





# Warehouse Proud

Holly Hunt revels in the pared-down simplicity of her new corporate headquarters designed by Piotrowski+Ecker.

"I WOULD LIKE to say that it was my vision from the beginning, but it wasn't," confesses design doyenne Holly Hunt, who recently relocated her ever-expanding furniture and fabric empire to striking new offices she credits to architects Piotrowski+Ecker. Having realized that her 17-year-old, Chicago-based company had outgrown its quarters in the Merchandise Mart, Hunt decided to move part of the operation to a former warehouse building in the comparatively less fashionable Greektown in the West Loop.

As partners Robert Piotrowski and Dea Ecker tell the story, the architects were originally hired to design a 3,700-sq.-ft. warehousing space for Great Plains, Hunt's textile line. "Once we began work, Holly would periodically and unexpectedly add another department to this migration, until we were suddenly faced with a project totaling nearly 20,000 sq. ft.," recall Piotrowski and Ecker. The project would eventually encompass corporate headquarters for the Holly Hunt Collection, Design Studio, and Great Plains, along with related departments, including accounting, order processing, customer service, and storage. "It started out as a small, rough project—a good opportunity for a young firm," say Piotrowski and Ecker, who had opened their office just a few months before. Looking back, the partners now call the project "the commission of our young careers."

A pragmatic businesswoman, Hunt gave the architects a firm mandate. "There was a limited budget. This was to be an office, not a showroom," she says. Responding to Hunt's "very stringent budget" and the loft's raw, industrial character, the architects devised an orderly scheme with simple—"almost severe"—forms combined with finishes and materials that are rougher than those usually associated with Hunt's aesthetic. Prior to construction, the existing concrete columns, beams, and slabs were sandblasted to a "velvety" finish. According to Piotrowski, an unsightly jumble of electrical conduits that looped under every beam and girder was rerouted along the perimeter of the space. "The shell looks simple because we worked hard to clean it up," says Ecker. →

*Opposite: View from reception to the accounting department, with the glass-enclosed materials archive to the left. Locally manufactured fluorescent lights illuminate the ceiling plane, and highlight the texture and rhythm of the board marks from the form work used in casting the concrete structure.*

PHOTOGRAPHY: JON MILLER,  
HEDRICH BLESSING





The company's various departments are clearly defined by a plan that derives from the warehouse's structural elements. "We loved the loft's character and wanted to preserve the space's 'found' quality," says Piotrowski. "The rhythm of the windows and positions of columns guided the division of space and gave way to natural niches," adds Ecker. Consequently, the office's work area is organized into three main corridors. Defined by channeled glass walls, the center section houses a pair of conference rooms, the archive, and executive offices, with work stations positioned on either side. Rooms dedicated to storage, mechanical systems, computer network equipment, and the like are neatly consolidated on the western side of the space.

Custom work stations feature natural, white maple-veneered multiplex plywood desk tops and undercarriages with solid Iroko spacers in between. A pair of metal file cabinets tucks underneath the work surface, while aluminum and translucent-glass book boxes provide additional storage above. Custom, double-sided file cabinets of anodized plate-aluminum and teak "define the work spaces while emphasizing the loft's dimensions and openness," say the architects. With no visible hardware, the massive, stripped-down cabinets on articulated teak legs are elevated 21 in. above the floor. As the project's scope widened, Hunt admits that she was initially skeptical of custom elements such as these. "But, step by step, Robert and Dea coaxed →

*Above: Custom, double-sided file drawers of anodized aluminum and teak are among the project's experimental elements. The architects say that Hunt "unflinchingly" supported their design investigations as long as they responded to her requirements.*

*Below: View of the Holly Hunt Collection "suites," which feature generous work surfaces and ample, teak-veneered material reference cabinets, dubbed "coffins" by the architects. The office's West Loop location provides the luxury of both space and views.*

