

"We love for people to come in here and hang out," said Darryl Kluskowski, chief creative officer.

The agency visually welcomes visitors with a wall leading to the conference room. Black-and-white photos of the smiling staff hang from red bungee cords below the proclamation, "We have a great idea" in black type.

This décor is temporary, but the statement is a Yamamoto motto. Its 25 clients include health care, finance, consumer electronics, candy, beer and technology companies. It works in television, radio, outdoor, digital, print and mobile advertising.

"Every day, we as a collective group of people, are very idea-driven," McCuskey said.

Turman created the character of "Lady Yamamoto," an Art Nouveau-style illustration, for a mural on the strategic/leadership/accounting side of the office. He drew the woman, whose face is surrounded by red, yellow and orange leaves, blowing red leaves (representing ideas) from her outstretched palm across a forest of birch trees that span the rest of the wall.

McCuskey wouldn't let her staff of 35 see the new office until move-in day, Dec. 6, 2013. They offered a champagne breakfast to celebrate the space that McCuskey said aligns with the agency's brand and its process. Then they could get down to work, uninterrupted by the upstairs, downstairs trek.

"Now you walk in here and it feels like Yamamoto," Vohs said. "I see whimsy right away. I see who these people are. You see the murals. You see the life."

"It's an awesome space. I love it here," Kluskowski said.

"I love that you guys love it," Vohs replied.

"We're really proud of it," McCuskey said. "We love to be here. We love to have our clients over."

See below for a slideshow of Yamamoto's offices by F&C staff photographer Bill Klotz:



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