Small Spaces, Transforming Results
Three interior jobs show that good things come in small packages

BY LINDA G. MILLER

Some firms consider interiors projects stepping stones towards landing that one architecture project that will put them on the map. Others see interiors work as worthy on its own, and find ways to keep it fresh. Wary clients test the waters with interior fit-outs when building projects look too risky. That means interiors projects in today's economic climate can allow small firms to keep valued staff working and the ledger in the black—and let the creative juices flow.

These three interiors are small spaces that deliver big results. A student center that started as leftover space becomes a popular campus destination. A temporary storefront-turned-gallery connects a university with its neighborhood. An office allows an idea-driven organization to reach out globally.

Sullivan Family Student Center
at the College of Education,
University of Wyoming LARAMIE, WY
Architect: Lewis Tsurumaki Lewis/LTL Architects

On the heels of its acclaimed renovation of the Arthouse in Austin, Texas, LTL Architects was commissioned to design a student center for the University of Wyoming. Asked to create a space like no other on campus, LTL turned a non-descript, underutilized space in the recently-renovated College of Education building into a comfortable, contemporary, two-level student lounge that students have made an essential destination.

Inspired by the organization of a courtyard in a cloister, the 5,200-square-foot center layers a two-level lounge space in a sequence of skins and armatures. Digitally-milled, bamboo plywood screens, produced by a computer script, are perforated with random openings of various sizes. The screens define the lounges and allow views between the cloistered “courtyards” and trafficked hallways. Walnut columns on the first level support both the bamboo panels and a stainless-steel “horizontal chandelier” with colored resin “petals.” It skims the ceiling, extending out toward the front door in one direction; inside the lounge it folds vertically to link to the upper-level guard rail. The architects thought a double-height wall topped with a skylight should be neutral, but certainly not boring. They constructed a CNC-milled, 900-square-foot topographic map of Wyoming that extends between the two floors. It is installed so that the setting sun pours through the skylight on the second level, animating the mountainous contours of the state.

“Typically, a building’s interior will be transformed more frequently than its shell,” says LTL Architects Principal Paul Lewis, AIA. “Interiors, therefore, can be critical to a young practice’s finances. But we approach interiors for their capacity to invent richer ways for people to inhabit spaces, and as a testing ground for material and organizational experiments. They can happen more quickly and at lower costs than exterior construction.”