

Blue Ridge Region offices that work

Here's a look at some of the stylish and some not-so-stylish offices in the region that work as they were intended

BY DAN SMITH AND
CATHARINE SHAW-GALLANT

A considerable portion of our lives are spent at work and how we fit into that space has a lot to do with the quality of our work and the quality of our lives.

This is a look at how some businesses in the region have approached the challenge of furnishing a work place that gets the most from their employees and for their clients and customers.

Danny Goins President, The Highlands Group

Roanoke

The minute Danny Goins saw what Bob Fetzer had done with the dilapidated old house on Day Avenue three years ago, he knew that's where his office was moving. "We were out in a standard business park (in Roanoke County) and wanted to get downtown, so we could be part of that culture and because it was a lot more convenient." Fetzer's creation made the move irresistible.

Not only is Goins' The High-



Dan Smith

Roanoke's The Highlands Group has plenty of room in a small space

lands Group of architects, land planners and interior designers settled into an inviting and open space — contrary to what you'd think possible in an 800-square-foot area, accommodating five people — but there is close proximity to vendors, consulting engineers and clients.

Fetzer is president of Building Specialists and owns both the building housing The Highlands Group and a refurbished business location next door (Fetzer's own business is

in the building with the Highlands Group, which has the top floor). The former attic has vaulted ceilings, open work spaces, windows that open, an entryway within its entryway and work spaces that can be individualized (and have been).

"We are connected to the environment," says Goins, "and that is important to us. This is a dynamic space in volume and form" and "it contributes to our practice." The connection to the environment — and that means

both the cityscape and the mountains in the distance — "is stimulating," says Goins. "It generates creativity and opens minds. The space promotes a professional attitude and environment, but it feels like home."

Howard Packett President, The Packett Group Roanoke

"We were in the back end of a warehouse before we moved here and I said to Cecil Edmonds, 'I gotta have a window.'" What Howard Packett got from his late partner was a window on the world, overlooking Jefferson Street in downtown Roanoke in one direction and the operations of the largest advertising agency west of Richmond in the other.

His windows — floor-to-ceiling, wall-to-wall — and the open spaces inside the offices (occupying 7,000 square feet on two floors and a mezzanine, but only 33 feet wide) at The Packett Group speak volumes about a creative business peopled with individualists who like their space, but who like to see what's going on around them. "We encourage individuality," says the ex-Marine Packett, who adds, "but I'm Mr. Neat, so I have a rule

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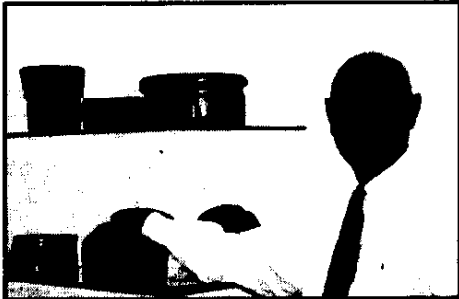
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that you can't build or put anything above the walls. That way the view of the office is unimpeded." The walls go about two thirds of the way to the ceiling in most of the building,

adding to the open spaces look and even the conference room — that inner sanctum where privacy is often sacred — has a wall of glass looking out onto the reception area.

Much of the furniture in the building was built by a creative genius of the old school of craftsmanship named Norman Ronk, and the wood appointments in the remodeled building (it had been a women's department store, where hats were made on premises — some of the hat molds decorate various corners) are the work of Building Specialists in Roanoke.

The interior and furniture were designed by a couple of young hotshots, Jean Feltner and Sue Thompson (now a partner with



Howard Packett shows hat molds

Barrows).

"I think we were probably ahead of our time with the architectural concepts," says Packett. "Cecil actually had more to do with this than I did. We flew to New York and looked at some of the small agencies, then

consulted architectural digest, but Cecil had a lot of the ideas."

But the windows were Packett's. "It's great to

sit up here and watch what's going on on the street. People wave. When kids come up you wind up with finger prints on the windows." Just like at home.

**Don Manning
Principal, The Greenwood
Partnership
Lynchburg**

This architectural and engineering firm ("big 'E,' little 'A,' with advanced computer technology," emphasizes Manning) renovated the

1864 granite bank building in downtown Lynchburg that the company has occupied since 1989.

