

Design agents



Interior for Polo Club Condominiums in Toronto by UW Design: accessible cool.

Need a business card, a condo interior, a set for a TV show? In the brash young world of contemporary design, the same people will do it all for you

BY LEAH McLAREN

The UW office is accessibly hip, which means it is precisely the sort of place a middle-aged corporate developer would conjure up when imagining the "lifestyle" of a prospective "20- to 30-year-old condo/loft buyer."

The airy second-floor space is furnished with designer chairs, broad wooden desks and a number of retro-space-age pieces that look as if they were ripped off from the set of *Mork & Mindy*. On the wall, there is an abstract installation the colour of chocolate pudding and in the centre of the boardroom table sits a large cylindrical vase of dried snake grass.

Spitting distance from the CHUM-CITY building in Toronto's trendy Queen Street West district, this is just the sort of office that teenaged suburban mall rats fantasize about working in once they make the big move downtown.

Welcome to the world of accessibly cool, where everything from Web sites to condo interiors can be stylishly created on demand. The firm has even designed the set for a TV show, the Web-based *U8TV*, popularly known as *The Lofters*, for Alliance/Atlantis.

In fact, UW founders Karen Williams, 35, and Adriana Urtasun, 31, arrived in this funky space by a circuitous route, after careers in, respectively, fashion marketing and Bay Street trading. On an afternoon this week, they are both dressed in what I like to call "the uniform" for conservatively stylish urban working girls: knee-length black skirt, sleeveless black top and mules. I

am, naturally, wearing the uniform as well. After shaking hands, we do "the greeting" — a social convention among conservatively stylish urban working girls in which you assess the other person's outfit to find something you admire and ask where she got it. Adriana oohs over my bracelet, I remark approvingly on her rhinestone-buckled belt.

Such details, of course, are a designer's stock in trade. In *The Lofters*, for example, the bathroom features side-by-side clawfoot tubs, orchids and black towels. "It was a challenging space to design because the lofters were literally living and working on top of each other in a 1,500-square-foot space," Williams says. "Plus there was the TV aspect. Everything had to be designed to accommodate the necessary camera angles."

The versatile live/work aspect of the *U8TV* set appealed to Williams's and Urtasun's concept of "personal branding." A design, they believe, should reflect the identity and specific needs of the client rather than the firm that created it.

"Right from the beginning, both of us wanted to step away from the trend of a design firm having one signature look, so there is no specific 'UW look,'" Urtasun says. The firm, which numbers eight people in total, approaches its corporate clients with the aim of incorporating the company's identity in the design, rather than just creating a trendy space. They try to take the same approach with residential clients. "We wanted to know all about the people," Urtasun says. "We said, 'Let's brand each individual client.'"

Underneath the corporate jar-

gon, Williams and Urtasun are talking about the new, all-purpose world of contemporary Canadian design. The most creative designers no longer limit themselves to one particular field. UW dabbles in architectural and furniture design as well as focusing on as graphic and interior design.

While UW has gone corporate, other young firms are aiming for a more indie client. Helios, a small Toronto graphic-design firm that started out doing album covers, music posters and club leaflets for friends' bands, is now known primarily for its irreverent pop-futurist Web design. Now, the firm has branched out into T-shirts and ani-

mation videos.

"From a creator's point of view, all design falls all into the same category," says founding partner Felix Wittholz, one of the brains behind OK47, Helios's new T-shirt line.

"The application is always different, but whether an image is on a piece of paper or a T-shirt or a Web site doesn't make a whole heck of a lot of difference."

Wittholz says new technologies have made the field of design more accessible. "Now, anyone with a computer can do that kind of work. Still, there are rules to design, and like anything else, it takes years to get good at it. Personally, I like designs that are versatile and mean

different things to different people," he says. "The new technology is great because it frees up a lot of time for the designer to think about things. A lot of the magic of a design comes out of the process of creating something from nothing."

