

Montana Urban Design

Reinventing a historic space in Billings lead to a new interior design style

WRITTEN BY SUSIE HOFFMANN OF ENVI DESIGN • PHOTOGRAPHY BY PHIL BELL

RARELY DOES ONE REFERENCE THE WORDS “urban” and “Montana” in the same sentence much less pair the two to describe a design style. Given that the majority of Montanans live here to enjoy open landscape, the stretch of mountains and the famous “big sky,” design trends tend to represent a classic western style. However, when I first left the hectic pace of New York City for a life less complicated, I discovered that I could not relinquish the lifestyle afforded by living downtown. And so, after three years of beginning my interior design business in Montana, I have settled into a unique niche best described as “Urban Montana Design.”

I stumbled across the historic 1906 Stapleton Building in Billings by accident. As a new resident of this relatively industrial Montana city, I searched for property that I intended to inhabit — not necessarily work in or renovate. Intrigued by an ad on the internet that claimed, “Loft Style Living in Billings,” I set up an appointment to see the space. Located in the heart of a downtown that seemed to struggle towards re-vitalization, the Stapleton Building stood tall above Broadway boasting a beautifully detailed brick façade. Inside I found a dilapidated interior that belied the restored exterior. Nonetheless, after seeing the immense windows, the high ceilings and the utter

rawness of the space, I was hooked.

I have now converted two spaces in the building, into two, two-bedroom condominiums: a total of 3,600-square-foot. I have plans to renovate another 2,500-square-foot and have recently been hired to convert an old Potato Factory nearby into seven downtown apartments.

The design opportunity is fantastic. The buildings’ turn-of-the-century architecture mirrors their contemporary counterparts in cities across the country. Space that has long been neglected screams for new design and purpose. The challenge, not surprisingly, has been to convince Montanans that living downtown is a good idea.

Especially in Billings, where the downtown declined and was once (one may argue, still is) a haven for derelicts, the city has struggled to bring people to its center. Residential sprawl has drifted west. Outsiders move to the state to buy acres of land and a horse. But the benefits to living “urban” in a mostly rural state are clear: Easy access to place of work and cultural centers, low maintenance apartments with views of the downtown and the

Opposite page: Joists and sprinkler pipes remain exposed in the upper unit. This allows for 15 foot ceilings and gives an industrial feel to the design. However, the lighting selection softens the effect while creating a play of shadow and light. **Right:** Custom walnut shelves hover above the bar area. Undercabinet lights, track fixtures and a contemporary version of a crystal chandelier give multiple lighting options for the dining area.





Above: In the unit on the lower floor, sustainable palm wood is used as flooring. Mast lights from a sailboat light accent the red wall and a chalkboard wall adds whimsy to the galley kitchen. **Below:** Windows at the office actually open to an interior corridor flooded with light from a glass atrium above.



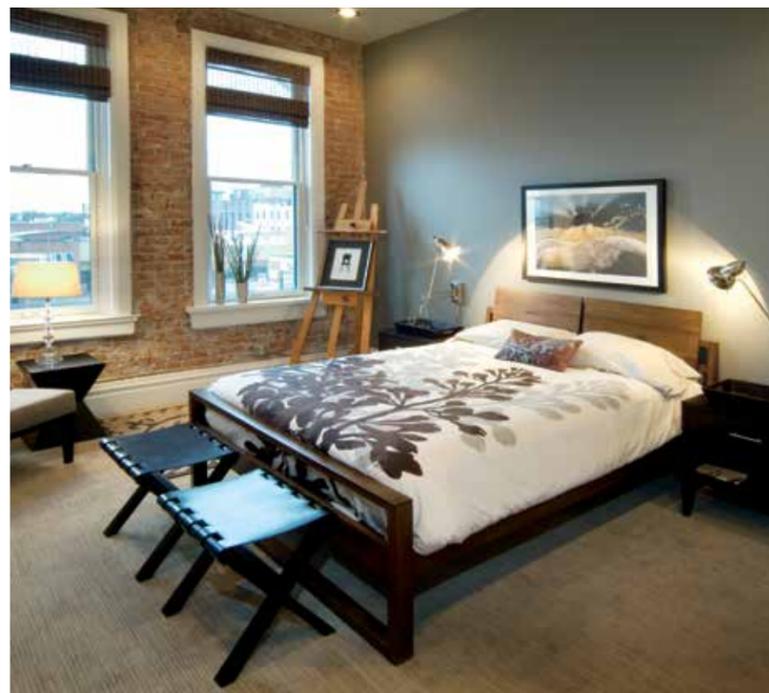
mountains beyond. The renovation of the Stapleton Building and others like it, calls for contemporary design. Perhaps in a state where unresourceful log cabins and energy inefficient estates prevail, the lure of environmentally conscious design combined with high-style living can also lure Montanans towards this refreshing urban lifestyle.

Envi Design strives to create interiors that celebrate contemporary design, employs earth friendly products and, as I like to call it, recycles buildings. The key to Montana Urban Design is to respect the existing architecture of the building and the Montana vernacular while simultaneously breathing new life into what is often a long disregarded space.

In the Stapleton Building, I strove to make best use of the natural light of



The guest bedroom and bath are styled to provide visitors with ultimate comfort. Hoffmann envisioned the guest suite as a boutique hotel: a restful yet hip environment for the weary traveler.



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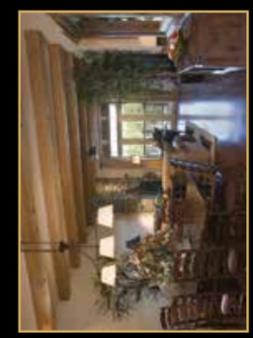
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Left: Envi Design designates ample space for utility and storage. The master bedroom is therefore smaller in size, but has a cozy and safe feel. This also allows the room to remain simple and uncluttered.

the existing windows — this was not difficult as the windows are over seven feet tall. However, in spaces where I could not take advantage of the direct natural light — interior baths and closets — I installed glass doors, transoms and skylights

to ensure the apartments never felt dark. I chose not to cover the unique and often stunning views from the windows with excessive window treatment. The apartments remain quite private, despite being in the heart of a city, so only in a few

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locations did I install privacy shades.

The exterior walls of the Stapleton Building were constructed of two feet of brickwork. I found that exposing the brick on some interior walls added to the historic value and urban quality of the design. I balanced the older aesthetic with newer sleek finishes, such as stained concrete and palmwood (a sustainable wood) floors.

In the unit on the upper floor, I was able to expose the joists and rafters. This allowed for 15-foot ceilings and a unique opportunity for creative lighting. I chose fixtures that shine light up and down so that the shadows from the structural members created texture and emphasized the height of the space.

I chose furnishings and decorations that would juxtapose the old and the new: a reclaimed tin ceiling hangs on the wall

opposite oversized photographs, by the artist Audrey Hall, that I found haunting and distinctly Montana. I paired the dining room table, made from reclaimed railroad ties, with highly finished wood and leather chairs.

I relish in the irony of “Urban Montana Design” and my work reflects a passion for the unexpected. Guests who tour the “loft style apartments” in the Stapleton Building often exclaim, “I didn’t know this kind of design existed in Montana!” I delight in this reaction: simply because it does. **11**

Susie Hoffmann, ASID founded Envi Design in Montana in 2006. She began her career in New York City. Her work has been published in Interior Design Magazine, Hospitality Design and the Robb Report. Formally educated at Stanford University and Parsons School of Design.

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