The environment is meant to stimulate creativity and innovation in the open, convenient mazes that feature small conference centers for team collaboration. The vision was to work in a building that would attract, recruit and draw clients into an atmosphere where they are at the top of the food chain.

A massive bank vault has become a library; the second floor features an expansive formal conference room and the top floor has the Jefferson stained glass dome crowning the charming structure.

The furnishings are formal and lush, reflecting the surrounding business district.

**Alex Bowman
Partner, Anderson & Reed**



Don Manning at old vault

Roanoke

"There's not much exciting about a CPA firm," Alex Bowman shrugs, as he surveys the spacious offices surrounding him. The 14,000-square-foot, two-story (plus basement) Georgian structure on Franklin Road sits at the edge of historic Old Southwest and, frankly, is exciting, if having enough room to do your work in comfort gets the juices flowing.

First of all, it is a beautiful building that

fits into its fashionably aged surroundings as if it were a contemporary of the lovely old buildings, which now house law offices, corporation headquarters and other high-profile business ventures. Inside is that vaunted CPA practicality, punctuated by plenty of space to spread paper. Offices are roomy in the right places, without necessarily being large.

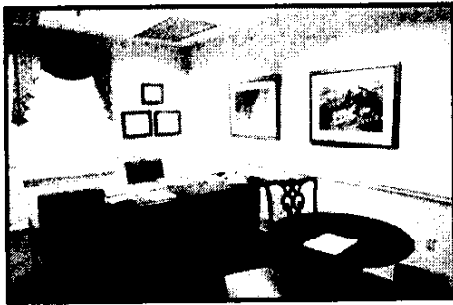
Getting the place built was a challenge, considering the layers of ap-

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proval (from the Old Southwest Neighborhood Alliance to various government agencies) Anderson & Reed had to go through just to put the building up. The watchdogs of our heritage nixed some features (the now defunct Horner and Associates de-



Alex Bowman's spacious CPA office

signed the building), including large windows that Bowman would have liked.

But the office spaces fall together in a logical, classy fashion that gives the feel of something important happening inside. "It's a lot easier to work when you have room and the things you need are close around," says Bowman. "We needed room to sit and talk with clients and places to put stuff."

Mark Borel President, Borel Construction Company Lynchburg

Mark Borel and his wife, Shay, did a great deal of the interior design work in converting an 1860s-era wagon factory into their office and home in the downtown business district of Lynchburg.

Craddock Cunningham Architectural Partners was charged with converting the 7,000 square feet of space, reminiscent of the New York lofts of the 1970s and 1980s, into the unique home-office. The complex has a private three-car parking garage, which accommodates

even a company truck, and a small, charming balcony over the back so Shay can get fresh air without going to the ground level.

Appointments range from Mark Borel's taste for traditional hunt cup horse pictures to Shay's contemporary preferences for comfortable sitting areas, full work-out and tanning room, two-floor iron curved staircase and children's rooms. This represents a secure inner-city lifestyle of

the 1000s, one that downtown planners in Roanoke and Lynchburg believe are important to the future of the downtowns in the region's largest cities.

Between the ample office and home spaces are 2,000 square feet of recreational and entertainment area, equipped with bar and ping pong table. The areas reflect vision, innovation and functional romantic creativity.

Pat Shaffner CEO, Chairman, SFCS Roanoke

What is essentially a pieced-together-over-time work space has become a showpiece for downtown Roanoke. Sherertz Franklin Crawford and Shaffner, an architectural and engineering firm, has put together what were once five buildings in three phases, creating functional work spaces with elegant executive and first-impression spaces.



Borel's historic exterior

This job, says Pat Shaffner, taught the principals a lesson from the consumer's point of view, as well: just because you can draw it, doesn't mean you can afford it. "We had this beautiful \$30,000 glass stairway, but we scrapped it and went with cherry," he laughs. But the huge marble table in the conference room? "Some things aren't what I'd call real prudent," says Shaffner, smiling.

But there is enough finery, preservation of the old and practicality to impress even the most demanding of clients. The metal pan ceiling and the upper parts of the historic buildings were returned to their original splendor, but the street-level facade was given a contemporary block and bolt look and the inside was made dramatic with color, soft light and plenty of room. "We demonstrated we could take the old building and mix the new with the old and be successful," says Shaffner.