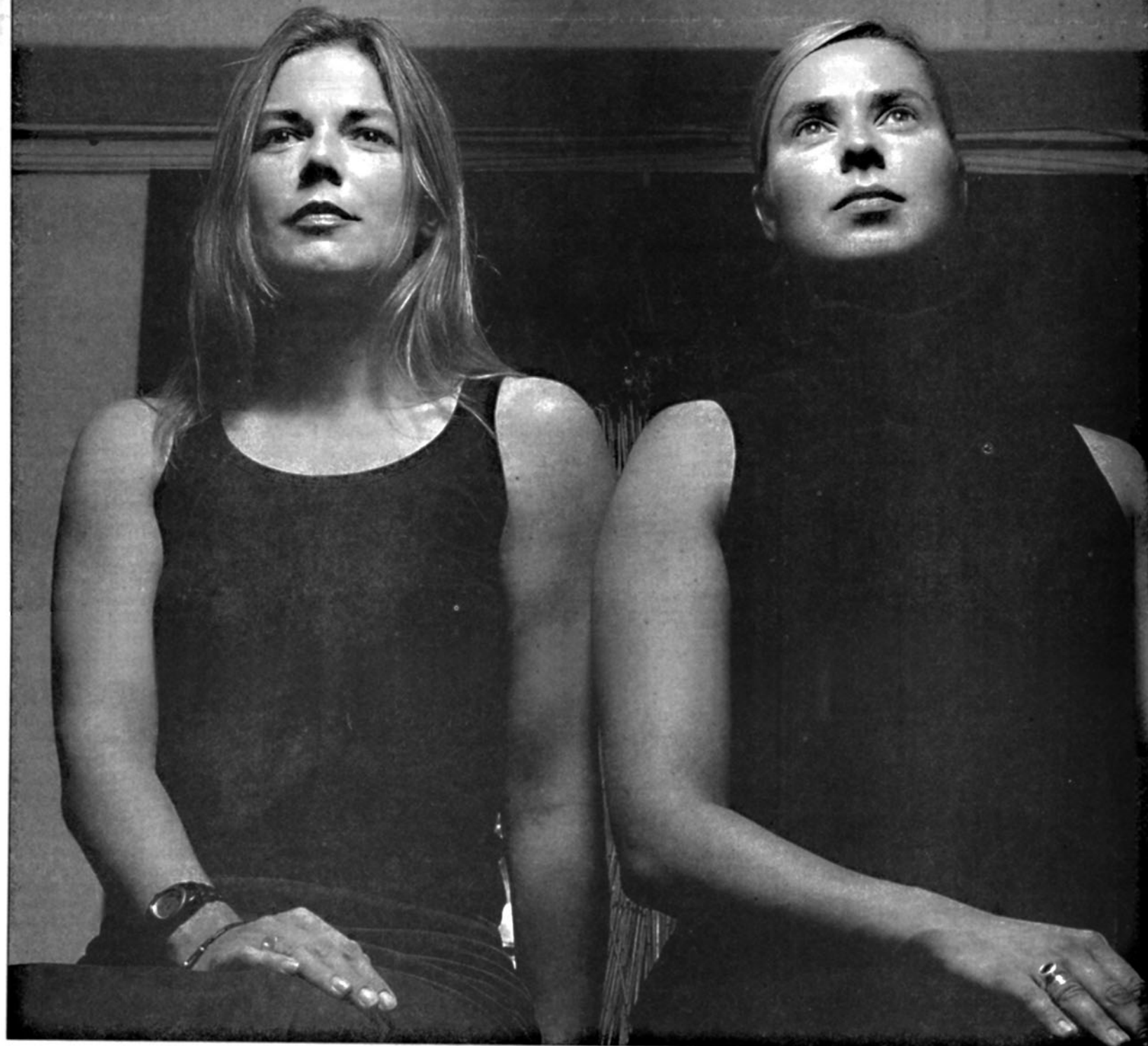
For the women at UW, versatility is also a key word. The difference for them is that it refers to their dedication to the personalized needs of the client, rather than the creative product itself.

"When we're designing a house, we'll ask people stuff about their personal behaviour," Urtasun says, "like, 'Where do you watch TV? Do you watch it lying down or sitting up? Do you eat in front of the TV?

Do you read in bed or on the sofa? In the morning or at night?' One woman told us she was a full-out klutz, a chronic spiller, so we designed her whole house using really tough, easy-to-wash, hose-'em-down type fabrics."

Personal design advice extends beyond the home or office for Urtasun and Williams. They say their clients often call them to ask for advice on what restaurant to eat in, store to shop in or hotel to stay at.

"We definitely have some clients who we've developed such a relationship with they ask our opinion on everything," she says. "Sometimes we end up knowing our clients better than their friends do."



LOUIE PALU/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

UW Design founders Karen Williams (left) and Adriana Urtasun: 'When we're designing a house we'll ask people stuff about their personal behaviour, like, "Where do you watch TV? Do you watch it lying down or sitting up?"'