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A SPECIAL PUBLICATION OF
seattle
MAGAZINE



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Alternative Space

Modern Mission

Company K's office mirrors its mission of making modern furniture from natural materials. By Katie J. Kurtz



PHOTOGRAPHY
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LEADING SOUTH ON AURORA, RIGHT BEFORE THE RUSTING SLEEP OFF THE HIWAY sign for the Bridge Motel and tucked behind the unmarked offices of Dow Construction, is the sleek office and adjacent 4,000-square-foot metal fabrication shop of Company K.

Reflecting a modernist sensibility that integrates man-made and natural materials, Company K's building was designed by Hutchison & Maul Architects, the office was designed by Company K owner Jack Kearney and built by Dow Construction. The office, made of board-formed concrete (a labor-intensive process that leaves an imprint of cedar grain on the surface), is entered through an imposing 400-pound, 10-foot-tall, fir-and-steel pivot door.

"Opening up this huge door makes you pause for a second because you are, in a sense, opening a part of the wall," Kearney says. Although only 15-by-30 feet, the space feels roomier and accommodates a number of work surfaces, several rows of bookshelves, a couple of flat files for Kearney's works on paper, an 8-foot-long cedar meeting table and his constant companions, German shepherds Rumer and Zeus.

Running L-shaped on the studio's southern wall and along the bright robin's-egg blue length of the western wall is a wall-mounted steel work desk Kearney inlaid intermittently with Phenolic, an industrial-strength laminated linen and epoxy material typically used for electrical panel boards (he found it at Boeing Surplus).

"I love finding raw materials and transforming them into something where people (CONTINUED ON PAGE 67)

Opposite: Company K's office is a masterful melding of man-made and natural materials, such as the fir ceiling beams that were reclaimed from a Seattle pier. Below: owner/designer Jack Kearney takes a reflective moment with his trusty German shepherd Rumer.

Modern Mission

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 23

don't realize it's actually older than it is," Kearney says of his inclination to incorporate salvaged materials into his designs. Unless a client provides him with a particular piece of wood, such as, say, the 8-foot-long and 2-inch-thick plank of Philippine teak leaning against his office wall slated to become a tabletop for a Seattle client, Kearney uses only what he calls "guilt-free old growth." He buys naturally fallen or blown-over trees from Pacific Western Timbers, a local company that harvests timber by helicopter.

Open steel-supported apple-plywood shelves mounted throughout the office are stuffed with design books and with what Kearney calls his "tchotchke collection," once-functional objects that are inspirational source materials for his designs. The objects—coiled springs, rusted machinery parts, aged hand-painted signs—speak to Kearney's fondness for materials "wearing in, instead of out."

A trained architect, Kearney honed his fabricating skills in the industrial-design program at the Rhode Island School of Design, where he says he basically spent two years playing in its foundry. Five years ago, he started Company K. While his staff—Pat Pugh, Stuart Henderson and Jeff Ludwig—handle the fabricating, Kearney is the principal behind the design (see his line of modern steel furniture, ranging from \$1,200 to \$6,500, online at companyk.com). Though Company K has collaborated on several commercial projects—providing aesthetically spare interior and exterior details for spaces such as Belltown's now-defunct Alameda Orchids and Mahlum Architects' Seattle and Portland offices—it is more often hired by local interior designers, such as the award-winning Amy Baker, to design custom-commissioned work for private residences. Word of mouth has already spread Company K creations as far as Colorado, Texas, California and New York.

"It's a great feeling to have authorship and realize that what's being shipped out is something I actually created," says Kearney. Once a piece is installed, he adds, his clients don't need to know some of the material has been recycled: "Its final state doesn't scream, 'I'm from the scrap yard.'" +

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