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who will retire in the near future and give the reigns over to Greg Jones. The buildings were combined and



President Greg Jones, Pat Shaffner at SFCS

expanded in 1982 and 1984. Then, for the final expansion, SFCS rented another space for eight months and brought all the elements together.

Individual space had once been a priority, but technological advances has decreased its immediacy. Those huge plans are now contained in computer screens and printed in a different area of the building. Still, because the work force values its individuality and its comfort, the offices are designed with that in mind. "People spend so much time at work that they need to be comfortable there," emphasizes Shaffner. Competition for good workers figures in, as well, because "it's a buyer's market (for employees)," says Shaffner. "It behooves us to give them what they want and need to be happy."

The offices "are part of who we are; they show what we can design," says Shaffner. "Larry Davidson (owner of Davidsons, a regional men's store) is not going to work in an old, beat-up suit. (The look of the office) is important."

Ken Anderson
President, Anderson & Associates

Blacksburg
Ken Anderson readily admits that few will consider his offices in the

former — and greatly expanded — suburban ranch-style house artificially genteel or ostentatious, but Anderson's an engineer and the offices reflect practicality.

This is your basic 24X40-foot ranch that has been expanded several times and out back is a metal storage shed (that originally had a wood floor) that houses the company's transportation center.

Anderson's workforce (with an average age of less than 30) has not moved far from the cluttered dorm or Animal

House to work in teams in spaces separated by partitions, that actually separate less than they focus. "What counts is what you do, not how you dress or what your space looks like," stresses Anderson. He is most interested "in our value to our clients."

This is not an ugly place, if functionality can be pretty, but "the money we make goes back into being better, faster and cheaper," says Anderson. "Sure, a beautiful building can help get jobs, and if you're an architect, that's important. But I think our clients are much more important in how we perform than how we look." Technology is rarely aesthetic and the building is full of the latest bells and whistles.

And, besides, the kids (up to 70 years old, but spirited and youthful) at Anderson & Associates like the mess. "We're more into people than the package," says Anderson. He said that as he introduced the reporter to an executive sitting alone in spare conference room, bent over paper and barefooted.

Steve Jamison
Director of Human Resource

Operations, AEP Roanoke

The conference room in the nondescript American Electric Power building in downtown Roanoke is much more than technological gimmickry. With its recessed computer screen and convenient, slide-out keyboard, it allows the student to work with the instructor and to spread his workbooks and papers out in a normal fashion without the computer dominating the work space.

The instructor's computer view is projected onto a screen behind him, giving the students a view of what they should be doing, or simply giving them written instructions. A hood over each computer screen localizes the view, but can be removed so that the desk can be used simply as a desk.

Dale Allen of Barrows and the



Anderson offices reflect practicality

human resources and training departments at AEP worked out the design and the room has been a bonanza for the company. It is a regional facility where up to 12 people can be trained on various systems simultaneously. That's good for efficiency and consistency in training, replacing a one-on-one system.

"A system like this encourages workers to keep their proficiencies (in computer programs) up," says Jamison. "Training is cheaper, more focused and directed to solve specific problems."

The training room is a marriage of opportunity and need: the company had some leftover computers that it had bought for a single purpose that lasted six months, the room was available and the expertise was developed.

David Shanks
Director, Small Business Development Center
Dublin

The New River Valley SBDC moved to Dublin in a strip mall space from its former home at Virginia Tech when Radford University's plan for a school of global studies fell to the intimidating presence of a governor threatening education money.

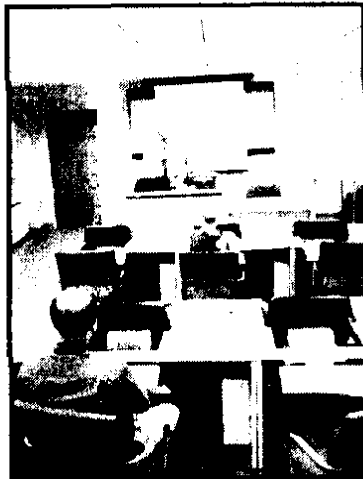
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Much of the planning had been done for the school and Shanks says, "The good furniture we have here is what they'd bought. The rest is what we've scrounged for since."