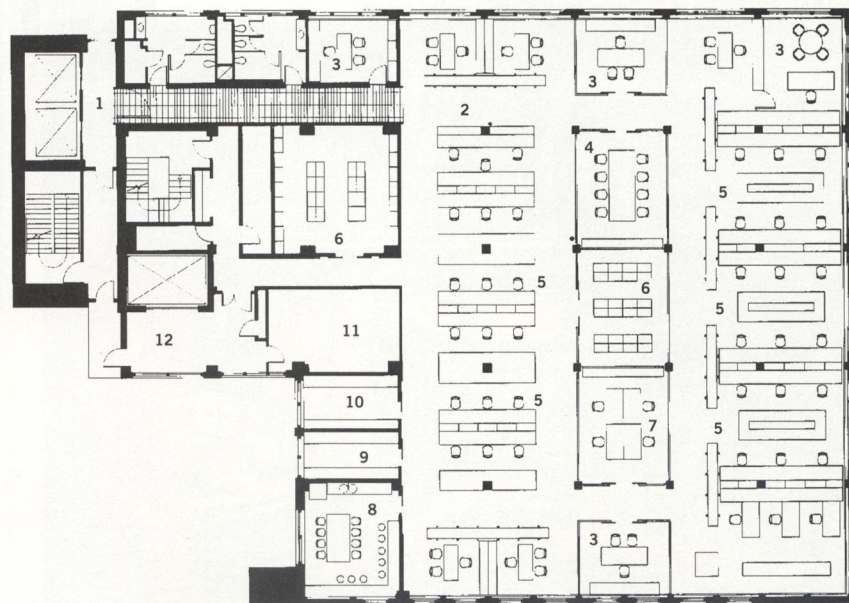
*Opposite: A sanded Homasote-clad entryway leads from the elevator lobby to the accounting offices. The architects say that this suede-like material complements the color and texture of the concrete elements, and provides acoustical benefits as well. The neutral mohair-blend carpet is another soft counterpoint to the ubiquitous concrete.*











- 1 ENTRY
- 2 RECEPTION
- 3 OFFICE
- 4 CONFERENCE
- 5 WORK STATIONS
- 6 STORAGE/ARCHIVE
- 7 LIBRARY
- 8 BREAK AREA
- 9 MAIL
- 10 FILE
- 11 MECHANICAL
- 12 LOADING

0 10 20 40





*Opposite: View of the conference room. Wrapped Homasote panels convert the far wall into a convenient pin-up surface. Piotrowski and Ecker designed the teak-and-aluminum credenza. The natural mahogany conference table is a custom design by Christian Liaigre.*

*Above: Reference cabinets between work stations were inspired by loading palettes and stacks of lumber. When general office lighting is turned off, the center, glass-enclosed section remains illuminated, in keeping with the code requirement for emergency egress lighting. The extruded glass is a common industrial material imported from Germany.*

CONFERENCE CHAIRS: **HERMAN MILLER**. CUSTOM CONFERENCE TABLE: **HOLLY HUNT COLLECTION**. TASK CHAIRS: **VITRA**. PEDESTAL FILE CABINETS: **KI**. CARPET: **EUROTEX BY TRET-FORD**. LIGHT FIXTURES: **FOCAL POINT**. DESK LAMPS: **LUXO**. PROFILIT GLASS: **LAMBERT GLASFABRIK**. MILLWORK: **VORTEX DESIGN**. METALWORK: **RON GARD**. ELECTRICAL CONTRACTOR: **HIRAM ELECTRIC**. HVAC: **COLUMBIA SHEET METAL WORKS**. GENERAL CONTRACTOR: **RIIS BORG**.

me along. In the end, the budget doubled—but it was the right thing to do—and the project was still extremely cost-effective. It probably should have cost twice as much as it actually did,” says Hunt, who attributes significant savings to the architects’ resourcefulness. “We used every advantage available to us,” say Piotrowski and Ecker. They report money-saving measures such as importing an inexpensive extruded glass from Germany for the glazed rooms and procuring lumber and wood veneers for custom millwork via the Internet. Work stations were built by a team of five local craftsmen, as opposed to a large millwork operation.

A richly layered collage of materials, tones, and textures, the design brings together the solid and the translucent, the smooth and the rough, the natural and the machined. Materials were selected with great care and consideration. “We spent a lot of time thinking about how to express construction,” says Piotrowski. In keeping with the client’s affinity for understatement and restraint, the materials palette was limited. However, in contrast to the luxurious and exotic materials that Hunt has popularized, Piotrowski and Ecker worked with comparatively humble elements, including concrete, glass, common wood veneers, anodized aluminum, and Homasote. “There is a minimum of drywall and paint,” Ecker points out. “We love color, but we wanted the space to have a natural palette based on the materials themselves.” The end result is far removed from the look of Hunt’s showrooms, but wholly appropriate in its pared-down simplicity and subtle elegance.

The project was completed in phases over the course of approximately one year. Robert Piotrowski and Dea Ecker extend credit to Sebastian Dobrescu, Dominik Soltys, Barry Bebart and Dong-Hoon Kim.

—Julia Lewis