

## Toronto-based UW Design Group is proving that interior design can be pared down and uncluttered without being austere.

### Simplicity as a statement

Five-year-old UW Design Group in Toronto is making waves with its clean, simple and progressive interiors for residences, galleries and offices.

Interestingly, both the principals of UW, Karen Williams and Melissa Davis (principal and senior designer respectively), came out of the staid corporate design world. "I thought that there must be more to design than forest green and tassels on sofas," says Davis, who studied design at Sheridan College in Oakville, Ont., and worked for very traditional residential and corporate design firms before joining UW in 2000.

For Williams, design is a second career after being involved in the business side of the fashion industry. While studying interior and environmental design at UCLA as a mature student, she was seduced by the modern architecture of Los Angeles, and the work in the 1930s and 1940s of Charles and Ray Eames. After living in Sweden for a year and then freelancing for a year on residential and retail projects, she decided to improve her technical skills by joining a corporate firm. But she was frustrated by the narrow aesthetic she found.

The urge to go on her own was acted upon when Williams met Adriana Urtasun, a founding partner of UW, and the two set up shop. (Urtasun has since made a lifestyle change and has left the design industry.) Their first commission was to design the set for U8TV's *The Lofters*. "It was a major departure from what I had been doing for the last five or six years," says Williams. The assignment allowed UW to experiment and express its design voice.

While the designers eschew a firm "style" or brand, instead claiming that if there is one at all it is in their approach, they are aware that much of their modern aesthetic may be a tough sell to clients who are unaccustomed to thinking about interiors. Often clients start out with "what they think they should like, because they watch HGTV, pick up *Architectural Digest*, or their friends have it," says Davis.

This tendency can be tricky for a firm that doesn't like com-

promise, instead wanting to feel that it has created a space exactly the way it should be. As a result, the principals spend a lot of time with the client to discuss what the goal is. "Although what clients originally think they want or will get is often not what they end up with, they are always ecstatic with the finished result," says Williams.

#### Encomium Gallery

"As clients, galleries tend to be less challenging than other types of environments, since they frequently want to be modern," says Williams. Nevertheless with this project, located in a basement, UW was challenged by preconceived notions of the art gallery as a large, light-filled warehouse space.

The 1,000-square-foot multi-purpose gallery and event space that was created in downtown Toronto emphasizes simplicity of lines and materials. By redeveloping the existing layout and opening up both ends with a deck and windows, UW achieved an uncluttered, airy venue for exhibition and entertaining.

Lighting is obviously a key issue in a long, below ground gallery. Simple, large moves, like dropping the ceiling (which goes against the expected convention of doing anything possible to increase the illusion of height) and creating freestanding walls allow the concealment of track lighting, and also help make the space seem longer. The lighting also creates what Williams calls a "washing" impression on the art, as well as lighting a wall from behind that has the clever effect of making it an object unto itself.

#### Toybox

This 5,500-square-foot space, home to one of Toronto's premier film and television post-production houses, exudes the confidence of a company that knows it is at the top of its game.

"Toybox was definitely the most sophisticated project we've done from a technical, educational and conceptual level," says



Above\_ Exterior of the Encomium Gallery, Toronto. Opposite top\_ The gallery's long space was exaggerated by dropping the ceiling, which allowed the designers to conceal lighting. This simple gesture emphasizes the simplicity of lines and light in the gallery. Right and far right\_ The designers opened up the gallery with decks and large glass doors at both ends.





Williams. "It expresses a high level of modern design vocabulary, as well as a high level of trust on the part of the client."

Visitors are greeted by an immaculate yet dominant common lounge, a place to meet clients and make calls, as well as to take breaks from the work in the post-production suites.

A series of three custom millwork islands creates a seamless transition between the entranceway and the further reaches of the lounge. Cool materials such as frosted glass, sandstone tile on the reception floor and black Cappellini low pad leather chairs are balanced by Sintesi lacquered tables, warm oak flooring and natural lighting from clerestory windows. Eight-foot light boxes suspended from the ceiling on either side of the suites create a cathedral nave effect, adding drama to space.

The economic engines of Toybox are six post-production suites, three on each side flanking the lounge. These are surrounded by a "shroud" of glazing, wood-slatted walls, and dropped ceilings, wood transitions on the floors, as well as doors refaced in matching wood species, creating a threshold effect, and letting you know you are entering into, as Williams puts it, "a place where something really great is going to happen."

Extensive discussions with executives and employees were conducted to understand their needs in terms of space and relationships with furniture. Since the rooms are used on a 24-hour basis, they have to be comfortable. Custom consoles, ergonomically designed in a boomerang shape, allow assistants or clients to sit on the wings next to the editor.

Special consideration needed to be paid to important technical requirements for the millions of dollars of electronic equipment in the office. Since the equipment is sensitive to moisture and natural light, edit suites tend to be dark. UW incorporated a sophisticated rope lighting (and static ground-



ing wire) system around the perimeter of each suite, adjustable from the editor's console. In addition, a cutting edge fibre optic lighting system by Eurolite hangs above each console, and holds the distinction of being only the second lighting installation of this type in a setting like this in North America. The other is in Los Angeles.

UW's spaces, which are sophisticated without being flashy, act as visual business cards for their clients. The simplicity of the design firm's projects resonates with the clarity of the modernist theme that runs throughout the firm's philosophy, each completed assignment building and enhancing UW's reputation. □

Top left\_Cappellini leather chairs, a Loop upholstered bench and Sintesi lacquered table anchor the lounge, along with three millwork islands. Top right\_Six edit suites flank both sides of the lounge. Wood-slatted walls surround doors refaced in a matching veneer. Bottom\_A glass screen separates Toybox's reception desk and elevator banks from the relaxed common lounge.