In the near future, there is a good possibility that the SBDC will move into a new "Global Village" building on campus and, "we'll have to bring our own furniture," Shanks says.

This is another of those functional spaces, one where nobody's show-



AEP training room in Roanoke

ing off, but where a certain type of image must be present. The SBDC and its affiliated organizations, all of which help businesses do business, must deal with start-up businesses, old-timers and even foreign emissaries. "We had a group of Japanese business people in recently for a conference and were able to accommodate them in our conference room (which seats 50) and then feed them a Japanese luncheon that we had catered. We have one-on-one sessions and at least once a week, we have larger gatherings. The whole building is used and it is comfortable."

There was one oversight in the design: storage space. "There is just none," says Shanks, pointing to a

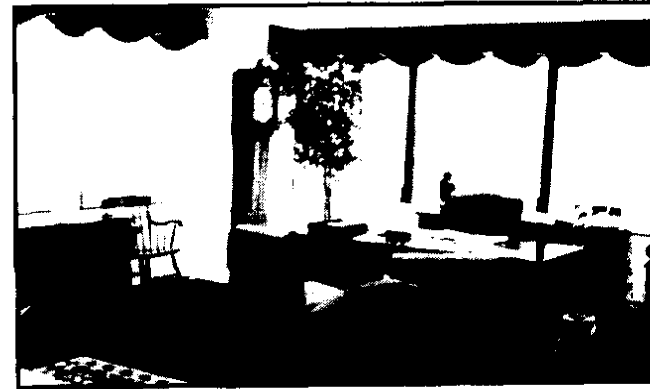
stack of boxes in a corner of his office.

**Sara Crews
Interior designer, Central Fidelity Bank
Lynchburg**

Sara Crews, a Pearisburg native and Virginia Tech interior design grad, worked as the in-house de-

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Central Fidelity in Lynchburg features large, roomy offices



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signer for the renovation of the 20-story building — Lynchburg's tallest — in the downtown area. Wachovia Bank, which is buying Central Fidelity, will move into spacious, impressive space.

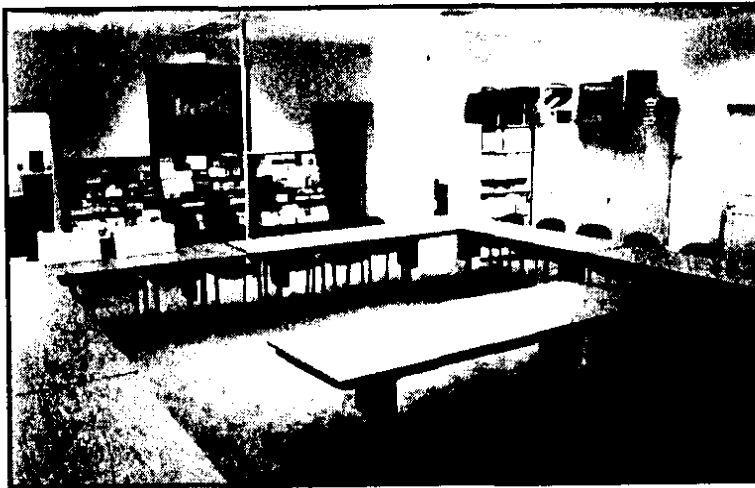
The redesign transformed complete departments with monochromatic panel systems of gray and blue, featuring original oil paintings by Virginia artists on the walls.

The executive suites are elaborately decorated, featuring touches

like grandfather clocks, detailed pattern carpets — even in the hallways.

The outdoors is brought inside, working from the Zen idea in the glass building with views stretching 20 to 40 miles. The idea, says Crews, is to bring a little peace and tranquility to the hustle and bustle of banking.

(Editor Dan Smith wrote the Roanoke and New River Valley segments of this piece and Lynch Station-based freelance writer Catharine Shaw-Gallant wrote the Lynchburg portions.)



New River SBDC's multi-purpose room



Dan Smith Photos

Anderson & Associates' Ken Anderson likes to make room for the practical applications of engineering, like this laptop computer, which adorns the top of his desk and allows live communication